It Hurts To Love You
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Summary

There were two things in Jeongguk's life that could bring him to the edge of insanity: Overwatch and Park Jimin. While his passion for the video game was nothing too alarming since most boys went through that phase, his provocation by his best friend's older brother was a cause for concern.

Jimin was an infuriating person that made Jeongguk's blood boil and his heart race. He ignored and taunted him until Jeongguk couldn't handle the tension.

The sort of tension that couldn't be defined as just awkward or sexual. It was deeper than that.

Notes

Please make sure to read the tags before you continue, there might be some things that you are sensitive to. The story builds very slowly—in fact, things don't pick up until Chapter Eight—to keep it realistic. Also, you might not agree with some parts, but I hope as you read
on things start to make sense.

*Title inspired by Lana Del Rey's 13 beaches.

The pictures used for the moodboards are not mine. All the credit goes to the rightful owners. I've only edited them to fit the theme.
Drifting In Purgatory

There were clouds amidst his head, a light-headed sensation engulfing the background noise and people. Jimin felt as though he would start hovering soon because there was nothing to ground him in this isolation. His vision was entirely filled with light whose source he couldn't distinguish. The haze enveloping his mind was making it difficult to understand where he was, who he was.

So maybe taking LSD when Jimin was already feeling erratic wasn't his smartest idea. He couldn't seem to contain his thoughts and feelings within himself. People were surrounding him but he couldn't differentiate between them. The group of friends he had arrived with seemed to have dispersed into the crowd but something told him that he wouldn't be able to recognise a familiar face even if it was in front of him. The thought didn't frighten him, though.

Jimin felt free. He felt like he was capable of anything. He could dance into the daylight hours. He could lose control and never let himself be grounded. He could touch the sky if he wanted to. His lips were stretched into a smile that couldn't be contained. He felt like screaming into people's faces how happy he was. He knew that nobody would listen, that nobody would care. But that was okay. Because the world was beautiful right now. He could delude himself into believing that he was in heaven.

There were hands grabbing onto him and bodies rubbing against his. He didn't have the heart to tell them to stop because everything was okay. The people weren't leering at him and the resounding music wasn't deafening his ears and the room wasn't closing in on him and he could finally breathe. God, how it felt to be free and not confined by a feeling. His heart was soaring but his chest didn't hurt like a constant reminder of everything that was wrong with him. His bones weren't giving out on him with every move he made.

But he was too excited. Perhaps some more alcohol would resolve the overwhelming urge to jump around like nobody was watching.
Because people were always watching.

Watching but not seeing.

No one ever saw Jimin.

He took stumbling steps to reach the bar and ordered another drink; the bartender glanced over at him and seeing that unbeatable smile on his face, she gave him a wink. Jimin wondered if maybe she recognised him from his previous visits to the bar where he sat alone and got drunk, maybe she was happy to see him happy. He couldn't contain the urge within himself to express his elation so he leaned forward to smack his lips gleefully against hers.

"Are you happy too?" he yelled.

The girl looked quite perplexed but amused at the same time. "Sure," she said airily and Jimin gave her a toothy grin.

Everything was just delightful.

But suddenly, there was a grip on his arm wrenching him back to reality. He tripped over somebody's feet as the person holding his wrist dragged him across the room into a corner. Jimin found it difficult to focus on the person's face, all he could see were colours. Reds and oranges and violets were splurged across his vision.

He barely had the strength to move away from the person, mumbling incoherently how happy he was and that they should join him in this dream.

"What did he take?" Jimin heard a voice say from beside him.

"No idea. He does this sometimes," another person frustratedly replied. Jimin could recognise this voice. This was ... It was ... his brother, probably.

"Jihyunie, aren't you happy? Look how pretty these colours are!"

Someone scoffed while his brother grunted in irritation. " Fucking hell, hyung. Did you take drugs again?"

"Yes, I did. And I'm very happy right now."

"Wow, who knew you could be happy, huh?" the other person said in a condescending manner.

"Shut your trap, Jeongguk." Jihyun laughed. "And Jimin hyung, could you at least try to be responsible?"

Jemin looked at him in annoyance. "What's your problem? Leave me alone. Your voice is too loud," he said as he moved to cover his ears.

"I can't believe this. Jeongguk, can you hold onto him while I get Taehyung hyung? He's probably drunk as well since he can't walk straight."

Jemin was too much bordering on another hallucination to glare at his brother. He didn't hear what Jeongguk said since his mind was overswept by a flurry of images. Pretty colours were dancing in his vision again. Although he did feel a strong hand gripping his bicep, and he could have sworn he heard some cussing.

For some reason, that sobered him up a little.
"Jeongguk, do you think I'm crazy?"

Jimin could see the younger boy's angular face staring back at him in exhaustion.

"Probably."

That evoked a sudden bout of giggles from Jimin. He laughed so hard that in no time, he found himself gasping for air. A part of him also knew that he was verging on crying soon so he stopped before he could lose himself to his emotions.

"Are you okay, Jimin?"

"That's not a compliment, Jeonggukie," Jimin mumbled sadly. "All the best people are not crazy."

He gazed up at the younger boy with wide eyes, hoping he would change his mind and say that Jimin was not crazy. But Jeongguk didn't say anything, he turned his back to Jimin and decided on blatantly ignoring him.

And then, the world wasn't so beautiful anymore. Jimin didn't feel as weightless as clouds. He was yanked down from the heaven he had deludedly immersed himself into. His legs felt like lead and he had to hold onto a pillar to stop himself from collapsing. His heart was starting to race but not from happiness anymore. It was thudding painfully against a vice which wouldn't relent. The walls were closing in on him and he couldn't breathe. He kept himself from gasping because he didn't want Jeongguk to turn around and look at him. To see how not normal he was. That he probably was crazy.

After all, who could get upset by something a person who was so unimportant said to them? But Jimin was too helpless against the feeling, it just wasn't in his power to control how badly he had started to tremble. His entire body was shaking but nobody seemed to notice. He had become invisible again.

Why did people leave him? Why couldn't they just stay? Why couldn't they just see him?

"Jimin!" Taehyung's voice called for him. "Are you okay?"

Jimin wanted his friend to stare into his bloodshot and watery eyes and ask him if he thought Jimin was okay. But he never did. Because it didn't matter.

He caught a glimpse of Joohyun, Taehyung's girlfriend, looking frustratedly at him and he felt like curling into himself and disappearing from this place. She probably didn't appreciate Taehyung's crazy friend stealing him away from her. She barely got away from him herself.

"I'm sorry, Taehyung."

"It's okay, Jiminie," he said soothingly. That was the thing about Taehyung, he was so warm-hearted. It wasn't that he was particularly caring towards Jimin, no, Taehyung was kind to everyone. It especially didn't mean that he cared about Jimin. He was willing to listen and console people but all he ever uttered were false words. He always said it was okay no matter how badly Jimin screwed up. Because it wasn't okay. Jimin was falling apart and everything around him was crumbling back into pieces which he so desperately wanted to hold together.

He wanted to hold himself together with his bleeding hands and unavailing grip but he was losing the fight. Though, if he thought about it, he had never won against that part of himself anyway.

"Jihyun, I'll take care of him." It was Taehyung's sweet, honeyed voice singing in his ears again.
Jimin loved Taehyung's voice. He just never paid attention to the words it formed. Anything that was too right or too comforting, he didn't want to listen to that.

"When are you planning on leaving? I can take Jimin to my apartment if you want, I figured you only have one set of keys."

Jihyun threw an inquisitive look towards Jeongguk, who merely shrugged in response. "In an hour or so."

"That's fine. I'll get Jimin back home."

"No."

"Jimin, come on. Let's go," Taehyung said.

"I don't want to go right now. Leave me alone for a while."

"Hyung, what the fuck. Go home and be alone there," Jihyun said exasperatedly. "It's not safe for you here and you obviously need sleep, that makeup on those bags under your eyes doesn't fool me."

No, no, no. Why wouldn't they let him be? Why were they bothering when they couldn't even see how Jimin was losing his mind behind the drunk exterior?

"Jimin," Taehyung said softly. "You could hurt yourself like this, you've lost your inhibitions right now. I'm sure you don't wanna wake up with a hangover tomorrow either. Let me take care of you."

"I wanna be alone."

"You're drunk and high, Jimin. Don't create a scene. Just let me take you home."

"I'm fine, I'm really fine. I don't want to go," Jimin pleadingly.

"Stop being difficult, hyung. If you don't want Taehyung hyung to take you home, I'll do it. JK, do you need a ride?" Jihyun turned around to face his best friend who nodded in accordance.

Jimin wanted to scream at them. He wasn't being difficult. He was just trying not to inconvenience anybody.

Taehyung just looked worriedly between the brothers and then nodded. Joohyun looked happy to have him to herself again, dragging him away into the looming crowd, but not without a disdainful look back at Jimin.

Jihyun grabbed Jimin's arm and yanked him behind himself as he walked towards the exit, Jeongguk following them. He led him to his car and helped him into the backseat, locking his seatbelt in place just to be safe.

Jimin closed his eyes momentarily to give his head a rest. He felt sick to his stomach and his mind was drifting all over the place. Jihyun turned the radio on and Jimin wanted to scream at him to turn the deafening thing off. His head was splitting in half. But he didn't have the energy to open his eyes, never mind to speak.

There were too many thoughts in his head, some so spiteful that they were suffocating him inside. It was always the same. When the feeling of worthlessness took over Jimin, he felt so utterly helpless because there was nothing he could do to help himself. The only thing he could think to end that pain was to just pause his life at that moment because everything was too much and not enough at the
same time.

And Jimin hated this: he hated that after all those meds and drugs and therapy sessions it would come down to this. It would always end with him thinking the same things and feeling the same emotions and not knowing how to just end this. It had gotten so goddamn tiring now.

After a while, the boys probably thought he was asleep since Jihyun sighed out loudly.

"Sorry about that, Jeongguk. I don't know when he'll learn his lesson and stop taking stupid shit just because it's there. Taehyungie hyung gets unnecessarily worried too. You know how he is."

Lesson learned. Jimin felt tears prickling behind his closed eyelids as he swallowed a sob. You're a fucking idiot, Jimin.
There were two things in Jeongguk's life that could bring him to the edge of insanity: Overwatch and Park Jimin. While his passion for the video game was nothing too alarming since most boys went through that phase, his provocation by the silver-haired boy was a cause for concern. But that wasn't a matter he liked to delve into since it didn't lead to any answers, only more questions. Because Jimin was an infuriating person who made Jeongguk's blood boil and his heart race.

For as long as he had been friends with Jihyun and stayed for dinner at the Parks' house, there hadn't been a single day where Jimin wasn't being chastised by his mother, Seohyun, while he looked like he couldn't give a flying fuck. Mr. Park was on a business trip so today the one-sided conversation was about Jimin's fresh tongue piercing. Every time the silver barbell glinted under the lights, Jeongguk couldn't help but admire it.

Jimin's eyes met his over the dining table and Jeongguk stopped breathing for a moment. There was a challenging look in his eyes, taunting him to say something too. But Jeongguk knew better than to engage in a conversation with Jimin or to even direct a comment his way. They rarely talked because it was much easier to ignore the other. Jeongguk could actually count how many times he had directly spoken to Jimin, which was not more than ten.

It would be nicer to say that their tastes just didn't match or their personalities weren't compatible, but that wasn't true. Jeongguk actually didn't like the older boy. Everything about him got on his nerves, from the constant blank expression in his eyes and knowing smirks to how Jimin always carried himself like he was superior to everyone else. And Jeongguk wished he could say Jimin disliked him too, but he didn't.

The older boy didn't care enough about Jeongguk to actually feel anything towards him. Jimin had always ignored him. In fact, Jeongguk's presence was so familiar to the Parks' house that nobody batted an eyelash at seeing him turn up at even one in the morning. Moreover, Mr. and Mrs. Park
even discussed family and personal matters in front of him as though he weren't an outsider. They had always treated him like a family member after Jeongguk's dad had passed away. Of course, it was nice to see himself being accepted into their family like that but Jeongguk couldn't handle how Jimin just blanked him.

He was an interesting person, for God's sake. His older friends called him the Golden Maknae because there was nothing Jeongguk wasn't good at. He was excellent in his studies, he was an unbeatable gamer, he had been told many times that he was strikingly handsome and had a godly, sculpted body, he was good at all sorts of physical sports, and he could vainly say that he was especially funny too.

But Park Jimin was an exception to all that. He had never once chuckled at Jeongguk's jokes or behaviour. Jeongguk had only ever caught Jimin staring quietly at him after he'd said something to make others laugh. Those were the only times he would witness any sort of emotion on his face. Because Jimin was never anything. He was too detached and unapproachable for Jeongguk to even make small talk with him let alone crack a joke.

But the worst thing was that Jimin didn't pretend to not care, he actually didn't care about anything. He didn't care about his grades or his appearance or his future or remotely anything that could make him seem human. The way he carried himself through life was a wonder to Jeongguk because he didn't understand how somebody could live without having a dream.

"Pick up your phone, Jimin." Seohyun snapping at her son pulled Jeongguk out of his thoughts. "It might be urgent."

"It's just Taehyung," Jimin said in a monotonous voice as he absentmindedly swirled his spoon in the bowl of soup he was having. His phone was vibrating beside his dinner plate.

"You need to start being more considerate towards your friends."

The way Jimin's eyes flashed at his mother even made Jeongguk startle in his seat. There was a certain bitterness in that look. He eventually clenched his jaw and moved to pick up his phone.

"Why is he video calling anyway?" he muttered under his breath.

"I may have told Taehyungie hyung about your piercing," Jihyun said mischievously.

Jimin gave his brother a pointed look before receiving the call with a sigh.

"Jiminie! Why didn't you tell me you were getting a tongue piercing?" Taehyung's frivolous voice soon filled the dining room.

"It wasn't planned."

"Well you should have still told me so we could get one together," Taehyung said in a pouting manner.

"Don't encourage him, Taehyung-ah," Seohyun said with a smile in her voice.

"Hi, Seohyun-ssi. I'm just trying to be a good friend to Jimin. If he wakes up one day in regret, at least he'll know he didn't do this stupid thing alone."

Seohyun just cooed at his endearing ways while Jimin just scoffed to himself. He was still playing around with his food, not taking a single bite. It made Jeongguk frown at him. He didn't understand
why Taehyung was friends with Jimin anyway, he was so moody and treated him like shit.

"Come on, show me your tongue!"

"You can see it later, Taehyung-ah."

"Stop being a bitch, Jimin, and let me see that thing."

Jihyun burst out laughing and Jeongguk smiled too. But when Jimin let his tongue poke of his mouth, that smile died right there on Jeongguk's lips and he nearly choked on the jjajangmyeon he was having.

*Holy mother of fuckity fuck*, that piercing looked damn hot.

Jeongguk was almost jealous of Jimin, and that was something he thought he would never say. He quickly diverted his gaze to pretend to unsee that thing of beauty. This was the one thing where Jimin and Jeongguk's preferences matched. The younger boy loved tattoos and piercings, but his mum didn't allow him to have any because they looked too bold. He wished he had enough courage to turn up with a tongue piercing in front of his mum like Jimin and not give a fuck. But that amount of indifference just wasn't something Jeongguk was capable of.

"*Ooh*, you'll be pulling girls left, right and centre with that, Jiminie," Taehyung squealed.

Jihyun scoffed. "Yeah, sure. As if he'll let anyone stay long enough."

Jimin glared at his brother before turning back to his phone. "I'll talk to you later, Taehyung," he said, ending the call abruptly just as Taehyung was about to speak and stood up from his chair.

"Where are you going?" Seohyun asked in alarm.

"To get some fresh air."

"At least finish your dinner!"

"It tastes bland."

Seohyun spluttered incredulously. "Park Jimin, sit down and eat something! You haven't had a proper meal since yesterday."

By this point, Jihyun was rolling his eyes at their daily conversation. He distracted Jeongguk by talking about their football practice tomorrow. They had a home game in two weeks so the practice sessions were taking place on a daily basis lately.

"Coach should seriously make Lucas quit," Jihyun complained, albeit good-naturedly. "His head's always in the clouds whenever his girlfriend comes to watch."

Jeongguk smiled. "I think they're cute." Because Lucas and his girlfriend, Yuqi, were that classic high school couple that people wrote stories about.

"It doesn't matter if they're cute, we won't look cute if we lose because of him. What if he's blowing kisses at his girlfriend and the ball smacks him on the head? Well, I certainly hope that happens."

"Stop pouting." Jeongguk laughed. "You look like Miri with your puppy eyes."

"I do not look like Miri," Jihyun grumbled. "She's way cuter anyway."
"—and drop Jihyun and Jeongguk off to their practice tomorrow." Jeongguk's attention snapped back to Seohyun when he heard his name. "They aren't allowed to bring their cars because their parking space is being rebuilt. Mrs. Jeon and I will be at work."

"How do you suppose I do that in my two-seater car?" Jimin deadpanned. "Is one of them sitting on the other's lap?"

"I wouldn't mind," Jihyun said in a suggestive manner at the same time as Jeongguk saying, "God forbid, no. I don't want Jihyun's bony legs underneath or on me."

Seohyun ignored them both. "Obviously not, you'll take them one at a time."

Jeongguk gaped at her unbelievably. She couldn't be serious. He couldn't handle being with Jimin when there were people around, forget about being totally alone. He already knew what his gravestone was going to say: death by extreme awkwardness.

For fuck's sake, he was actually considering hiring a taxi.

"Are you serious? It's a half an hour drive there and back."

"Well?"

Jimin just groaned and turned to walk away. "So much for wanting to sleep on the weekend." He halted at the door and faced them again. "What time do you have to be there?"

"9 o'clock sharp." Jihyun smiled sweetly.

Jimin threw him a dirty look. "Fuck all of you. There will be rush hour traffic too."

"Language, Jimin," Seohyun reprimanded but Jimin was already out of the door.
"Miri, let me at least have breakfast in peace," Jeongguk groaned at his dog, who was wagging her tail and staring up at him with imploring eyes. "I just fed you, you little drama queen. Why are you always hungry anyway? You're a dog, not a pig. I swear you're related to Seokjin hyung somehow."

After a moment, Jeongguk paused.

"Did I just call Seokjin hyung a dog or a pig?" he mused. "I'm losing my brain cells, aren't I, Miri?"

His dog just gave him a judgemental look and started to walk away.

"Don't leave me, you opportunist! You should keep me company when I'm eating."

But Miri had more important things to do, like finding unavailable food to eat. Jeongguk just wasn't having a good day. His heart was threatening to jump out of his chest as the clock approached half eight. Jimin would be picking him up in a few minutes. He couldn't stop cringing at every scenario he had imagined in his head of how their conversation would go—if there was one in the first place. Because Jimin was never the one to engage in unnecessary small talk.

God, what did he ever do to deserve such misery?

He quickly washed his cereal bowl after he had finished and grabbed his practice bag. Nobody was at home so Jeongguk had to leave Miri at his neighbour's house who was always happy to help whenever Jeongguk needed a dog sitter.

"Come on, Miri!" he hollered at her when he was at the door. She came running and clung to his leg as she made herself a seat on his shoes, making Jeongguk laugh. "No, you brat, we're leaving. Cuddle time will be at night."
He heard a beep outside as he was locking the door so he held up a finger for Jimin to wait while he dropped Miri off. His dog happily jumped into Mrs. Byun's arms when she opened the door, licking her cheek with her small tongue.

"Don't feed her until the afternoon. And beware of her puppy eyes, you know she always has them ready," Jeongguk told Mrs. Byun as she petted Miri gently at her lovely greeting.

"Okay. Have fun at practice, Jeongguk-ah. And nice ride," she said, looking past him at Jimin's car.

"Uh, yeah—it's a ... friend." He scratched his beanie hesitantly.

"Is it actually?" She chuckled while raising a brow.

"True, I wouldn't go that far. He's Jihyun's brother." He laughed before waving at Miri and making his way towards Jimin.

Of course, Jimin drove a white Aston Martin Vanquish. Nothing short of untypical for an untypical boy. He walked to the back and tapped on the boot twice for Jimin to open it. The older boy unlocked it accordingly and Jeongguk flung his bag inside.

Jimin was looking out of the windshield while drumming his fingers on the steering wheel when Jeongguk got inside. He didn't spare the younger boy a glance but Jeongguk did a double take after seeing Jimin's face.

"Uh, you look—"

"Like a truck crashed into me after being hurled down a set of stairs and then was resurrected? Yeah, Jihyun's already told me."

Jeongguk was speechless. There were massive bruise-like bags under his eyes, his eyes were bloodshot and swollen while his whole face looked puffy.

"No ... I meant that you look very tired."

Jimin sighed. "Yeah, late night."

"Why? You seemed okay last night."

*Shit.* Jeongguk probably wasn't supposed to acknowledge the fact that they saw each other last night. Shouldn't they be acting like strangers? Maybe casual acquaintances? Or should he just pretend that everything was fine between them?

Yeah, this was how awkward their non-existent relationship was.

Jimin was quiet for a moment while the brunet was cursing at himself for not keeping his mouth shut. "I couldn't sleep," he finally said.

But Jeongguk gathered that you couldn't get such bad bags under your eyes in just one day, Jimin had probably concealed them with makeup yesterday like he always did. "Was there something on your mind?"

There was pin-drop silence for a moment. Then Jimin looked at Jeongguk for the first time and after watching him with inquisitive eyes, he said, "What is it to you?"

It made Jeongguk's blood boil how Jimin questioned even the most apparent of people's intentions. It was a simple question, for God's sake. But instead of retorting something equally infuriating he just
turned to look out of the window.

They were rolled down slightly with a gentle breeze sweeping across their faces. Nobody talked for the next five minutes. Jimin was aloof as ever and Jeongguk was as mad as ever. The way Jimin got under his skin was just ridiculous. It was no wonder why many people disliked Jimin, he didn't have the nicest habits nor the most respectable manners.

Jeongguk almost jumped when the older boy's phone suddenly started ringing in the deafening silence, but he didn't make a move to receive the call. He was looking out the windshield, unbothered. In all honestly, Jimin's expression could make Jeongguk think he had imagined the shrill noise. But his mental peace was restored when, after a while, it rang again as they stopped at the traffic lights. Though, Jimin still showed no sign of accepting or declining the call.

When it blared the third time, Jeongguk lost it. "Can you take that or turn your phone off?" he snapped.

He could tell Jimin was startled by his tone. "Sorry," he mumbled as he moved to switch it off. "I'm not used to driving with people."

"What? So when you're alone you just let it ring? Isn't it annoying?"

"It feels reassuring to me."

Jeongguk just stared at him incredulously, he was questioning Jimin's sanity right now. Is he for real?

Jimin sensed the younger boy watching him. "Sorry, I know it sounds odd." He let out a dry laugh.

It didn't just sound odd, it was odd. Jeongguk decided to add this to the list of things that made Park Jimin so fucking strange.

"Who is even calling you?"

"People."

"Oh, really? I obviously thought monkeys wanted to talk to you." Jeongguk scoffed as he looked out of the window again. Somebody remind him why he was in this crazy person's car again.

*Come on, Jeongguk,* he told himself. *You can cope for another ten minutes.*

When Jimin finally parked in front of the training centre, Jeongguk couldn't get out fast enough. He grabbed his practice bag from the boot and basically ran away from the car. It wasn't until he reached their lockers that he realised he'd forgotten to say thanks. But another part of him thought, *Thanks for what? Messing with my head?*

He greeted the few boys in the locker room before getting changed into his football kit. After splashing some cold water onto his face, he tried to get into the right mindset to play. He had one of the most important positions as a goalkeeper, he couldn't risk letting his mind wander during a game.

The rest of the team were stretching and warming up as Jeongguk jogged over to the field. Jihyun seemed to be in a heated discussion with Lucas, probably over Yuqi, but the latter didn't even look apologetic. His best friend seemed to give up after a while, waving Jeongguk over when he saw him.

"Stop me from killing that guy, Jeongguk. I swear I'm losing it," Jihyun groaned into his shoulder.
Jeongguk patted his back sympathetically. As the captain and midfielder of the team, Jihyun had almost double the level of responsibility. But he worked well under pressure, unlike Jeongguk who would let his passion or anger get the best of him. He had always been hot-headed.

"How was the ride?"

Jeongguk just exhaled wearily. "Your brother is strange."

"Don't say that." Jihyun frowned, but there was a certain ferocity in his tone.

"I didn't mean—He just does odd things, you know? He looked like a mess so I asked him about it but he just snapped at me."

Jihyun sighed, looking defeated. "Just try to understand that he has his reasons, JK. You don't have to like him. I know you don't like him. But just respect him for it, okay? I know he's difficult."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to complain," Jeongguk said softly, not realising Jihyun would be sensitive to this. They never really discussed his older brother.

"It's okay. I know where you're coming from." He let out a long, audible breath. "We need to get started."

He jogged to the centre of the field. "Come on guys, gather round!"

But Jeongguk's heart wrenched at the defeated tone of his best friend's voice. Mostly, he was confused. He hadn't ever seen Jihyun try to explain his brother's behaviour to Jeongguk. It was always good-natured complaining on Jihyun's part and Jeongguk agreeing. He wondered if Jihyun knew more about Jimin's behaviour than he was letting on.
After that intense practice session, Jeongguk had to use the training centre's showers. He had never been a fan of doing that because he simply couldn't be bothered to bring his own toiletries and the risk of developing diseases wasn't very inviting. But he had been sweating so badly that his top was fully drenched and his shorts were clinging to his thighs uncomfortably.

He tried to be as quick as he could with it but given that his showers at home took him more than half an hour, he wasn't very successful. Although he still patted himself on the back for finishing in around fifteen minutes. He dried off his body with an Iron Man towel that the boys always mocked him for but he didn't care. If he was going to be teased about something, he'd rather it was Iron Man than some girl he was caught gawking at like the other guys.

"You need a ride home, JK?" Jihyun called when Jeongguk entered the changing area.

Jeongguk shuddered internally at the thought. "Nah, I'm going over to Mingyu's. You wanna come?"

"I've got work to catch up on." He pulled a face. "I have an essay due for tomorrow so I'm probably pulling an all-nighter."

"Good luck with that." He snickered.

Of course, Jeongguk had homework to do as well but getting away from Jimin was more important. He needed to sort his thoughts out before he saw the older boy again to prevent himself from potentially banging his head against a wall. From his prior confusion and also from Jimin's infuriating personality.

"How's your project for that human condition theme going?"
Jeongguk made an unintelligible noise which conveyed the amount of progress he'd made with that. He was a photography major so he was used to working with abstract ideas, not emotional crap like this. The portfolio that they handed in for this theme would be worth forty-five percent of their end of year grade, so he couldn't afford to jump in without any planning. "I have a lot of ideas that I want to communicate through this theme but I don't know what the subject of it all should be. In my mind, the human condition can range from simply our physical bodies to even landscapes because we have an impact on our surroundings, you get me?"

"I see what you mean." Jihyun pondered on it for a moment, but then he had to ruin the bonding atmosphere by adding, "I wish I could help you out but I don't fuck with art hoes."

"Go suck on a brick, motherfucker," Jeongguk said as flung the towel he was drying his hair with as his supposedly best friend. He was actually trying to be serious for once. "And I don't even do art."

Jihyun gave him a look. "You don't have to do art to be an art hoe," he said. "But whatever, you're better off asking Jimin hyung about this kind of stuff."

"Yeah, I'd rather shove my head in a toilet bowl," he muttered under his breath.

"I heard that," Jihyun remarked.

"You were supposed to."

"Why am I friends with such a bitch?" Jihyun sighed dramatically. "You sure you don't wanna come? Mum's making grilled lamb skewers tonight."

Jeongguk halted. This couldn't be happening. Avoiding Jimin or lamb skewers? It was a painful decision. Could he let lamb skewers slip away in order to avoid Jimin?

Jihyun guffawed when he saw Jeongguk's inner struggle. "Don't worry. Jimin hyung won't even look at you, he's got Seulgi noona coming over."

Oh right, Kang Seulgi. The girl who they couldn't figure out was dating Jimin or not. Jihyun said that they spent a lot of time together in Jimin's art studio. Both of them had the same major so maybe they just got inspiration from each other by working together. And Jimin had denied it too when Seohyun once asked.

Not that Jeongguk cared much about it, but the way Jihyun and Seohyun seemed so interested in that girl made Jeongguk curious. Was it that much of a novelty for Jimin to be dating someone? Jeongguk sighed as he finished putting his clothes on, this was exactly why he didn't like to delve into matters concerning Jimin. It was pointless to even try to figure anything out.

"So?" Jihyun asked.

"Yeah, count me in."

They had been working beside each other wordlessly for almost an hour now. There was faint R&B music playing in the background and gentle breeze sweeping in through the floor-to-ceiling windows. The atmosphere was so serene and ... effortless. Yeah, that was the word. Everything about Kang Seulgi was effortless. She was effortlessly beautiful and smart. Her presence eased
Jimin's anxiety simply because no part of her reminded him of the outside world. Of what he was running away from. She never talked about irrelevant things, she never mentioned anybody to Jimin, she gave all of herself to what she was doing in that moment.

Whether she was painting, reading a novel, or just listening to Jimin. When she was with him, she was only there.

Jimin could understand why his mother thought he was dating Seulgi, he was very much captivated by her because she was everything he wanted to be. Ridden of useless thoughts, utterly uncaring of what people thought about her, and simply living because she wanted to live. It was strange, he admitted, his fascination with her. But he didn't feel any sort of romantic inclination towards her, he just liked her as a person.

Seulgi was the one friend he could count on when he longed for somebody's presence but didn't want to talk. She understood that, Jimin didn't know how she did, but she understood him. She understood that Jimin would never let her get to know him, or reveal any run-down part of himself. He loved that she didn't demand or expect anything from him like others did. She knew that he couldn't give her any more than he already had done.

"Seulgi bear?"

"Hmm?" she hummed before looking over in her round-framed glasses and with the overgrown bangs of her orange hair falling into her eyes.

She was so endearing.

"How are you doing?" Jimin asked quietly.

She continued to stroke the brush on the canvas for a while, Jimin could see she was trying to put her thoughts into words. In the end, she smiled woefully. "You know what they say, it only hurts when I breathe."

Jimin reached for her hand and squeezed it. He wasn't good with his words, Seulgi knew that. But he could see her heartache. She sighed into his touch, not saying anything.

Seulgi wasn't an unhappy person in any way, she was just recovering from a bad breakup. Her boyfriend of almost two years had left her a couple months ago, dropping from the face of earth with a text saying 'I need a break'. She had no clue what happened, where he was or what he was doing. How does one recover from a relationship that ended with no explanation whatsoever, never mind closure?

Seulgi was a tough girl to be able to even go on with her life without letting the past prevent her from making new friends and letting them in. It wasn't easy to trust people after something like that. Though, that didn't mean she wasn't hurt.

"I don't even miss him anymore, you know?" she said. "What hurts is that I lost myself in that relationship, and I know there are some parts of me that I'll never be able to get back. But it's okay, I'm hoping time will heal everything."

Jimin watched her for a moment.

"I know I don't say it enough but I admire you a lot, noona. How you see a bright side to things even if it is bleak, how you give all of yourself to what you're doing. You're so strong, I don't know many people who could handle this the way you're doing it. You're a ray of sunshine, Seulgi bear. You know that, don't you?"
She smiled at him sweetly. Jimin felt like he couldn't say how much he appreciated her enough.

"And those sad eyes don't suit you."

The trance broke and Seulgi playfully smacked him away. "You dork," she said but grinned because it was something she always said to Jimin when he was feeling down.

Seulgi didn't know much about Jimin, they only ever talked about art or their general life experiences. Nothing particular about themselves which was why Jimin had been surprised when Seulgi told him about her break up. But he appreciated that she trusted him enough to reveal that part of herself.

From downstairs, they could hear the racket Jihyun and his best friend were creating over the lamb skewers his mother was making for them tonight. Seulgi chuckled at them before turning back to her easel. "I'm just going to finish this little bit before we go down."

"That's fine. I'll just watch you."

Seulgi laughed, smearing the orange paint which matched her fiery hair across his cheek. "Go wash yourself, you filthy boy. Have you seen your hands? You looked like a bag of charcoal was dumped on you."

Which was fair. Jimin had been sketching a charcoal portrait, and it was humanly impossible for him to not have the black residue smudged across his white shirt and hands, possibly his face too.

"Okay, okay. I'll clean myself. Shall I come grab you afterwards?"

She hummed. Jimin contemplated whether he should change his smeared clothes but then decided against it since he was going to come back to finish the portrait after dinner anyway. He quickly washed his hands and face, ignoring the streak of black in his silver hair, clueless as to how he managed to get charcoal in his hair.

Seulgi was just packing up when he went back, seemingly looking for something. "I've lost a development piece here somewhere, could you see if you can find it later?"

Jemin smiled. This wasn't the first time she'd lost something in his studio. "Sure," he said as she joined him and they made their way down the set of stairs.

The dining table was ready for them with Jihyun already having started eating while his friend seemed to be in physical pain as he waited for Jimin and Seulgi to arrive so they'd eat together. Jimin almost rolled his eyes at him.

Jeongguk was a surreal boy. Always so hyper and eager to talk about utterly useless things, cracking jokes left, right and centre and overflowing with talent. He had that endearing laughter that sounded more like a cackle but his bunny teeth made up for it. And Jimin had the lovely misfortune of hearing him laugh all the time since the boy never shut up. Jihyun and him together were a piece of work.

But Jeongguk had always been apprehensive around Jimin, and the latter understood why. They certainly weren't on friendly terms with each other and this morning hadn't been particularly pleasant for either of them. Jimin admitted that maybe he was too blunt with his words, but he'd just not been prepared for Jeongguk asking him about himself. The younger boy had spent more than half his life at their house, never once initiating a conversation with Jimin. So sue him for thinking Jeongguk just wanted to make small talk without real concern behind his words.

Jemin pretty much stayed away from the boy because Jeongguk was too bright for him. His
personality was too much for Jimin who had been drowning in his jadedness for so long now. And it was for the best since getting close to Jimin wasn't something that let you leave unscathed. He was all edges and bitterness wrapped into a person.

"Hello, Seulgi," his mother greeted her as they took a seat. "How are you, dear?"

"I'm good, thank you, Seohyun-ssi. And this aroma had my mouth watering upstairs, thank you for inviting me too."

"It's my pleasure. Go on, dig in."

Of course, the first one to reach for the skewers was Jeongguk, not even blowing on the meat before shoving it inside his mouth and then immediately fanning it.

"Have some manners, you muscle pig," Jihyun chided.

Jeongguk, managing to swallow some of that painfully hot bite, glared at him with his mouth full. "At least I have enough manners to wait for the guest to arrive before stuffing myself."

"Boys, let's not act like twelve-year-olds. We know neither one of you has any manners," Seohyun said.

They both spluttered while Jimin just ignored their everyday drama, focusing on feeding himself with the distraction of Seulgi beside him. His appetite was still fully diminished but he knew he had to get something in his stomach. It didn't help that he still had to have soup since his pierced tongue was healing.

"Jimin-ah, you could have at least changed your shirt before you came to eat," Seohyun started and Jimin almost sighed. There she went again with her daily reproach. She continued for a while until she decided that Jimin wasn't going to respond.

"How was the session upstairs?" Seohyun turned to Seulgi instead.

"It was lovely," Seulgi beamed. "Our themes are totally different. I'm trying out contradictory colours while Jimin's gone for black and white this time. I'm not quite sure if I'll be able to pull it off but you never go wrong with the classic black and white."

"I'm sure yours will be as creative as always, noona," Jimin said.

"Oh, while we're on the topic," Jihyun interrupted. "JK was struggling with his end of year project. Could you help him out?"

Jimin glanced at Jeongguk, who looked like a deer caught in headlights with his wide doe eyes and mouth stuffed with the meat.

"What's your theme, Jeongguk?" Seulgi asked.

"Human condition."

"Oh, that's very interesting. It's a broad topic, isn't it? How are you thinking about portraying it?"

Jeongguk scratched his neck hesitantly. "There are so many interpretations of it but I was thinking just simply the human body. It reveals a lot about the human condition since how we treat our bodies is how we subconsciously express ourselves."

"I don't understand." Seulgi tilted her head slightly.
"I'm not putting it into the right words," Jeongguk mumbled while munching on another bite of meat. He pondered on his thoughts for a while. "I don't want to have an answer of what the human condition is at the end. I'm not writing an essay, you know? I want to just express the theme and leave it up to people on how they choose to interpret it.

"For example, a portrait of a skeletal figure would show them not eating healthily, that may be because they can't necessarily afford their basic needs or maybe it's due to their lack of appetite, which in turn could reflect their physical or psychological health. So I want to start off broad and then delve into the deeper connotations later."

Everybody on the table seemed to be perplexed by this. This was the most they’d heard Jeongguk speak that wasn't utter bullshit. Jeongguk’s cheeks tinted pink at the attention and he scratched the back of the neck again. It was cute, Jimin thought. Jeongguk was normally at the centre of attention with his exuberant personality, but he was shy revealing his thoughts.

"That's very thoughtful," Seulgi murmured. "You should definitely go ahead with it. I'd personally go for the gloomy parts of the human condition since sadness is more prominent to express than positive feelings. What do you think, Jimin?"

Jimin found the boy watching him with a curious expression on his face. "If you are going for melancholy themes and want to photograph the human body, I guess silhouettes would be a good starting point. It would convey the hidden parts of us we never want to reveal. It starts off like that, doesn't it? Before you acknowledge and bring light upon your faults to accept yourself. That's just human nature. But there's happiness too. I don't think you should abandon that, the end should always be happy."

Jeongguk's wide eyes hadn't shrunk a tiny bit since this conversation had started, and he still looked uncomfortable with the attention. "Oh," he eventually said. "Uh ... thank you. I think that's a good interpretation of it. I'll keep that in mind."

"I'm sure Jimin hyung will help you along with it if you get stuck, Jeongguk. Won't you, Jimin hyung?" Jihyun gave his brother a pointed look which he settled on ignoring, merely nodding in Jeongguk’s direction.

He'd like to stay as far away from this as he could. Jihyun had always been insistent with trying to get Jimin to hang out with his group of friends, to go out and enjoy his youth instead of staying cooped up in his art studio. In fact, he was the one to introduce Taehyung to Jimin, saying that Jimin needed some fun people in his life.

But Taehyung was hard to cope with by himself, Jimin wasn't ready to immerse himself into the boisterous world of Jeon Jeongguk. No matter how ignorant of it he was.

"Anyway, I'm pulling an all-nighter today to finish an essay for tomorrow," Jihyun said. "Any tips?"

Everybody simply continued to eat their food as though nothing had interrupted the silence. Jeongguk burst out laughing at the everybody's lack of response, they knew Jihyun was all talk. There was no way that boy could stay up past 2 am.

"Seulgi noona?" Jihyun pouted.

Jimin chuckled at Seulgi's blank expression, before turning to his brother. "Shows how desperate you are if you have to resort to asking Seulgi bear for tips on staying awake." He smirked. "She's brain dead after midnight."
Seulgi elbowed his side playfully while she laughed. "I like sleeping, okay?"

"No wonder you and Yoongi hyung get along so well."

"Come on, he's way more of a sloth than me," she exclaimed.

He merely hummed, that wasn't a lie. Yoongi was probably a rock in his previous life, it would explain his aversion to motion. They talked some more, mostly in between themselves but Seulgi would direct a comment in his mother's direction after some time too.

As they were finishing up, Seohyun reminded Jimin of his assigned duty the next day, which made him sigh internally. "Make sure you remember to take Jihyun and Jeongguk to their practice, Jimin-ah."

Jimin nodded, accidentally making eye contact with Jeongguk who quickly averted his gaze. It made Jimin frown. Surely there must be some other reason behind Jeongguk's blatant jumpiness around Jimin rather than just the awkwardness. He obviously didn't like Jimin, but that didn't explain how wary he looked whenever Jimin was around. Did he make him that uncomfortable? It would be a lie to say that Jimin wasn't curious about what went on in that boy's mind.
Jeongguk didn't know what he expected from Jimin when he came to pick him up the next morning. Perhaps a little familiarity since they'd actually held a conversation yesterday, perhaps some tips on his project, or maybe just a nod of acknowledgement to indicate that they weren't total strangers. But Jimin did none of that. There was rap music playing in the background which served to ease the awkwardness that normally strived between them. Still, Jeongguk couldn't help but feel disappointed.

To make matters worse, that annoying ringtone of Jimin's phone was blaring repeatedly without the older boy showing any sign of answering the call. How could any sane person find comfort in a shrill sound constantly piercing their ears? Jimin obviously did, but then Jeongguk couldn't exactly say that Jimin was sane.

He glanced sideways at him, trying to observe any expression on his utterly blank face. But it was to no avail; Jimin's dark eyes were focused on the road, his thick lips were in their natural pout, and his jaw was stubbornly set in one place. Only the strands of his silver hair underneath his beanie were fluttering gently in the wind coming in from the open windows. Jeongguk decided that Jimin was simply incapable of showing emotion. He should've at least pursed his lips at the traffic lights that were taking forever to turn green.

But no, in addition to that and his obnoxious ringtone, Jeongguk was literally perched on the edge of his seat because he couldn't wait to get out of the car. After a few minutes, he decided to take the matter into own hands by reaching across the car to snatch Jimin’s phone out of socket where it was charging.

The caller's ID displayed his dad, Chansung's, name, making Jeongguk frown at how Jimin seemed to be blatantly ignoring him. The said boy turned to him, raising his eyebrows inquisitively. But Jeongguk didn't respond to him, answering the call instead.
"Hey, it's Jeongguk. Jimin was busy with something so he couldn't answer."

Chansung hummed in a way which showed that he could see through Jeongguk's fib but didn't call him out on it. "Hello, Jeongguk-ah. How have you been? I hear from Jihyun that you're working hard for your next game."

"I'm good enough." He sighed. "You know how we barely got the winning goal in the last match? Coach is still hung up on that and pushing us hard. And since winning the next game will help to put us into a solid position for the next matches, he is working us to our limits. We're all totally spent by now."

"I see Coach Dongwoo is the same old tyrant," Chansung said and Jeongguk laughed. "But I'm sure our muscle pig's body is coming along well, then." He chuckled, having adopted Jihyun's only method of teasing Jeongguk.

Jeongguk grunted half-heartedly in response, mumbling about annoying family members and how he didn't deserve all the disrespect towards his muscular body.

Chansung ignored all that uttered out of the boy's mouth. "Hard work always pays off, son. Keep going and remember to take care of your health."

"I will, thank you. See you soon."

"Goodbye, Jeongguk-ah."

He smiled, passing the phone over to Jimin.

"Yeah?" Jimin said as a greeting.

Jeongguk could faintly hear Chansung on the other side due to the utter silence in the car. "How are you doing, Jimin-ah?" he asked.

"I'm fine," he replied shortly.

"Jimin," Chansung sighed defeatedly. "Your mother's telling me that you haven't had a full meal since last week. This is not something we should be pestering you on. You're not a child that we need to feed regular meals to."

"Then don't pester me."

"And let you starve yourself to death?"

Jimin scoffed ludicrously. "I won't die that easily."

"You and I will have a talk when I come home, young man."

"Looking forward to it," Jimin deadpanned in his nonchalant manner.

Jeongguk, who was unintentionally listening to their whole conversation, couldn't help but shake his head at how disrespectful Jimin was being, even though he was used to the older boy's behaviour by now. Could Jimin really blame his parents for worrying about him? Not only Jimin's family but Jeongguk had also noticed the older boy merely pecking at his food at meal times. Obviously, they would be worried about him. And just because his eye bags were covered with makeup today didn't mean that they weren't there.

"Did you see Mr. Kwon yesterday?"
"Dad," Jimin sighed. "Now's not the time."

"Are you busy?"

"I'm taking Jeonggukie to his football practice."

Why Jeongguk's heart skipped a beat at Jimin adding that little '-ie' at the end of his name, he had no idea. Did it show some progress in their relationship if Jimin was calling him by a nickname? But then Jeongguk mentally smacked himself for being that desperate.

"Is Jihyun not with you?"

"I dropped him off earlier."

"Alright. Take care, Jimin-ah. I'll see you later."

Jimin hung up without a word, tossing his phone onto the dashboard with a vexed look on his face.

"Don't take my calls without my permission next time," he said to Jeongguk coldly.

The younger boy's mind spun from the whiplash that Jimin's moods were giving him. Why call him 'Jeonggukie' if he was going to be a jerk the next minute? Jeongguk cursed himself for getting his hopes up. There was truly no understanding Park Jimin and trying to get on his good side was utterly hopeless.

"Don't annoy with your stupid fucking ringtone next time, then," Jeongguk replied in an equally spiteful manner.

Jimin didn't respond, instead, he merely glared out of the windshield. And that was that, the end to every conversation between them would only comprise of the older boy being a dick and Jeongguk retaliating in an equally rude way. He was regretting the day his dumb brain convinced him to let Jimin drop him off.

Wasn't everything in his life so much more peaceful without Jimin's presence? How long would that fucking parking lot take to be rebuilt? And did Jimin have to have a two-seater car? At least having Jihyun would prevent Jeongguk from wanting to bang his head against the window. But then Jeongguk realised that he was going to blame anything he could for this misfortune.

The only thing making up for it was Singularity playing in the car. Even if it hurt his pride to admit, Jimin had a good taste in music.

So the next few days were only bearable due to Jimin's playlist; even the songs Jeongguk didn't initially like were starting to grow on him. The genres ranged from hip hop and sexy R&B to mellow jazz. But whatever the song, there was something meaningful behind each one of them. Most of which Jeongguk's simple brain couldn't figure out but he downloaded the music nonetheless. Not that he would ever let anyone know, that was something that'd go down with him to his grave.

On weekdays, the practice would be later on in the evening due to his university classes, and sometimes Jeongguk felt like riding with Jimin at dusk with the soft croon of Lana Del Rey in the background wasn't the worst thing. He had noticed that the silver-haired boy never had upbeat music playing in the evening, and he wondered why.

The silence in the car had grown to be calming instead of awkward because they both knew neither of them would engage in a conversation which would only end in a senseless dispute. Jimin almost never spoke except for murmuring 'hello' and 'goodbye' and Jeongguk wouldn't have it any other
But Jimin had muted his ringtone now, which Jeongguk thought was a massive improvement. That repetitive back-and-forth between them hadn't been good for his health or his mood; he'd be on edge the whole day and his ears would constantly be ringing from the arguments.

Perhaps God took pity on him and decided that just seeing Jimin's face twice every day was enough of a challenge for Jeongguk.

A nice face, that was, Jeongguk couldn't deny that Jimin had an especially nice face if he kept his mouth shut.

When the older boy picked him up from practice on the day of Seohyun's birthday party, he was quite dressed up. Which for Jimin meant that his eye bags were more concealed and his hair was pulled back from his forehead. Of course, his outfit just consisted of a baggy shirt and dark skinny jeans.

"Hi, Jeongguk," Jimin greeted, albeit very tiredly. "Mum asked you to come straight to the party but you probably need to shower and change. Shall we stop at your house?"

Straight to the point, that's what Jimin was.

"Yeah, that'll be good," he replied. "Is my mum already there?"

Jemin nodded softly in his direction, looking like just that movement took so much out of him. His eyes were puffy and he looked drowsy enough to not be driving right now. Jeongguk was contemplating asking him if he was alright, perhaps not so much out of concern but for the safety of them both. But after personally witnessing Jimin's touchiness at being asked about himself, Jeongguk was quite rightly wary to do so. In the end, his love for his life made him ask the dreaded question.

"Are you okay?"

Jimin didn't exactly respond straightaway, but the lack of snapping on his side had a sense of relief washing through Jeongguk. At least another argument wasn't going to brew. Jeongguk saw his mouth open and close as he presumably contemplated how to answer, his teeth ground together before he let his jaw relax. He glanced at Jeongguk quietly, before mumbling in a small voice, "M'tired."

_No shit_, Jeongguk thought but wisely chose to keep that to himself.

"Is this picking and dropping thing wearing you out?"

"No," Jimin said with a sigh, then after a while, "No, it's not that. Just tired." But his tone was too forlorn for Jeongguk to be convinced.

Jeongguk frowned at him, a person couldn't just be that tired from nothing. All Jimin did was go to university every day, pick and drop Jihyun and Jeongguk from their football practice, work on his art stuff and do the occasional house chores. Which Jeongguk liked to think were ordinary everyday tasks, no moving mountains or anything too strenuous that could make a person as tired as he was. Perhaps he was organising things for his mother's birthday party. Yes, that would explain it.

"Uh ... did you do a lot of work today?"

Jemin chuckled, almost like a scoff. "Not much."
His blasé attitude was ticking Jeongguk off. Why couldn't Jimin just answer like a regular person and tell him what was wrong? Was he too special for that? Did he need Jeongguk to probe him about every possible reason?

As though Jimin could hear his internal thought process, he said, "It's nothing, Jeongguk. Don't worry, I won't kill you today."

This time, Jeongguk scoffed. It seemed like those days where Jimin's rude habits wouldn't make an appearance were too good to last. The way he spoke was always so condescending, like he was too superior to associate himself with others. As much as Jeongguk tried not to let Jimin get under his skin, the boy managed to do so without fail. It was almost comical how the little things Jimin said would bother him all day.

He was still ranting at himself internally when Jimin parked the car outside his house. Jeongguk jumped out hurriedly, grateful to even have a few minutes to himself. But as he retrieved his bag from the boot he realised that having a shower and getting ready would at least take him half an hour, so his good manners wouldn't allow him to let Jimin wait in the car. He heaved a sigh dejectedly.

Walking over to Jimin's car door, he tapped on the window so the boy would pull it down. "Come in, I'm going to be a while," he informed, and considering his duty done, he walked off without a second glance in Jimin's direction.

His dog jumped into his arms as soon as he opened the door, performing her usual greeting of licking the person's face. Jeongguk chuckled at his baby, enveloping her into a hug and smooching her head. "Did you miss me, little brat?"

Miri waggled her tail enthusiastically, skipping all over the foyer. But then she suddenly stilled as her doe eyes fixated on Jimin's approaching figure. For a minute they both just stared at each other in quiet wonder and God knew what else. Possibly love on Miri's side telling by the way she couldn't tear her eyes away from the silver-haired boy. Then as Jimin stepped closer she leapt at his chest, obviously expecting him to catch her, which he did so, albeit in an alarmed manner. Jeongguk didn't have the chance to alert Miri on Jimin's unsociable habits before she started licking his face too.

Jimin, to Jeongguk's surprise, let out a startled giggle. A fucking giggle. He stroked behind her ears in utter elation as he continued to smile at her. Miri was having a field day at the abundance of love showered on her, lapping at his face in more eagerness. Then at seeing Jeongguk's bewildered expression, Jimin's smile subdued. "She's very endearing," he explained softly.

"Yeah ... " Jeongguk said, still mystified. "I gathered that."

"What's her name?"

"Miri."

"Aren't you the most adorable little bean?" Jimin cooed, his tiredness from earlier had miraculously vanished with no trace of it ever being there.

Jeongguk walked backwards to the staircase, still watching the two of them and trying to wrap his head around what on God's green earth was happening in front of his eyes. This was the most he'd ever seen Jimin smile in a month. Forget that, this was the most interest he'd seen him show in anything. He couldn't believe Miri had done what most people failed to do. His dog really was an otherworldly being, wasn't she? It was the most baffling thing he'd seen.

Jeongguk took his sweet time showering, which may or may not be due to the jealousy at seeing his
dog so enamoured by Jimin. If he knew Miri would bring out this side of Jimin, he'd take her to practice with him every day just to avoid Jimin's unpleasant behaviour. From downstairs, he heard Jimin's delighted squeal at Miri's antics and decided that thirty minutes were enough for a quick shower. Reluctantly, he made his way out of the shower.

By the time he got downstairs after dressing himself, it was safe to say his dog's love wasn't unrequited anymore. Miri was showing off all her tricks while Jimin watched her, transfixed, with his face resting on his hand. Right now, the show involved her walking on her hind legs which Jeongguk could tell was straining her body to do so. He'd always thought that Miri was a bit of an attention seeker, but if he were being honest, his dog probably had a praise kink.

"Okay, Miri. Enough affection for today. We're going now."

"No," Jimin said quickly. "I mean, uh ... can we take her along? I promise I'll look after her. Please."

Who knew a day would come where Park Jimin would plead Jeongguk for something? It was hard to not let that get to his head.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. And you shouldn't leave her alone for that long, it's not safe," he said in a know-it-all manner, eyes wide but lips pursing at the end.

"My neighbour can dog-sit her, though."

Jeongguk narrowed his eyes at him. What a manipulator.

"Fine, she can come," he relented. "But you better not let her drown in your pool."

"I won't. You're safe with me, aren't you, baby girl?" Jimin said in a honeyed voice that had Miri wagging her tail, utterly enthralled.

Jeongguk just scowled and went to pick her leash. He did not like this. He did not like this at all.

As the three of them made their way to Jimin's car, Jeongguk was hell-bent on investigating the reason behind this alien behaviour occurring right in front of his eyes.

"Why does she like you so much?" Jeongguk wondered out loud.

Jimin shrugged, getting inside the car and switching the light on so Miri could climb in. Jeongguk followed behind, grabbing his dog to place her on his lap because there was no other way of seating her. A thought suddenly infiltrated his mind as Jimin was putting his seat belt on, he leaned across the car and inclined towards Jimin's neck, inhaling deeply.

The silver-haired boy froze in his spot, looking mildly uncomfortable as he jumped back in surprise.

"W-What?"

"Aha!"

"What?" Jimin repeated, this time more confidently but still as confused as before.

"You smell like orange blossom, it's Miri's favourite scent." The verdict made him happy, there wasn't some hidden magic of Jimin's that had his dog wanting to kiss the ground he walked on. "She won't like you when you don't smell like that."
"A bit like her owner then," Jimin murmured as he pulled out of the driveway.

Jeongguk halted. His lips parted to deny that but then closed again. It wasn't a lie. But had Jeongguk been that apparent in showing his aversion towards Jimin? It had a wave of guilt rolling through him.

"Sorry," Jeongguk said, to his own and Jimin's surprise.

The older boy turned those knowing eyes towards him, smiling gently. "It's okay, Gguk."

And Jeongguk's heart did that thing again. First skipping a beat and then simply just skipping across his chest. His breath hitched in his throat and he daren't glance at Jimin. He was always so affected when Jimin called him by nicknames, and he knew why that was now. It was the only thing that Jimin did which made him feel not-ignored, like he existed in Jimin's world. And in his amazement at the newfound nickname, Jeongguk didn't ask why Jimin thought it was okay that he didn't like him.
Jeongguk wished he was like Jimin. With a reputation of keeping himself to himself, the silver-haired boy was lounging on a pool chair with Miri on his lap. That was his normal routine at every party that the Parks hosted. He didn't greet the guests as they arrived, he didn't entertain himself with the music or the feast, and he didn't partake in any sort of celebration going on. Most of their old acquaintances were aware of Mr. and Mrs. Park's older son's habits so they didn't try to initiate any uncomfortable conversations, which Jeongguk thought was for the good of both the parties involved.

Jimin was quite ... volatile in situations like this. Not that he ever caused a scene by outright quarrelling, but his silent treatment and cold eyes were enough to create tension that could be sensed by an outsider. He had this thing where he got frighteningly quiet when he was angry. But even that was difficult to determine since the silver-haired boy never spoke much anyway. In short, Jimin was just difficult.

So Jeongguk probably should have been more concerned about leaving Miri alone with him by the pool. First of all, he didn't trust Jimin to not toss Miri into the water if his mood suddenly changed. Secondly, if he were to do so, his dog could pretend all she wanted that she could handle the water but she really didn't know how to swim. But here he was, getting dragged by Jihyun to all sorts of 'family friends' that were just an excuse for his best friend to talk to their daughters. Who were all quite pretty, if Jeongguk did say so himself.

But he just wanted a short break from the party. The practice had tired him out and he always looked forward to collapsing on his bed after the sessions, but Seohyun's birthday was an occasion he definitely needed to attend. She and Chansung had always treated Jeongguk so affectionately, albeit Seohyun being a little cold in her nature than Mr. Park.

For a moment, Jeongguk contemplated just sitting beside Jimin until his laziness left him but seeing Jimin willingly was too much of an effort by itself. And so he continued to follow Jihyun like a lost
"How was the journey on the way here?" Jihyun asked, nudging him with his shoulder as they made their way to the drinks stand.

The brunet scowled at him. "He stole my dog."

"I can see that." He laughed. "I think Jimin hyung actually changed his top to match with Miri."

At that, Jeongguk raised his eyebrows and glanced at Jimin, finding that he was indeed wearing a white sweatshirt now. He was absentmindedly stroking Miri's head while his eyes gazed into the pool where his thoughts were drowning. Why was Jimin always thinking? What was he even thinking about? Jeongguk couldn't recall any memory he had of the older boy where he wasn't lost in his own thoughts, so deeply that anybody calling his name would startle him.

Jeongguk would get sick of being in his own mind for that long.

He saw Chungha flicking Jihyun's hand as he was passing by, gesturing him to pull a stool beside hers where she was having a drink. Jeongguk, considering it his role as a best friend, joined them and obediently took a seat. Chungha and Jihyun shared a class at their university although their majors were different. Jihyun was studying business while Chungha was doing a dance course, however, there was a compulsory digital practice module both of them had to take which led to their meeting.

"Jihyunie, you didn't tell me your brother was this fucking hot," the black-haired beauty said in an accusing manner, looking in the general direction of where Jimin was sprawled out idly.

"Noona, please refrain from your fangirling in front of me." He groaned. "I knew that tongue piercing was gonna have girls all over him."

"He has a tongue piercing?" she mused, a little smirk taking over her features as her eyes skimmed over Jimin's figure again, but now in an interested manner. Chungha had a very cat-like nature to her. She was inquisitive and playful but knew how to change her demeanour in different settings, and her mind was very perceptive of her surroundings. Her posture was always that of a lazy cat, all relaxed out and unwinded. But seeing her at her dance classes made it obvious that she worked tirelessly for her passion.

Jihyun stared at her wearily, then just face-palmed. "Don't you feel sorry for me? Look at what I have to endure because of hyung's stupid decisions."

Chungha clicked her tongue incredulously. "I've seen stupid decisions, Jihyun, but tongue piercings are never one of them."

Jihyun sighed. "Why do I get the feeling that girls only talk to me because I'm related to Jimin hyung? They either want details on his love life—which is non-existent—or they want to complain about his antisocial habits. You don't know how many times I've heard 'God wasted such a pretty face on Jimin' because hyung manages to piss people off without even interacting with them."

"Is that so?" Chungha wondered. "Doesn't that tell you more about those people than Jimin-ssi?"

"Hmm?"

"Nothing," she mumbled. "Although I do agree with them on his pretty face. He does have an especially lovely face, and that tongue piercing really seals the deal."

"You're being gross, noona."
"I'm not!"

"Jeongguk, isn't she being gross?"

"His piercing does look good."

Jihyun turned to gawk at him. "What?"

"I mean," he started. "If I got it done, I'd look hot as fuck too."

"Did you just indirectly imply that you find my brother hot as fuck?"

Jeongguk stared at his best friend with wide eyes. Did he just tell his best friend that he found his brother hot, albeit objectively? Well, shit.

But thankfully, Chungha saved him from answering by saying, "See, there you go. Somebody who understands my dilemma."

Giving them both disbelieving looks, Jihyun took a swig out of his glass. "So you're into Jimin hyung because he's got his tongue pierced?" he said impassively.

Chungha looked affronted. "Of course not! I don't care about his piercing, but that is an added bonus." At Jihyun's look of distaste, she smiled unapologetically. There was a moment's pause, then she continued, "He has such sad eyes, Jihunie. Did you never notice?"

The said boy looked between his brother and her a couple of times, then with a straight face, he asked, "What have you been taking, noona?"

"Fuck off," she said, but with no real bite to her words. "Haven't you seen him talk to people today?"

"Uh ... no," Jeongguk laughed but Chungha shut him up with a glare.

"When he's talking to someone, it's like he's not even there. He was here with Soyeon earlier and I overheard them just chatting about the party but he was so removed from the conversation, it's unreal. He's so ... He doesn't—"

"—want to be here," Jeongguk finished for her.

"True," Chungha mused. "But that makes him sound like a bad person."

"Chungha noona, as much as I appreciate you crushing over my brother, I'm not enjoying this conversation psychoanalysing hyung's habits. Let's not—"

She laughed dismissively. "That's the thing, Jihyun. They are not his habits."

"What are you trying to say?"

"If you wanted to, you would have figured it out."

"I feel like I'm being patronised."

"I'm just showing you how dumb you are," Chungha stated with a sweet smile.

"I don't like this."

"Call out his name."
"What?"

"Call out Jimin-ssi's name."

Jeongguk was getting tired of the back-and-forth between the two of them. Chungha was being extremely strange today which Jeongguk guessed was the side effect of associating with Jimin too much. He glanced around to see if he could join another conversation that wasn't as tedious as this. But all he could see were pretentious people trying to one-up the other. Guess he'd have to stick around with these two.

"Jimin hyung!"

At Jihyun's voice, Jeongguk turned back towards Jimin. The silver-haired boy either didn't hear his brother or he was ignoring him because he remained unmoving.

"See?" Chungha spoke. "He didn't even notice you saying his name."

"Hyung!"

At the second, louder yell, Jimin jolted in his seat. He glanced around until his eyes landed on Jihyun. He looked questioningly at him as if to say 'what?' and well, damn if Jihyun knew.

"What now?" he muttered to Chungha.

She shrugged. "I don't know."

"Nothing!" he shouted, giving Jimin a thumbs-up with a fake smile.

Jemin's eyes briefly scanned over Jeongguk and Chungha sitting on either side of his brother before he shot them all a dirty look while scowling and turned back around.

"I'd be inclined to refer to Jimin's eyes as angry rather than sad, Chungha noona," Jeongguk deadpanned.

"So, care to explain what that was for?" Jihyun asked.

"No reason. I just wanted to see his face again. Look at that bone structure, though. Was it sculpted by the Greek gods?"

Both boys gave her a look of pure disdain.

She then faced Jihyun. "You sure you're from the same parents?"

"Why am I friends with you?"

"Because fate had to make mine and Jimin-ssi's paths cross." Chungha winked.

"You do know that hyung is going to be pissed at me all week, right? Because he'll think we were talking shit about him."

"But we weren't."

"What?"

Chungha stared at him for a while. "You still don't get it."
Jeongguk could tell that his best friend had given up on Chungha's riddles by now. But he was finally beginning to make sense of them. He had no way of knowing if he was thinking along the right lines but that look in the raven-haired girl's eyes when she looked at him told him that he might just be.

"Anyway," Jihyun said. "He's more into Miri than he'd ever be into you."

Chungha sat up in her seat and Jeongguk almost laughed at her. "Who's Miri?"

"The dog on his lap."

That's when it clicked. Jimin was only wearing a white hoodie so that he could camouflage Miri on his lap. It made Jeongguk let out a startled chuckle. Of course, Jimin had to protect his reputation because Miri was bringing out his soft side that nobody was accustomed to.

"Oh." Chungha and Jeongguk said together.

It made Jeongguk give her an impressed look; she was way too observant for her own good, figuring out someone she had never met before in a matter of seconds. But perhaps being an outsider made her look at Jimin in a different perspective with no bias. Jeongguk had been around Jimin all his life and he couldn't really tell apart his actions from his habits.

But Chungha's words earlier were something Jeongguk's mind wouldn't stop replaying: That's the thing, Jihyun. They are not his habits.

If they weren't his habits, what made him adopt those methods?

However, then Jeongguk's mind told him that he'd had enough of analysing Jimin for today. More would continue when he wasn't so tired. And if he was being honest, he would blame his competitive side for taking such interest in Jimin suddenly. He couldn't let Chungha, who'd only known Jimin for a couple of hours, deduce the silver-haired boy's personality so effortlessly. If anyone was going to do it, it'd be him.

"Don't you dare tell him about anything I said," Chungha warned both boys.

"Why?"

"Because I'm going to tell him myself." She uncrossed her legs and got up from her stool.

"About your undying crush, noona?" Jihyun teased.

"Something like that." She smirked and Jeongguk could officially declare that he resented that look in her eyes.

It only meant trouble for him.

He watched her saunter towards Jimin in that confident manner of hers, her footsteps sure and her eyes determined. Jeongguk was waiting for the older boy to just blank her when she said something to him. However, Jimin smiled up at her softly, nodding his head before turning back to stroking Miri's head.

But Jeongguk's mind was left reeling over what had happened. Hadn't he glowered at them all just minutes ago? Who has this person and what had he done to Jimin? First that whole episode with Miri and now these warm greetings to strangers. He was acting way too out of the ordinary and Jeongguk couldn't get used to it. Did that mean if he had gone and sat beside Jimin he would have been nice to
him too? No, that concept was too difficult to grasp at the moment.

He shared a stunned look with Jihyun who shrugged and gulped down the rest of his drink.

"Chungha noona is very charismatic," his best friend said as an explanation.

"She can be a fucking goddess for all that matters, but Jimin is still Jimin," Jeongguk said incredulously.

"I'm not even gonna pretend to know—Oh shit! JK, act cool. Eunbi is coming over."

Jeongguk rolled his eyes. His best friend was such a moron. Even since he had spotted Jeongguk and Eunbi talking after class at a cafe, he had become hellbent on making them interact more because apparently Jeongguk and her were 'one and the same'.

Eunbi was quite a bubbly girl and she talked with a lilt of mischief in her voice that matched her beauty. The brunet agreed that their tastes and interests were quite similar but he wasn't interested in Eunbi like that. They were just good friends who liked sharing ideas about their projects.

From the corner of his eye, he could see Jihyun sneaking away, it made Jeongguk sigh. What was he going to do with him?

"Hi, Jeongguk!" Eunbi greeted him with a hug. She pulled away to give him a once-over. "Wow, you look dashing. Dressed to impress someone?"

The mere thought made him laugh, he wished there was someone who caught his interest long enough to make him want to impress them. "Yeah, myself," he said.

She hummed. "Can't blame you. Girls have been flocking around you all evening but you haven't spared them a single glance."

"Who has?" he asked, stunned.

Eunbi chuckled. "Who hasn't? You were too busy chatting with Chungha unnie to notice. Was she making you fall for her charms?"

"She's not after me." Jeongguk laughed. "Chungha noona is infatuated with Jimin. I've never seen her more into anyone."

"What does she look for in him?" she asked ludicrously.

"Beats me." He shrugged.

"I'm not surprised though, unnie does have a type when it comes to boys."

"What type?"

"Hmm, lemme see." She held up her fingers as she counted the features. "Mysterious. Spicy. Rude. Dicks."

Jeongguk guffawed so loudly he almost fell off his stool. "Well, that certainly sums Jimin up."

Eunbi smiled at his endearing mirth. "Anyway, enough about this. Have you decided on the theme for your portfolio? I've been staying behind classes to ask Mr. Cho for some ideas—"

Her voice drifted away as Jeongguk's eyes fell on Jimin and Chungha. The silver-haired boy was
watching her in a way Jeongguk had never seen him look at anyone. His eyes were so attentive and focused on her as though she was uttering the most interesting words possible. Everything about their interaction went against Jimin's nature. He never listened to people so intently; most of the time he couldn't wait until people shut up so that he could go back to ignoring them. Nobody was interesting enough to capture his attention. Not even Jeongguk. And that made a hot flare of jealousy shoot through him, his jaw locked as he observed them longer.

What did Chungha have that Jeongguk didn't?
Jeongguk was gleeful to witness that Jimin's mood was just as unpleasant as always the next day. That undying jealousy he'd been feeling all night simmered down by knowing that even after Jimin and Chungha's cosy little chat at Seohyun's party, he was still as unapproachable as ever.

God knew that Jeongguk wouldn't be able to handle it if Jimin suddenly became a sociable person after merely talking with the raven-haired girl. Yesterday had been full of surprises. By the time Seohyun was cutting the cake, Chungha had progressed enough in her relationship with Jimin to be initiating physical contact with him with a flirtatious glint in her eyes. To which the older boy hadn't even seemed to be pulling away from.

It had Jeongguk wondering if Jimin and he would have been friends by now if he had put in some effort to talk to him like Chungha did. For as long as Jihyun and he had been friends, Jimin's impertinent behaviour had made Jeongguk stay away from him. Maybe he should have tried to figure him out. Although he wasn't sure he would have been successful since Jimin's evasive habits were something to be applauded.

He would always be locked up in his room or studio whenever Jeongguk came to visit. At sleepovers, Jeongguk would often catch Jimin pacing in the garden well after midnight as though his thoughts were getting ahead of him and he was trying to chase them. He rarely responded to people even if they were directly speaking to him, choosing to remain quiet and leaving the room as soon as he could. And things like that got on Jeongguk's nerves because it was one thing not wanting to talk to people but Jimin was plain rude.

That wasn't it, though. Jimin was strange. Jeongguk once caught him staring at the TV with no signal for more than forty minutes—yes, he timed him—when he went downstairs to get some water at night. Not to forget the whole thing with his continuous ringtone.
But Jimin wasn't always that withdrawn, he also had his out of the ordinary days where he'd attend clubs and parties, talking people's ears off and dancing like there was no tomorrow. He was so flighty and whimsical during those times, almost like a whole another person, and Jeongguk couldn't help but think that it wasn't all due to the drugs and alcohol. He was a strange, strange person.

And Jeongguk wanted to get under his skin. Not necessarily for the right reasons.

He couldn't say that he cared for Jimin in any sort of way, it was just that his personality was a challenge Jeongguk simply couldn't resist. He wanted to break Jimin out of that shell which made him so different to anyone he'd ever met. He wanted a reaction out of him.

It all came down to Jeongguk wanting to do something many people couldn't. Obviously, now Chungha had fuelled his zealous nature further. He had seen Jimin with several people over the years, but nobody was able to get through to him and eventually they were forgotten. Despite Jimin being comfortable with Seulgi, Jeongguk could see that they weren't close.

The only constant in Jimin's life was Yoongi. He had no idea how their relationship was but Jeongguk admired Yoongi's perseverance for keeping up with Jimin for so long. He wondered if there was a time where Yoongi was cautious around the silver-haired boy like Jeongguk was. Something about Jimin made Jeongguk feel like he was walking on eggshells: he was careful with anything he said or did. He just couldn't seem to relax around him. Before uttering any words, he deliberated on whether they would make Jimin snap at him or just ignore him like always.

But he realised that he didn't care anymore, Jeongguk wanted to provoke him until Jimin couldn't ignore him anymore. The competitive streak in Jeongguk wouldn't let him live until he managed to unravel Jimin like Yoongi had. He didn't know if he would get anywhere with it but he couldn't give up without trying.

The music playing in the car infiltrated his ears after that lengthy internal monologue as he heard Jimin hum along. The song sounded very fervent with a raw voice carrying the melody and delivering sincere words.

"Tteoreojine," Jimin mumbled along with the lyrics, his expression deeply pensive.

"What's this?"

Jeongguk seemingly pulled Jimin out of a reverie since he was startled. "Oh, it's Yoongi hyung's. He sent it to me a few days ago. It's called So far away."

"It's very heartfelt."

Jemin only hummed in agreement, and that was the most Jeongguk would get out of him.

"Does he often send you his music?" he asked, trying to keep the conversation going.

For some reason, that made Jimin laugh. It was needless to say that Jeongguk looked at him with eyes as wide as saucers. Wasn't this the first time he'd made Jimin properly laugh? How disappointing. He hadn't even meant to be funny.

"No, I have to beg him for it. But if hyung willingly sends me a song, he has something to tell. I'm sure he'll call me to ask if I've figured it out."

"Do you have an idea yet?"

Jimin shrugged. "Yoongi hyung has a very profound mind. He just understands things, you know?"
He glanced over in Jeongguk's direction to meet his eyes. When the younger boy just continued to stare blankly, he chuckled. "Maybe you don't. Hyung just... knows everything, it's bewildering. If you tell him something, he'll read all the words you didn't say."

"Oh." It was all Jeongguk could say, he was merely shocked that Jimin willingly talked to him for that long. He even laughed. Did heaven just catch fire or did hell freeze over? He couldn't help his extra ass as he pinched his forearm to make sure that it wasn't a dream. Today would go down in history as the day Jeon Jeongguk made Jimin laugh.

Then his internal goading came to an abrupt end when he thought about what Jimin had actually said. He had only made the effort to talk because he was talking about Yoongi. He had only laughed because Jeongguk had asked him something about Yoongi. What was so good about that grumpy old man anyway? Jeongguk could bet his jokes were funnier. Not as hilarious as Seokjin's, obviously, but better than Yoongi's. All he'd ever seen him do was complain and grunt about everything.

Jeongguk huffed annoyedly, but before his jealousy could fully rear its head he decided to change the topic. Chungha and Yoongi were really evoking violent tendencies inside him. He needed to repair his ego after that blow he hadn't seen coming. Which meant some bragging on his part. He was going to hate himself for this, self-flattery was difficult.

"We've got our next home game soon," he started. "That's why the training is on all week, instead of the weekend and Thursdays like usual. We barely won the last game, though. Two of our teammates got into a fight so coach suspended them. Part of the reason why we won is because I saved, like, five goals," he bragged. "The defenders were absolutely hopeless that day. There was a new striker in the opponent's team but I managed to read his movements pretty well. Of course, good reflexes are also essential."

"Shouldn't Jihyun be doing that?"

Jeongguk first balked at Jimin's lack of reaction to his praiseworthy performance—despite the lousy way he gloated over himself—and then proceeded to look at him incredulously. "Don't you know our positions?"

"Isn't Jihyun the goalkeeper?"

"No, I'm the goalkeeper."

"You are?" Jimin mused as he glanced sideways at Jeongguk, his gaze raking over his body from head to toe before turning back to face the windshield.

Jeongguk narrowed his eyes at him. "What?" he snapped.

"Nothing."

"Are you doubting me? I'll have you know that I have all the qualities of being an excellent goalkeeper," he proudly stated. "I've got excellent teamwork skills, you can say that basically everyone on our team loves me, including Coach Dongwoo. I'm always aware of what's going on in the game and I'm the fastest, which I admit would be more useful in other positions but it only makes my position stronger. And obviously, I have good hands."

At that, Jimin glanced over at his hands, which were currently resting on his thighs, before murmuring, "Huh."

"What do you mean, 'huh'?"
Jimin glanced out of the window for a second before facing the windshield again. "You tell me." He shrugged.

"Do you get out of the house thinking 'I'm going to annoy or confuse Jeongguk today'?"

He scoffed in response. "You're not that special."

Of course, he wasn't. Jeongguk knew that. But he wanted to be special to Jimin, enough to make him drop that unbothered pretence of his. Those days where Jimin would so easily blank Jeongguk were going to come to an end. He wasn't a person who could be overlooked like that, for God's sake.

"I am special, though," he said, watching Jimin carefully for a reaction. "I made you laugh today."

He halted. And Jeongguk knew that he had caught him by surprise. Jimin didn't expect him to comment on his mood or his lack of laughter. They'd never had that kind of a relationship where intrusive things like that could be discussed. Jeongguk was bordering on uncharted territory, he knew that. But he wanted to push them both out of their comfort zone.

"I do laugh, Jeongguk," he finally said.

"Why have I never seen you laugh, then?"

"Because you've never been around at those times." It sounded accusatory, the way Jimin phrased that. But there was also an edge to his voice which had Jeongguk contemplating how he should respond.

Was it true? Were there really times where Jimin wasn't as impassive as he always appeared to be?

Jeongguk started to say something but the car suddenly came to a halt. They'd reached the training centre.

"Work hard, Goalie," Jimin waved him off, a little dismissively.

And why he felt patronised by those words, he had no idea.

Throughout the entirety of the football practice, Jeongguk was deliberating over all the ways he could initiate a conversation with Jimin on the way home. He thought he'd bragged about his exceptional skills enough to know that Jimin wouldn't humour him by showing any other reaction except for disdain. But then his condescending last words to Jeongguk infiltrated his mind, Work hard, Goalie. Jeongguk would show him just how hard he worked.

Which he wasn't doing right now as he startledly watched the football come flying across the field and hit his stomach.

"Ow!" he hissed, doubling over in pain. "That was uncalled for, you bastards!"

His teammates just snickered to themselves, but from the middle of the field, he could swear Mingyu was lamenting to Jihyun that he should've gotten hit a bit lower.

"Jeon!" Coach Dongwoo snapped. "Where is your mind? Focus on the game. I'm not rushing you to the hospital if the ball smacks you in the face this time."
"He's just jealous of my face," Jeongguk muttered under his breath, still rubbing over his abdomen. He was definitely going to wake up with a bruise tomorrow.

Jihyun strode from his position to the goal net, elbowing his best friend hard in the ribs with a scowl on his face. "You're reminding me too fucking much of Lucas these days. Have you got a girl I don't know about?"

"What—No! What are you on about?"

He stared at him, poker-faced.

"Whatever. I just wasn't concentrating."

"The game's this weekend, Jeongguk. I don't need you dozing off."

Jeongguk gulped at his serious tone. He knew how important this match was. He couldn't let some dumb thoughts get in the way of him giving his best. He nodded to Jihyun. As the caption of the team, his friend had enough on his plate. Jeongguk didn't need to add to his stress. So he made sure to not give him a chance to complain again. For the sake of the game, of course, but he couldn't deny that it was also so that he could rightly brag about himself later to Jimin when he picked him up.

From then on, he compelled his mind to stay on track. He watched every player on the field, keeping track of their movements at the same time as never letting his eyes leave the ball. He practiced some more of his goal-saving tricks he'd learned from watching professional matches on television. All the while, he ignored the shit-eating grins Mingyu was sending his way for whatever reason. He would deal with him later.

Just about when the game was approaching half-time, Jeongguk started to relax because the defenders were doing a good job keeping the ball away from the goal. However, that relative peace was soon snatched away as he saw the other team's midfielder nearing the penalty arc. His vision was blocked by Jaehyun who was in his line of sight, and it was almost too late when he saw the ball soaring towards the corner of the goal. But he dove across the net at the last minute and smacked the ball away from the goal. His body landed with a thud and he groaned.

There was a sudden piercing of cheers from the bleachers' seats which had Jeongguk's head flipping towards them. There was a group of their regular fangirls clapping gleefully, some of them who Jeongguk recognised. But he thought he saw Eunbi among them too.

So that was what the smug looks in his direction were about. His teammates actually thought he was trying to impress the girls. Jeongguk scoffed to himself. They really just needed an excuse to gang up on him because his overconfident attitude peeved them. They probably thought he was pursuing someone for once. It wasn't true, though; not wanting to sound conceited, but Jeongguk had never needed to chase a girl. They all came to him themselves. Although Jeongguk did reject most of them at the first hello. He wasn't immune to the beauty of girls, or guys for that matter, but it was just the notion of relationships which had him backpedalling.

For the rest of the game, he tried to tone down his efforts so the boys wouldn't tease him about the fangirls again. But it was to no avail. When everybody went to the locker room afterwards, they gathered around Jeongguk, probably thinking they were going to get a full rundown of his nonexistent girl.

"What?" he snapped. "They are here every day at our practices. Why are you being such idiots today?"
"Yeah, but you don't try that hard 'every day'. Have you seen how much you're sweating?" Mingyu smirked.

"Do you really think I care about them, you fuckers?"

"You obviously do," Yugyeom said. "First you were drifting off into dreamland thinking about whatever girl that's on your mind and then when Mingyu hit you with the football to get you in the zone you suddenly started playing like crazy."

"I knew you hit me on purpose." Jeongguk glared at Mingyu.

"You're missing the point."

"And that dive was way too unnecessary," Jaehyun added.

"Yeah? You wanna show me how else I could've saved the goal without flinging myself in front of the ball?" Jeongguk retorted. He was getting way too riled up.

"Alright, boys. That's enough," Jihyun interrupted. The grateful look Jeongguk was going to shoot him transformed into a glare at his next words. "I think we can all see that JK has love on the brain. But knowing him, it's probably lust. Let's not force him if he doesn't want to talk about his girl."

"I don't fucking have a girl!" Jeongguk growled, throwing the water bottle in his hand at Jihyun.

"Jeongguk!"

Oh no. Not now.

Jeongguk groaned in misery as he turned around to face Eunbi who was standing in the doorway with a smile on her face.

"Wait, I thought you were after another girl," Jihyun spoke in a hushed voice to him. "You said you and Eunbi were just friends."

"We are just friends," he said through gritted teeth.

"Jeongguk," Eunbi repeated impatiently. "Can I talk to you for a second?"

Why today? Jeongguk wanted to scream at her.

"What are you doing here? You never come," he said as he approached her.

"Are you that disappointed to see me?" She pouted.

"Today, I am."

"Whatever, loser." She opened her bag and retrieved a file. "You didn't even wait for Mr. Cho to hand back our assignments today before leaving. I said I knew you so he asked me to give yours back because you wrote it on the wrong topic."

"Wasn't it the history of communication?"

"Your coach was right. Where is your brain lately? It was on visual communication. You have to redo it for tomorrow."

"It's the same thing, what the fuck?"
Eunbi looked at him in distaste. "You really are a loser."

Jeongguk sighed defeatedly. He had homework due tomorrow which he also had to do along with this. Today just wasn't his day. As he turned back around, he realised that Eunbi had ruined any chances of Jeongguk convincing his teammates that he hadn't been trying to show off earlier.

"She just came to give this to me," Jeongguk said tiredly, holding up the file. The boys just gave him disbelieving looks.

"Oh, really?" Mingyu smiled.

"Fuck off."

"But you said you didn't like Eunbi like that."

"I'm out." He couldn't be bothered giving explanations anymore.

Lately, Jeongguk had started showering after the practices since Jimin dropped Jihyun off first so he had a bit of time to kill while they were gone. But today he had decided to not shower. He wanted Jimin to see him right how he was after practice so he could understand the amount of effort he put into this. He wasn't going to take shit from him over something he worked so hard for.

"Jihyun!" he called. "I'm going first today. I already had a lot of work to do and Eunbi just told me to do another assignment."

His best friend gave him a thumbs up and returned to his conversation with the bane of his life: Lucas.

Jeongguk left them to it, grabbing his practice bag and shoving everything in it. Some girls who were still lingering giggled and made obscene gestures as he made his way to the exit. He smirked to himself; damn if he didn't know he looked like a whole snack.

Jimin was waiting outside the centre, right on time as always. Jeongguk put his bag in the boot and then climbed inside in all his sweaty glory, not even bothering to look falsely apologetic. Jimin responded by simply raising an eyebrow at him.

"You're getting sweat all over my seats."

"I'm blessing your car with my all sated out presence."

Jimin snorted, and Jeongguk had to do a double take to make sure he caught the amused smile on his lips.

"Did you put your good hands to a worthwhile use, then?" Jimin asked as put the car into gear, and Jeongguk could swear on Miri's life that the boy was smirking.

"I did. You could ask those girls for confirmation, if you'd like." It was now Jeongguk's turn to smirk, but he didn't catch Jimin's reaction since he chose the moment to look out of the window.

"You're so fucking cocky."

Jeongguk smiled, satisfied. "I'll take that as a compliment."

"Maybe it was, maybe it wasn't."

"You know it was." Jeongguk laughed.
"I don't like haughty people."

"You don't like yourself?"

Jimin went quiet, and Jeongguk cursed himself because he had successfully ruined the mood again. This wasn't what he meant when he'd said that he wanted to get under Jimin's skin. He just wanted a reaction out of him, not force Jimin back into the shell he rarely came out from.

"Do you think I'm haughty, Jeongguk?"

Yes, he thought. Or maybe that's just the impression I get around you.

"I ... don't know, Jimin."

The silver-haired boy hummed but didn't say anything else.

Jeongguk was mentally reprimanding himself and made a note to slap himself when he got home. Jimin was actually being playful with him before he spoiled everything. God knew when he'd get the chance to be that carefree with him again.

"Would Yoongi hyung mind if you sent me that song you were playing in the morning?" he asked, partly to have something to say again and partly because he wanted to figure out what 'message' Yoongi had been communicating to Jimin.

Jimin appeared surprised. "I guess he wouldn't. I'll send you it."

"You don't have my phone number."

"Oh." He was quiet for a moment. "I'll use Jihyun's phone."

"You can have my number, Jimin." Jeongguk sighed. When would the older boy stop being so reserved?

Jimin gestured to his phone on the dashboard. When Jeongguk picked it up he was surprised to find that he didn't need a code to get in. Which youngster these days left their phone unlocked? Jimin was on a whole another level with many things.

After he had entered his number, he halted as he deliberated over what to write as his ID. Feeling daring, he quickly typed in ‘Gguk’ before he could change his mind. His heart thudded against his chest as he imagined Jimin searching for his contact later and finding that as his ID. Jeongguk put the phone back onto the dashboard, finding it difficult to control his heartbeat.

"Uh, so do you want to come to see our match?" Jeongguk asked without a single clue why he was doing so. "It's this weekend."

"Tomorrow's the last practice?"

"Well, it won't be as regular as the past fortnight."

"I—Yeah, sure. I'll be there."

Although Jeongguk had some hope Jimin would agree, he was still surprised by his answer. But he couldn't deny Jimin being there would be his biggest motivation for the game.
It was a good game. One that Jeongguk would have been able to brag about to Jimin if only he had been there. Obviously, Jihyun was the star of the show as he managed to score three goals alone. But as the goalkeeper, Jeongguk was close behind in that title since he didn't miss a single goal. The boys gave him funny looks over it but Jeongguk just rolled his eyes. This wasn't the first time he had let the other team score zero goals. Although he couldn't deny that it had been a while. He could see even Coach Dongwoo looking a little bewildered at how well Jeongguk was playing.

It would also be a lie to say that his efforts weren't mainly because he had wanted to impress Jimin. If someday that became the sole reason for his existence, Jeongguk wouldn't be surprised. He just got a euphoric sense of satisfaction when he evoked a reaction from Jimin. His heart always soared like he had accomplished something monumental.

However, it had been during halftime of the game that Jeongguk realised that Jimin really wasn't there. He'd spotted Mr. and Mrs. Park as Jihyun waved at him but there was no bright silver head of Jimin's in the crowd.

Jeongguk tried convincing himself that perhaps Jimin was sitting somewhere that he couldn't be seen since being in crowds wasn't his thing. But the realistic part of him told him to snap out of it. He didn't know why he was disappointed, it wasn't like he didn't have a notion from the start that Jimin wouldn't be there.

He didn't let that stop him from giving his best, though. In truth, he played even better in the next half because his hyung, Seokjin, spurred him on with what he called his 'blessed support'. He was holding up a poster that said, *Let's get it, Jeon Jeongguk!* with a phrase in smaller writing beneath that wasn't so hard to read, *Make your handsome hyung proud*. Jeongguk face-palmed when he saw it but he couldn't help the smile tugging at his lips. Seokjin always managed to find ways to embarrass Jeongguk in front of the whole school.
Yes, the whole school because his hyung's posters were notorious for being vaguely narcissistic. Last time it had said, *JK gets the talent from me.*

Jeongguk didn't mind, though. If anything, it was the best part of the game. After winning, of course. Their team was now in a good position for the following matches, they could even afford to lose a match without it greatly affecting their points on the table.

Of course, now the circle of their fangirls had inevitably grown. The noise from their shrieks didn't cease until the boys made it into the safety of their dressing room after receiving commendations from their coach.

"I can already taste the bulgogi on my tongue, Jeongguk," Jihyun moaned. "Isn't Seokjin hyung the best? We must've saved a country in our past lives to have him as our hyung."

He hummed, chuckling over his best friend's theatrics. This was the same person who had vowed to kill Seokjin with his both hands after their hyung had revealed his potty training stories to his crush. The three of them were close childhood friends but with Seokjin being five years older than both of them, he had left for university earlier. Of course, that meant creating a new group of friends which had included Yoongi. It was how Jimin and Yoongi had been introduced to each other so Jeongguk may or may not still hold a grudge against Seokjin.

Their separation had caused them to drift apart a little. But now that Seokjin had opened a high-end restaurant just a fifteen-minute drive from their university, Jeongguk and Jihyun had started leeching off him again. After all, what were hyungs for other than to feed their dongsaengs? Seokjin had let them know that he would generously be treating them to a celebratory meal if they won.

So perhaps a tiny part of the effort put into the game was also due to the greed of having an endless supply of bulgogi later. Not that Jeongguk or Jihyun would ever admit to it.

"Don't blow your cover of being a parasite, Jihyunie." The brunet laughed. "Seokjin hyung might stop being so nice."

"As if you aren't one! You literally eat over at my house four days a week."

"Are you revoking my rights to decent meals?" Jeongguk clutched at his heart in fake hurt. His mother was always at work during the day and she spent most nights at her boyfriend's house. And Jeongguk was a lot of things, but a good cook wasn't one of them. So his last resort when he wanted to have some nice food was to go to Jihyun's house.

"Yeah, right. As if I can do that." Jihyun scoffed. "Don't you remember when we fought once and you wouldn't come over anymore so mum sent you packed lunchboxes in case you were missing her food?"

"Fond memories." He smiled.

They showered and changed out of their kits quickly because they couldn't make Korean BBQ wait that long. Seohyun and Chansung met them outside, giving their congratulations and praise in which both boys revelled. While Jihyun talked with his parents more, Jeongguk spotted Seokjin and made his way to him.

"Yah, Jeongguk-ah! Aren't you taking your Golden Maknae title too far?" Seokjin exclaimed as he reached him, slapping his back as what would be considered an encouraging smack so hard that Jeongguk nearly bowed over in pain.

"Ow, hyung! Careful, please. I'm a little delicate."
"Delicate, my ass," he said, smacking his head this time. "Don't think I didn't see the extra umph in your dives and jumps today. Who were you trying to impress, huh?"

"You just beat me to it, hyung!" Jihyun cried as approached them finally. "I was going to ask him that as well. So, JK? Spill the beans. Eunbi wasn't even here today."

Jeongguk hung his head in humiliation. There was no way he was letting them know that he tried so hard for a boy who hadn't even come to watch him. His friends wouldn't let him see the end of it.

"Fuck off, you two. I just wanted to win," he grumbled.

Seokjin's perceptive eyes watched him for a moment. "Don't think you can lie to me, bunny boy. I practically raised you on my back—"

*There he goes again.* Jeongguk smiled at him defeatedly while Jihyun just rolled his eyes.

"—anyway, you were the main man, Jihyunie!" Seokjin said. "I'm so proud of you. My little babies have come so far."

"Hyung, please stop," Jihyun muttered under his breath as a girl turned to look at Seokjin dumbfoundedly.

But their hyung felt no shame in talking like that in public, he guided them to his car, unfazed over the stares he was getting at his dramatic monologue. He didn't stop throughout the whole journey, giving himself equal credit on how much of 'good children' Jeongguk and Jihyun had become. The younger boys didn't dare interrupt Seokjin in the fear of him retracting his offer of the unlimited bulgogi tonight.

They stopped outside *Epiphany* that was closed to other people for today. Jeongguk still laughed at the name. Seokjin said he could have named his restaurant 'Eureka' but that was too cliché. He wanted to evoke a feeling of a great revelation when people tasted the food at having discovered his 'gem' of a restaurant. And Jeongguk couldn't deny that that was exactly the feeling his taste buds granted him when he took the first bite. But the gem he was referring to was Seokjin.

If Jeongguk was being honest, there was nothing he'd wanted to do more than to just chill in his bed with popcorn and watch a movie on a Saturday night. But the text on the group chat to have a marathon of Overwatch also painted a tempting scenario. Jihyun had called him over for a sleepover so that both of them could play together. It had been a while since all the boys had decided to play together so Jeongguk gave in.

He parked his Range Rover Sport—which still had nothing on Jimin's flashy Aston Martin—in the driveway and took out his overnight bag before making his way inside the Park mansion. It was relatively quiet in the foyer so Jeongguk guessed Jihyun was in his bedroom upstairs.

But Jeongguk could hear voices coming from the drawing room as he neared it. Through the glass window on either side of the door, he spied Jimin's silver hair in contrast with the dark room. Seohyun had her back to Jeongguk and was on another rant to Jimin. The younger boy started to make his way to Jihyun's room, believing it to be nothing out of the ordinary.

But then he paused when he heard Jimin's voice, albeit quiet, speaking to Seohyun in a defiant
His lack of silence told him that this wasn't the daily telling-off of Jimin. He never spoke back to his mother when she usually chided him, assuming that she'd stop speaking when he continued to not listen.

Jeongguk could tell that he had walked in on a family quarrel, and God knew how long it had been going on for. Common sense told him to leave before anyone found him there, but he wanted to know what was making Jimin finally show a reaction to Seohyun. And from the infrequent solemn voice, he realised that Mr. Park was also there.

"—but you had no right to argue with me when I was speaking to Mr. Kwon," Seohyun was saying.

"I did because you were talking about me."

Chansung said something but Jeongguk couldn't distinguish his words since his voice was too low.

"I'm doing what is best for you," Seohyun said, seemingly as an addition to her husband's words.

"How would you know what's best for me?" Jimin retaliated.

"Park Jimin! I've had enough of your ungrateful attitude. As a parent, I know perfectly well what is good for my child. Or are you going to teach me that as well?"

"I'm just saying that I'd prefer it if you left matters that concern me up to me."

Seohyun threw her hands up in disbelief. "That's what you want, isn't it? Total freedom over your life as you continue to waste it? You're an adult now, and although I know it's not all in your hands you still have to make an effort. Have some resilience, Jimin. All you do is hole up in your room as if that's going to fix anything. You can't just ignore and walk away from things when they aren't good."

"What are you going to do to stop me?"

"Jimin," his father snapped. "I'd appreciate it if you could speak with some manners. You're becoming more and more aloof every day."

The silver-haired boy gave him a withering look. "I wonder how that happened, huh, Dad?"

Chansung spluttered but Seohyun only sighed. "Jimin-ah. Why are you so stubborn? How many times do I have to repeat the same thing over and over again until you get it in your head? I feel like I'm talking to a wall because you won't pay any heed. I don't have the energy anymore."

"Why don't you let me be, then?"

"Because God knows you'd be dead if I let you live on your own terms! Do you really think you'd get out of bed if I didn't drag you? Do you think you'd even feed yourself a morsel if I didn't insist on it? Why do you make this so hard, Jimin? I'm tired."

Jimin laughed humourlessly, eyes shining with the brimming tears. "Then, can you imagine how tired I am?"

"Jimin." Seohyun sobbed.

Nobody spoke for a while, and even Jeongguk was speechless over what he was witnessing. How had he never noticed this extent of tension between the family even after spending half his life with them? Obviously, he didn't know the root of the problem but he couldn't fault anybody in the way
they were speaking. They all seemed to have some basis behind their words.

Mr. Park broke the silence by addressing Jimin in a way you would to a stray, injured cat: hesitant and cautious. "Jimin-ah, I know it's not your fault but—"

"Exactly! There's always a 'but'. Do you really think I believe you anymore when you say that it's not my fault? Why would you even try to console me in the first place when I know everything you say will contradict that?"

"We just want to show that we understand, Jimin. Your mother's not saying that you're not trying—"

"Then, can she stop making it seem like it?"

"That's no way to talk to your mother," he chastised.

"It wasn't a way to talk to the shrink either," Jimin said in finality. "Like I wasn't even there. Do you not think I would have told him all that if I wanted to? I think you need to reconsider your definition of understanding me because you're not helping with my image of yours." He watched them for a moment, looking like he'd continue but Jeongguk could see the defeated change in his face when he decided against it.

As he came out of the room, he saw Jeongguk whose surprise had rendered him immobile in the doorway. Oh, fuck. Why hadn't he left earlier? Jeongguk floundered, looking helplessly around him to find an excuse for eavesdropping although Jimin didn't look like he was going to lash out at him too.

"I—I was just going to Jihyun's room," he said pathetically.

Wow. Way to go, Jeongguk. That was very convincing.

Jimin nodded. "I'm sorry I couldn't make it to your match."

"It's okay. I didn't trust you to come."

Fuck, that wasn't supposed to come out of his mouth. Especially not after all this.

A flash of hurt flickered across Jimin's face before he clenched his jaw. "You're such bastards," he spat, walking off in such rage that when he slammed the front door behind him, the sound was still reverberating in Jeongguk's ears. Snapping out of his stupor, Jeongguk ran after him. He couldn't let Jimin go again. It always happened, he'd said inconsiderate things before and Jimin had driven off with no retaliation whatsoever. He didn't deserve that.

But the plethora of apologies died on his lips when he saw Chungha in the driveway. The raven-haired girl had been leaning against her car while she waited for Jimin but she stepped away as he came outside, looking at him in puzzlement. She confusedly trailed after him to his car, most likely thinking he would offer an explanation.

"Jimin oppa?"

"I'm not in the mood, Chungha."

"Jimin—What happened?" she said in alarm. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he snapped. "Just leave me alone."

"Is it something I did? I can—"
"It's not you, for fuck's sake. I just want to be alone."

"Oh, I-I understand if you want to—"

"Stop that! No, you don't fucking understand! Take your false empathy where it's needed and leave me the fuck alone!" he yelled, his chest heaving in fury. He jerked open the car door, getting inside and not even waiting for Chungha to get out of the way before he put the car into gear. She scurried back, still disconcerted over what was happening as she watched Jimin drive away with his car's tires screeching in protest.

There was a moment of stunned silence, both on Jeongguk and Chungha's parts. The younger boy was utterly confounded at seeing Jimin acting like this for the first time. He could never have even imagined that he would witness such rage from the usually impassive boy. Jeongguk couldn't fault him, though; his parents and himself had both driven Jimin to that stage.

When Jimin suddenly stopped at the driveway gates, Chungha jolted in surprise. Jeongguk could make out his figure inside as he breathed deeply with his head down. After a while, Jimin reversed back to the entrance, glancing at the raven-haired girl in an apologetic way. He stepped out of his car with a sigh, hands clenched into fists.

"I'm sorry, Chungha," he murmured. "I shouldn't have taken it out on you."

"It's okay—"

He shook his head sadly. "It's not okay. I always do this, I take my frustration out of people who don't deserve it. That wasn't your fault. I'm really sorry."

"Jimin oppa," she said softly. "I do understand. If you don't mind—do you wanna talk about it?" It was said in such an intimate way that Jeongguk didn't want to intrude on their moment. He left them alone after that, walking back inside defeatedly. He'd have to find some other time to apologize to Jimin.

Just as he was about to go upstairs to Jihyun's bedroom, he saw Seohyun coming out of the lounge. "Where's Jimin?" she asked in an alarmed manner at seeing the open door.

"He ... went out?" he hesitantly responded, not understanding her reaction.

"Is he drinking in this state?" she shrieked.

"No, no. I think he's going to go with a friend."

"Oh, thank God." She collapsed against a wall in relief.

"What do you mean 'in this state'? Is he—" Jimin didn't look intoxicated or anything.

"No, nothing like that," she dismissed. "Jimin's just very angry right now. He gets ... impulsive."

Jeongguk didn't even want to know the meaning behind that. He excused himself to Jihyun's room with a bow, hoping his friend would explain this whole mess that had Jeongguk's head spinning. Jihyun was relatively chilled about whatever happened in their house, never taking anything too seriously. He was also quite open about their issues, knowing that he could trust Jeongguk.

But all that hope only led to disappointment as Jeongguk entered Jihyun's room. His best friend was nearly hanging out of the window with his headphones hung around his neck and hands clutching a game controller. Jeongguk would take a wild guess and say that he was spying on his brother and
Chungha who were still outside.

He had already started playing Overwatch with his team players yelling expletives that could be heard vaguely from his headphones. "Shh!" Jihyun hissed at them. "Shut your traps for a second, please." He pressed closer to the glass as though he could lean in further. God, what a loser. Jeongguk wanted to bang his head against a wall.

"Guys, you won't shut up so I'll be back in a few," Jihyun notified them, pausing the game as he watched Jimin and Chungha with more interest than that would be considered healthy.

"Where are they going anyway?" Jeongguk asked.

"Chungha noona said that they were going to her dance studio. Remember when hyung used to be so into dance? I think he wants to try again." He whistled when Chungha leaned closer to Jimin, chuckling over whatever he said. "Oh. They're getting cosy."

"And you're becoming creepier every day. Get your fucking nose off the window and let's start the game again." Jeongguk sighed.

"Let's not pretend that your snoopy ass didn't witness the whole show downstairs."

"Show'?"

"Yeah, happens once every blue moon."

"You're telling me this has happened before?" Jeongguk said incredulously. "I practically live at your house, why didn't I know? I've been going out of my mind downstairs because I couldn't wrap my head around the fact that Jimin spoke for more than five minutes."

Jihyun shrugged. "Like I said, it's very rare. They all scream at each other and hyung gets even more pissed off. He drives off to God knows where and comes back after a month or two. Well, that part is not uncommon."

"Hold the fuck up!" Jeongguk pulled the curtains shut so he'd have Jihyun's full attention. "Stop being a creep for a second and talk to me. What's that about Jimin coming back after a month? I thought he goes to visit your grandparents in Busan."

"God, no!" Jihyun laughed. "Grandma hates his guts. And hyung would rather die than spend more than a day at their house."

"So he—"

"He's a reckless driver. Especially when he's mad." He shrugged again.

"Oh."

"I think he has … accidents. I don't know. Mum always says Jimin hyung's left for Busan but I know he's in hospital. Haven't you noticed how my parents always come later on in the evening? They must go to visit hyung there. I don't know why they won't tell me though, It's not like I'm a kid who can't handle the fact that my brother's gotten hurt."

"I don't think it's that," Jeongguk murmured.

"I know." His best friend sighed. "But I'm glad he gets it out, you know? Keeping all the shit inside is not healthy. And I can at least convince myself that Jimin hyung is not as dead inside as he looks
Jeongguk snorted. "Can't disagree with that."

Jihyun got up to part the curtains again now that Jimin and Chungha had long left. He grabbed some cushions from his bed and flung them onto the bean bags in front of the Xbox. Park Jihyun was all about methods that indulged in his laziness. He slumped down onto one of them, arranging himself to give the maximum comfort.

But Jeongguk was still hung up on what had happened. "How are you so casual about everything?" he wondered.

"It happens way too often, that's why. Not the fighting part, the hospital part," he clarified.

"So all those times I thought Jimin was chilling by the Busan beach, he—"

"Do you feel wronged?" Jihyun chuckled. "To be honest, nobody specifically told me to not tell you but it never really came up. I guess you saw it today so you must have had questions."

"Yeah, a shit ton of them."

"Alright, cut this short now. Let's play, the boys are waiting."

Soon, Jeongguk got too into his competitive zone to spare a thought to Jimin and all his complicated matters. He felt like half his day was already spent just thinking about Jimin and his strange mood. Should he even be getting so into the older boy's business? All Jeongguk wanted was to figure him out but the more he looked into him, the more confused he became. Right now, Jeongguk wanted to just relax after the stressful past fortnight.

"Mingyu, you fucker!" Jihyun screeched. "I told you to cover me."

Okay, so maybe Overwatch wasn't the best way to de-stress. But they continued for another three hours, yelling the kind of swear words that would make their parents want to disown them. Mingyu was being a nuisance since he continued to shove snacks into his mouth throughout the game which he was quick to deny as the boys reprimanded him. But it wasn't like they couldn't hear the crunch of crisps with his every bite.

He eventually stopped but it was most likely since he'd ran out and not because of everybody's complaints. Jeongguk enjoyed this, the little banter as the game calmed down a little and the sudden string of curses when it heated up again. It had also been too long since he'd had a sleepover at Jihyun's house. If Jimin was the cause of that, nobody would ever know.

"Hold on, Seokmin. I forgot to ask you about your date with Yoojung," Jihyun said. "How'd it go?"

"He puked all over her salad, that's how it went." Jeongguk snickered. "Why the fuck would you even go on a date like that if you need to drink a whole bottle to calm down your nerves?"

They all laughed but Yugyeom soon came to Seokmin's rescue. "Let him be, JK. Not everybody excels in the art of luring girls like you."

"But guys, in all honesty," Mingyu started. "As much as we make Jeongguk out to be a playboy, how many girls has he actually been on dates with? None. And I can count the number of one night stands he's had on one hand."

"Think you might be underestimating, Mingyu," Jihyun said with a chuckle. "I'd say JK's had more
than nine wild nights altogether."

The brunet didn't get a chance to respond before Jaehyun suddenly burst out laughing. "Make that eight and a half. Don't you remember when he left the last one right in the middle because that girl wouldn't stop calling him oppa?"

Everybody cracked up and Jeongguk just scowled. "It was such a turnoff, okay? I even asked her to stop calling me that or I'd leave but she insisted that she was younger than me. I nearly asked her to show me her ID."

That fuelled another bout of laughter from the boys, Jihyun was nearly crying as he clutched his stomach while rolling back onto his bean bag. "Trust Jeongguk to make sex sound like a business transaction," Jihyun said through his heaving chest.

"But it is," he exclaimed. "You're giving something and she's taking it."

Yugyeom's howl of amusement then pierced their ears. "Oh my God, Jeongguk. You're such a joke. I feel sorry for your next victims. Can you guys imagine how painful their interactions would be to watch?"

"I'm gonna leave if you don't stop," Jeongguk grumbled. "We weren't even talking about me. Let's talk about Seokmin's girl."

"There's nothing more to it, JK." Seokmin laughed. "I don't think she's gonna want to see me again."

"Don't lose hope, bro," he said. "I can put in a few good words for you if you want."

"Uh, no thanks. I'm alright," he responded. "Knowing you, you'd probably say 'I swear he doesn't usually puke that much'."

Their back and forth continued for a while until Yugyeom yawned in their ears, mumbling tiredly about how he needed to catch up on his sleep. They unquestioningly let him go, knowing that they needed to stop soon as well. Seohyun was also probably five minutes from banging on their door to get them to sleep and Jihyun and Jeongguk really didn't want to face her wrath at this time.

It was nearing midnight by the time Jimin and Chungha came back so Jihyun took that as a sign to say goodnight to the boys. It was more so due to his stalker tendencies which couldn't be helped than doing a sensible thing like going to bed. Jeongguk reluctantly joined him as they both crawled over to the window.

Chungha was walking around her car towards Jimin, looking at him with a smile in her eyes as if she knew what a monumental thing she'd done by calming Jimin after such a day. She said something to him which had him shaking his head in a shy manner. The tinkling of her following laughter reached even their ears. Jeongguk hated to use that cliché expression, but Jimin really was looking at her like she hung the moon and the stars in the sky.

"I know it doesn't seem like it, but my brain is going haywire at this interaction," Jihyun murmured absently to him. "How is he looking at her so ... sweetly? Noona really is a goddess, isn't she?"

Jeongguk only grunted in response. Something about this scene wasn't sitting well with him and he couldn't figure out what. Chungha was still talking to Jimin exuberantly, getting attentive nods from the silver-haired boy. He then smiled at her endearingly with his eyes turning into crescent moons. And a subdued part in the back of Jeongguk's mind thought it wouldn't be so bad to be on the receiving end of Jimin's smile.
It had been a week since the incident, and Jeongguk was still the main focus of the silent treatment from Jimin. If he thought Jimin ignored him before, it was nothing compared to the blank stares he was given now.

Jeongguk wanted to argue that it hadn't all been his fault but who would he argue with? The Park family or the spawn of the devil, Jimin, himself? It had been several days since Jeongguk had even caught more than a passing glimpse of the older boy. Jihyun told him that Jimin rarely came down even for breakfast anymore which made the younger boy feel a tiny bit better. At least all of Jimin's hate wasn't only directed at him.

However, that wasn't to say that the amount of distaste aimed towards him was insufficient. He avoided him so adamantly that Jeongguk hadn't even had a chance to apologise yet. Jimin simply wanted nothing to do with him and the rest of the Park family was hellbent on pretending that nothing remotely unusual had occurred.

Maybe they were doing it for Jeongguk's sake, but he wasn't a child. He could obviously sense the palpable tension between Jimin and his parents. Honestly, what would become of them if Jihyun wasn't there as a mediator? His best friend cracking jokes occasionally subdued some of the unpleasant atmosphere.

Jeongguk knew he wouldn't be able to survive the family dynamics that the Parks had. His relationship with his mother, Haewon, was very honest and straightforward. She wasn't the most doting mother but Jeongguk had never been deprived of anything. Despite her staying mostly with her boyfriend, she made sure that she was there for Jeongguk in any sort of terms, financially or emotionally. They had a good communication system where they couldn't let a problem go undiscussed for more than a few days. Definitely not like the Park family whose avoidance of matters was really something of a wonder.
"Take some more steak, Jimin," Seohyun said frustratedly, breaking the silence for the first time since they’d started eating. "You need something nutritious inside you. God knows how you've been surviving on junk for the past week."

"Still alive," Jimin muttered as he reached for the dish.

"Barely." She scoffed back. "Pass some to Jeongguk too. You like it, don't you, dear?"

"It's delicious, thank you." Jeongguk smiled at her. She really could've have been a chef if she wanted to, her cooking made you want to lick your fingers clean. No wonder why Jeongguk was addicted to coming to their house. He would start to get withdrawal symptoms if he didn't have her food for more than two days.

He looked at Jimin, awaiting, but the older boy paid no heed to his mother's words. After he had done putting a slice of meat onto his plate, he simply placed the dish back on the centre of the table and continued to eat impassively. As if Jeongguk wasn't even there.

_How petty._

"Don't be rude, Jimin," Seohyun snapped. "I'm sorry, Jeongguk-ah. Here you go."

"It's okay, Mrs. Park. I think Jimin is still learning the basics of human interaction."

Jimin's eyes flashed at his and Jeongguk met his glare full-on. He wasn't past stooping down to the older boy's level if he annoyed him enough. And it wasn't like Jimin's attitude towards him could get any worse than this. He might as well take advantage of it. Jimin's eyes continued to bore into him and Jeongguk kept staring back with no sign of going back to eating.

"Anyway," Jihyun said emphatically, interrupting the staring competition with a nervous chuckle. "Mum and Dad, have you thought about my exchange program yet?"

"If you think it will benefit you academically you should go for it, Jihyun-ah," Chansung said. At catching the flicker of his eyes towards his mother, he smiled. "Don't worry about your mother. She's just concerned about sending you off to a foreign country and how you'll manage yourself."

Some people on Jihyun's course had been chosen to go on an exchange program to Japan for a month so they could benefit from learning the ins and out of international businesses. Of course, Jihyun was buzzing from the excitement but Jeongguk felt miserable because not only he'd be away from his best friend but he also wouldn't have a reason to come to their house anymore and that meant no good food for a month.

"I just want you to take care of yourself, Jihyun," Seohyun sighed. "As long as you're eating healthily and not going out recklessly, I'm fine. Make sure you're doing what you're going there to do."

"When haven't I taken care of myself, Mum?" Jihyun rolled his eyes with a pointed look at Jimin.

"I know. But Jimin on his own is enough for me, I don't need an addition to the infant behaviour I have to handle."

Jeongguk could see Jimin's grip on his chopsticks tightening but his face showed no signs of provocation. He wondered if the older boy would snap, but something told him that he hadn't bottled up enough feelings in the past week to just burst right now. It would be another long while before the dam broke.
When Jimin's gaze met his coincidentally, Jeongguk tilted his head in speculation. It made Jimin uncomfortable, he could tell, at being observed like this. But he was still adamant on figuring the boy out so he felt no regret.

"I'll start preparing, then. We're leaving in about two week's time," Jihyun said, his brain was probably going into overdrive at the stuff he would have to pack.

"We can go shopping tomorrow if you want. Unless you wanted to go with Jeongguk-ah?" Chansung said.

"Are you free, JK?"

"Yeah, sure," Jeongguk replied, still bummed about being abandoned like this.

"Don't look so glum." He laughed. "You can still come over for dinner. Can't he, mum?"

"Of course, dear. Is that why you look like a kicked puppy?"

Jeongguk spluttered. "I don't look like a kicked puppy."

"More like a kicked bunny," Jimin murmured under his breath and in his state of embarrassment, Jeongguk didn't foresee the consequences of reaching under the table and kicking the silver-haired boy in the shin.

Jimin winced as he jerked his leg back. "What the fuck, Jeongguk?"

At this point, being the sole object of interest to four pairs of eyes, Jeongguk's cheeks were burning in mortification. He stared back like a deer caught in headlights, not knowing how to explain himself. Fuck. Jimin and he really didn't have a relationship where they could playfully hit each other like that. What had he been thinking? Jimin was still looking at him, awaiting an explanation with a piece of steak raised halfway to his lips.

Jeongguk belatedly realised that Jimin not having soft foods anymore meant that his tongue piercing had healed. And why he started to feel hot after that bit of information, he had no idea.

"Uh, sorry," he said quietly.

"Muscle pig at it again," Jihyun teased and this time Jeongguk didn't care about the onlookers before elbowing his best friend hard in the ribs. "Ow, you fucker!"

"Language, Jihyun." Chansung sighed.

"But Jimin hyung swore too!"

His father just gave him a look.

"I feel bullied because of this obvious favouritism."

Seohyun ignored him. "Jimin-ah, you didn't tell me about yesterday. How was your date with Chungha?"

"It wasn't a date."

"So you don't feel a romantic inclination towards her?" Chansung said wryly.

"I didn't say that," Jimin mumbled.
They all looked at each other in alarm and the seconds going by could be heard as the clock clicked
in the background, but then Jihyun broke the silence with a shriek. "What?" He got up from his
chair, gripping a chopstick in each hand as he stopped inches from Jimin's face. "Did you just say
you have a romantic interest in Chungha noona?"

"Stop overreacting, Jihyun. I didn't say that either."

"Can you please sort your thoughts out? They are not making sense to anyone but you."

"Good thing that it's none of your business, isn't it?" Jimin deadpanned.

"Hyung. Why are you so insufferable? Just tell me, please." He looked imploringly at his mother.
"Mum, tell hyung to tell me."

"You should learn from Jeongguk," Jimin said. "Has he poked his nose where it didn't belong?"

Jeongguk snorted internally. If only Jimin knew that the only reason he was speechless right now
was that he was trying to understand why his left eye wouldn't stop twitching. It definitely had
nothing to do with Jimin's fondness for Chungha. But he hadn't failed to notice how Jimin's silent
mode had suddenly been turned off as soon as Chungha was mentioned.

"That's because Jeongguk's only interest is himself," Jihyun stated. "If one day in the future he
decides to marry himself, I wouldn't be surprised because I have already foreseen and recorded it in
my diary. He has no time for peasants like us, isn't that right, JK?"

"I don't disagree." He nodded sagely.

"But you are still inferior to Chungha noona. She has managed to do what no other mere human
being is capable of. She has broken Jimin hyung out of the confines of his dumb brain and is leading
his way onto the righteous path. Her beauty is obviously incomparable." Jeongguk scoffed but
Jihyun condescended him with, "Yes, Jeongguk. She's even more beautiful than you. I told you she
was a goddess."

Jeongguk knew that if Jihyun could see the wooden look on Jimin's face, he would shut up. But his
best friend was too absorbed in his monologue to pay attention to anyone else.

"So Jimin hyung, what would you say to explain your attraction towards her?"

"I'd tell you to shut your trap."

"You're not confessing to me, say something about Chungha noona."

Hadn't Jihyun become too brave, Jeongguk thought, talking so rashly with Jimin? He would
definitely be asking for a death wish if he continued for another minute.

"Jihyun-ah, finish your dinner," Seohyun said with a sigh.

"Mum, this is important. How are you not on the edge of your seats? I'm dying from curiosity right
now. Are you really going to make me plead now, hyung?"

"She's just ... "

"God-like? Mystical? Beautiful?"

"... different," Jimin finished.
"Huh, that was boring. I'll make sure to tell her that."

"Then, I'll make sure that your dead body is sent to her for her final 'god-like' blessings too."

Jihyun paused, staring open-mouthed at his brother. "Or maybe not."

Jeongguk didn't know what he felt more, incompetent or angry. It was honestly ridiculous how Jimin managed to provoke him without even intending to. So what if he talked to Chungha so willingly, so fucking what if he always smiled so shyly around her? It didn't mean that Jeongguk couldn't make him smile like that. He had even made him laugh before. It didn't mean anything.

But it still got on his nerves. How could Chungha change Jimin so much when he was with her? After trying so hard to make him talk, to just apologise for before, why did it take no effort for Chungha to have such long conversations with him? Jeongguk had seen all the full-blown talks they had when he and Jihyun spied on them from his bedroom window. For the past week, they had gone out together almost every single day. Jihyun said that they just hung out at Chungha's dance studio but Jeongguk didn't care.

The problem wasn't what they were doing, it was how often they were doing it. Didn't Jimin have some sort of social interaction limit? And it'd be fine if they kept this abnormal behaviour outside of the house but no, that wasn't the end of it. Even when they came home, they'd be chatting in the driveway for nearly half an hour. Every time one of them made to pull away, the other would say something and they'd start again.

It was just ridiculous.

Even Jihyun seemed to agree on some occasions, but most of the time they both were simply bewildered at how long this had been going on for. Jimin never spared anyone a minute of his day. Never mind dedicating a whole week to them.

Jeongguk wished he had some sort of escape from thinking about this, but he didn't. Along with the constant disregard from Jimin and Jeongguk's restless state of mind as a result, he was feeling inherently subdued. He wasn't able to focus on his end of year project which he should have started by now. His mind was stuck in a rut and his inspiration was thrown out of the window.

So here he was, standing outside Jimin's studio because he did say once that Jeongguk could come to him if he needed help. He had sucked up his pride and was ready to bruise his ego as he stood in the doorway. He could see Jimin inside since the door was opened. As he had mentioned before about his colour scheme, he was working on a black and white charcoal drawing of a sole hand. It was shaped in an ambiguous manner in that it could have been giving or receiving something, but Jeongguk realised that might be the whole point of the work.

Jeongguk loved the atmosphere of Jimin's studio. Maybe that was why Jimin spent all his time in there and actually managed to get things done. It was so serene and detached. The white, linen curtains were parted and they always seemed to be swaying with the wind. There was Yoongi's So far away playing in the background which Jeongguk hadn't yet had the chance to ask Jimin to send it to him. He didn't even know what Jimin thought of Jeongguk putting his name as Gguk into his phone.

That whole scene had gone down the next day and Jeongguk didn't think that reaching Jimin through
his phone would result in any response. In fact, the older boy might have gotten angrier at seeing the innocent addition of Jeongguk's name as Gguk.

He shook his head free of faltering thoughts, looking inside the studio again. He had noticed that Jimin only ever worked in there with bare feet, and Jeongguk could understand the concept behind it. It was Jimin's safe place, he could be comfortable without any practicalities. It was an open space, with floor-to-ceiling windows on three walls of the room. Jeongguk thought a person would feel like they could finally breathe when there.

It was tranquil and secluded from the outside world. If Jeongguk didn't know any better he'd say it described Jimin's nature perfectly. But now he knew that that composed image of his was just a facade, the Jimin inside was bursting at the seams. He was like gasoline, just waiting for a match to light him up.

He hid it so well, though. Looking at him now, Jeongguk could see no trace of that untameable anger that took over him. He was wearing an oversized shirt with his small hand that held the charcoal barely peeking out. No wonder he always got his clothes dirty, didn't the sensible thought of pushing his sleeves back ever occur to him?

But then, those mindless choices he made really fit the entire aesthetic of him.

He looked soft.

"Jimin?" he called.

Jimin turned around, startled, silver hair falling into his eyes as he peered at Jeongguk from underneath. "What do you want?"

Jeongguk winced. It was fair. Even he wished he could come to Jimin without wanting something off him, but they just didn't have the relationship where he could ask the older boy how he was or how everything was going. Only practicalities could make them interact, no feelings or anything similarly stupid.

"I was wondering if you could help me with something."

Jimin seemed taken aback, he pondered over his words for a moment before nodding perceptibly. "Is it with that project you were talking about?"

"Yeah," Jeongguk said, taking Jimin's nod as permission to enter the studio. "I'm struggling with ... inspiration, I guess. I had a whole plan in my head about the possible interpretations of it, but whenever I get round to photographing something, it just doesn't feel right."

He thought Jimin might not understand but that knowing look in the artist's eyes told him that he knew exactly what Jeongguk was talking about. "I'd tell you to at least get something down and then start to narrow it but I would be a hypocrite."

"Are you like me?" the younger boy blurted.

Jimin tilted his head. "What are you like?"

Jeongguk smiled, embarrassed. "You know ... unable to start something if it could lead to failure?"

He watched him intently, as though he didn't expect Jeongguk to say something like that. "What if that's the only option?"
"Failure or the fact that you have to start anyway?"

"Both."

"I don't like uncertainty. I'd wait as long as I have to until I can define exactly I'm going to do and how it'll end up."

"Nobody likes uncertainty, Jeongguk. But you're lucky you think like that."

"You don't?"

"What's the guarantee that you will come out of that indecisiveness?"

"You learn to take a risk," Jeongguk said firmly.

"You're afraid of failure, though."

"But you could fail either way." He smiled.

Jimin stared at him again, there was a certain look in his eyes that Jeongguk wished he could comprehend. It was as though Jimin was seeing him for the first time. There was an appreciation in his gaze, it made Jeongguk feel euphoric.

"So, you mentioned inspiration? You must have had some faceless person in your thoughts when you were coming up with the plan."

"Do people from Google Images count?" Jeongguk wondered.

His lips twitched. "Can you get them to model for you?"

"No."

"Then, your answer is no."

"I was thinking of including clothing as self expression too. So I had Taehyung hyung in mind for that"

"I wouldn't disagree." Jimin hummed. "He has a good fashion style. It definitely matches the idea of objectives behind different clothing. Why don't you start with him?"

Jeongguk shrugged, looking sheepishly at him.

"Not good enough?" He sighed. "Can I see what you already have?"

The younger boy laughed. "When I say I have nothing, I mean I have nothing."

Jimin shook his head. "Your past work, I meant, so that I can get an idea of your style."

Jeongguk tentatively retrieved his camera from his bag and handed it to him, suddenly feeling nervous about showing the documentation of his life to a near stranger.

"You don't have to if you don't want to," Jimin said empathetically. "I know showing your art to somebody makes you feel vulnerable. Or you can go through my sketchbook if it makes you feel better? You can perhaps draw some inspiration from it too."

He didn't know how looking through Jimin's sketches would make him feel better but he went with
it, opening the sketchbook Jimin gestured towards. It was very abstract, which was the whole idea of rough sketches, he guessed. But it seemed inconsistent with Jimin's big-scale paintings and other portraits. However, Jeongguk was only five pages in when he started to take his words back from earlier. This was probably the most personal work of Jimin's that he'd ever seen, it did make him feel slightly less exposed. He could sense the meaning behind the work even if he didn't understand it.

If he were to say so, he'd think this was a diary of emotions. A row of soothing pastels contrasting with a cluster of crimsons, burnt oranges and dirty greys on the next page. It went from one extreme to the other. From monotone to vibrant pigments. At seeing the dates on the bottom corner of the pages, Jeongguk realised that this sketchbook was indeed Jimin's diary.

"Hmm, you're very diverse, aren't you?" Jimin's voice broke through his thoughts as he looked through Jeongguk's camera. "I can't find more than a couple shots of a single person."

Jeongguk inhaled deeply, still reeling from what he'd just seen. "I think different people fit different themes really well."

"That's true. Especially for the human condition, with multiple people you would be able to capture a range of emotions."

"Not necessarily, though," he argued. "I think we as humans can experience such an extent of things alone." He looked straight at Jimin as he said that, making the older boy look away. Jeongguk was finally starting to understand him, and he was starting to understand his evasion techniques too.

"Can I recommend somebody for you to photograph?" Jimin said.

Pleasedon'tsayChunghapleasedon'tsayChung—

"Seulgi—" Jeongguk took a breath of relief "—has a lot of experience with movement and people. I think she would wholly understand what you are trying to capture in a photograph."

"I mean if she's willing to."

"She would be." Jimin smiled. "She'd love to help you."

Why did he smile so endeared when thinking of anyone but Jeongguk? Why did it affect Jeongguk so much?

"I'm more into close-ups, I'd say," Jimin continued. "I like working with the details. I can give you some ideas if you want?"

And so, for the first time, they worked together by sharing their thoughts and opinions. It still left Jeongguk in disbelief how easy it was to put aside their differences and talk about art so passionately. He liked this narrative. Something told him that he could easily become dependent on this if he didn't restrain himself. It was addicting being in Jimin's presence and having him look at Jeongguk as though he wanted to divulge his heart into this conversation.

He was good with his words, Jeongguk realised, even if he was never able to express himself clearly. The words he said made you look at things in a different light. He gave him quite a few homologous ideas: curves of the body, close-ups of bones, wet skin, glinting shards. Jimin was very insightful of what Jeongguk wanted his project to deliver.

As the younger boy was writing down the last of their accumulated suggestions, he thought it wouldn't hurt to try to delve deeper into Jimin. "So do you often work on these sort of ideas? You seem knowledgeable about it."
"Don't," Jimin snapped, making Jeongguk jump from the sudden change in his tone. "Don't make this more tedious than it has to be. Just finish what you're here for and go. I don't need this filler talk."

"I was only trying to—"

"I don't need you speculatively trying, Jeongguk. I'm not a part of your project and I'd rather it stays that way too."

"What's so wrong in trying to know about what the ideas behind your art are?"

It made him furious how Jimin pulled away at the slightest of inquisitions. It wasn't like he was asking him something personal, it was just an abstract question. Jeongguk would understand if Jimin was that guarded with everyone, but that wasn't true. He had no problem talking with other people, namely Chungha, but when it came to Jeongguk, he was so spiteful. As though he didn't consider him deserving of basic human respect. He made him feel so pathetic.

"I wouldn't be interested in what you have to say in response to my ideas, Jeongguk," Jimin said simply.

He clenched his jaw, glaring at the older boy bitterly. "I'm sure if Chungha asked you'd have no problem in answering like a rational person."

Jimin furrowed his eyebrows. "What does Chungha have to do with this?"

He got up, grabbing his camera off the table. "Nothing at all. Thanks for your fucking help," he spat.

So as quickly as it had started, it ended too. But this time, Jeongguk wasn't putting the blame on himself. If this was the result he'd get even after trying, then, he had no qualms in leaving Jimin alone as he wished. He had enough self-respect to walk away without the older boy belittling his efforts anymore.

A part of him knew that he wouldn't have been as bothered if Chungha wasn't in the picture, but he was incensed and so fucking jealous. So fight him for feeling wronged. He should have known it would end like this, but then he scoffed. It didn't even start. It'd be worth something if Jeongguk actually managed to achieve something at the end of it, though.

For now, he had adopted Jimin's method of the silent treatment, blanking the older boy every time he stepped a foot inside the Park mansion. It was only because of his decency as Jihyun's friend that he even went to their house anymore, he knew he had to indulge his best friend in his excitement for his upcoming trip and help him pack everything.

But it didn't mean that he'd have to show any acknowledgement to the passing-by figure of Jimin. It made Jeongguk feel better to have the silver-haired boy on the receiving end of the disregard for once. But it would mean something if Jimin actually cared that Jeongguk was ignoring him so blatantly. He was perfectly desensitised to Jeongguk glaring holes into him. It was infuriating how the younger boy couldn't do anything to affect Jimin as he much as he affected him.

The past couple of weeks had gone by quick enough, with last minute trips to stores because Jihyun's stupid ass managed to forget something even after writing a to-do list. Jeongguk would never admit
that he was feeling a little emotional at having to be away from his best friend for a whole month. But then he felt better that no Jihyun meant no more of Jimin's dumb face for a month too. He had decided that he'd rather handle starvation than have to tolerate the older boy's indifference.

"Jeongguk, am I seeing tears in your eyes right now?" Jihyun snickered.

"Fuck off, you bitch." He put him into a chokehold, threatening him to shut up.

It was finally the day Jihyun would be leaving for Japan so Jeongguk had come to say goodbye. Haewon had said she'd come after work to send him off. But his best friend seemed to be showing no sign of sentimentality at being away from his family and friends which made Jeongguk think he should really make a new best friend in the meantime.

"Admit it, you're gonna miss me," Jihyun said.

"I'm gonna miss the food more," Jeongguk said petulantly.

"You're always welcome, I've told you."

"I'd rather not." He scoffed.

Jihyun didn't say anything because he had gathered that Jimin and he were not on talking terms anymore. As if they ever were, to be honest. But this past week had been worse because both of them had been just as adamant on avoiding each other compared to when it was only Jimin. Mr. and Mrs. Park, as always, chose to ignore the hostility between both boys and Jeongguk couldn't figure out if he was grateful for that or not.

"Park Jihyun, you poor excuse of a human being! What have you done?" Seohyun's shriek from the utility room rang in the silence suddenly.

Jihyun turned around in alarm, eyes widening in surprise. "What did I do?"

Seohyun was seething as she came into view, her eyes livid. Her clothes were dripping wet and Jeongguk was subconsciously starting to make sense of the situation. He distantly recalled Jihyun saying that he needed to fix something about the washing machine since he had a pile of clothes to wash. Shit, was this what he thought was happening?

"Why did you go anywhere near the water pressure valves? Haven't I told you to keep your hands off things you don't know anything about?"

"Why—What happened?" Jihyun spoke in dread.

A drop of water spattered onto Jeongguk's forehead and Jihyun's eyebrows rose in realisation.

"The pipes have burst, that's what, you mindless child!" she screamed.

"Seohyun-ah," Chansung said, walking urgently in from his study room. "Don't stress Jihyunie out, he'll be leaving in a couple of hours. We'll sort this out afterwards."

They got into a heated discussion then, Seohyun exclaiming that all the furniture would get ruined and Mr. Park trying to calm her down by reasoning with her sensibly. Jihyun looked sheepish, his head turning back and forth between his parents as he tried to resolve the tension too.

Jeongguk wanted to reassure him about the situation but he didn't want to butt into their conversation. From his periphery, he could see Jimin making his way down the staircase in
confusion. They accidentally made eye contact and Jeongguk quickly looked away. Great, just what he needed when he was trying to be less awkward.

"What happened?" he said as he neared them.

"The water pipes have burst, Jimin-ah, but don't worry, we'll just rent some hotel rooms in the time being," Chansung said. "The third floor doesn't have any pipes installed so your studio will be fine."

Jimin nodded, looking so unbothered that he had Jeongguk staring at him incredulously. Was he for real? How could he not care that his house was turning into a fucking swimming pool as the minutes went by? Jimin caught his gaze again, raising an eyebrow in an expectant manner. But Jeongguk was too done with him to humour him with a reaction.

He looked away then, eyes wandering over the dripping roof and the marble floor which was starting to become dangerous to walk on. Seohyun had left the argument midway to fumble through the kitchen, trying to find something. She came out with a roll of plastic sheets, gesturing at Jimin and Jihyun to help her with it.

Jeongguk, trying to be useful, approached her too. She nodded at him gratefully, telling him that they should cover the main furniture with the sheets so that it doesn't get soaked for the time being. They were halfway done when the foyer door opened and Jeongguk spotted his mother making her way inside the lounge. She looked disoriented at the state of the house, her eyebrows shooting up to her hairline as her eyes scanned over the roof.

"What happened?" she asked, perplexed. The lines on her forehead told Jeongguk that she was probably getting too anxious. Haewon had always been such a worrier.

"Jihyun messed up the valves and their water pipes have burst," Jeongguk explained.

"Oh, dear." She turned to look at Seohyun, who was now on the phone after leaving the boys to handle the covering. She gave her a look of concern and Seohyun held up a finger, telling Haewon to wait as she nodded to whoever she was speaking to. Probably the plumbers, if Jeongguk had to take a guess.

"We should help them out, Jeongguk-ah," his mother said frantically. Jeongguk wanted to tell her that she was getting more worried than the Park family combined but it was best not to call her out of her obvious distress. "Who is Chansung calling?"

"He said something about booking some hotel rooms while the house gets sorted out."

"What nonsense! They can stay at our house."

Jeongguk turned to his mother incredulously. This was the last thing he thought she meant when she said they should help them out. "Our house is not even big enough," he tried to reason incredulously.

"Of course, it is. Chansung oppa and Seohyun-ah can stay in the guest room and Jimin-ah can sleep in yours with you now that Jihyun will be away."

Fuck. This could not be happening. He stared with his eyes wide as saucers at his mother. Had this woman lost her mind? Forget about just the Park family living with them, was she actually entertaining the idea of Jeongguk and Jimin sleeping in the same room? All of his nightmares were starting to take form right in front of him now. He felt like the room was spinning as he tried to make sense of what she was even suggesting. "Mum, no. Jihyun is gone anyway—"

"Jeongguk-ah," she snapped. "Don't be so inconsiderate. Just think about how they look after and
care for you."

Which was true, but Jimin didn't look after him now, did he? Why did he have to play nice with him? "Listen, I'm just saying it's more practical to let them stay in a hotel—"

"Seohyun-ah!"

_Oh, fuck._
"Are you okay with this, Jeongguk?" Jimin asked.

Considering Jeongguk's plan to avoid Jimin for the rest of his life and not be within two meters of him, no, he wasn't okay with this. Especially now that his mother had the ridiculous idea of them sharing a bed as though there wasn't anything marginally wrong with it. As though the awkwardness wouldn't be the death of him today.

"I'm not—"

"Of course he's okay with it," Haewon interrupted, shooting her son a glare. "Don't worry about Jeongguk, he still hasn't snapped out of his teenage rebellion as you can see."

Yes, that was right. Don't worry about Jeongguk, even if he might not wake up to see the next day tomorrow. It wasn't like he was going out of his mind, not at all. Jeon Jeongguk was perfectly satisfied with his life and everything was simply sublime.

"Let me just make this known," Jeongguk started. "I am not happy."

"There are not many people in this world who are, Jeongguk," Jimin said impassively.

For God's sake, would this boy stop taunting Jeongguk in his own house?

Haewon clicked her tongue. "Do I need to retract the offer of buying that Canon you're been wanting for Christmas?"

Jeongguk looked at his mum in betrayal, at last hanging his head in defeat. "I'm okay with it."

Mr. and Mrs. Park had gone to drop Jihyun off at the airport while Haewon had driven Jimin and
Jeongguk home. Seohyun had been hesitant when Jeongguk's mother offered to let them stay at their house, she said they weren't sure how long it could take to fix the damage. But Haewon had convinced her that they wouldn't be intruding. While Jeongguk begged to differ.

Park Jimin was definitely intruding into his fucking life, never mind just his room.

"Come over here and help me with the meal," Haewon called. "I'm sure Seohyun-ah will appreciate it if the food she eats tonight is at least half as good as hers."

Jimin nodded his head, following her into the kitchen. By the time Jeongguk snapped out of his irritation and got there, he realised that the older boy had picked out the easiest task of peeling the potatoes while subtly leaving Jeongguk to chop the onions. Jimin glanced back at him, falsely innocent, as the brunet fixed him with the dirtiest look he could manage.

But not wanting to infuriate Haewon further, Jeongguk accepted his fate. Although nothing could stop him from occasionally sending Jimin death glares. If he were comfortable with him, he would kick him from behind the countertop, but Jeongguk didn't want to push it too much. He wouldn't put it past Jimin to just smash the nearby plates if he got mad. Maybe.

After all, who could be sure of Jimin's actions? Nobody knew what would make him snap or what would evoke no reaction from him whatsoever. So Jeongguk thought it'd be sensible to not provoke him too much.

Luckily, the doorbell rang and distracted him from entertaining more malicious ideas.

"Oh, that'll be Mrs. Byun," Haewon said, wiping her hands onto her apron and going to open the door. As soon as she unlocked it, the white fur-ball that was Miri leapt into her awaiting arms, her tail waggling in contentment at finally being home.

Hearing her little woofs, Jimin abandoned the peeling and waddled into the living room.

"Miri!" he said delightfully, immediately kneeling down to cradle her as Haewon let her go to greet Mrs. Byun. Miri was just as smitten with Jimin as she had been the first time round, which made Jeongguk frown because Jimin didn't even smell like orange blossom today. He smelt faintly of mandarin oil which was probably just his body wash.

Jeongguk tried convincing himself that they had similar scents.

Mrs. Byun, however, was watching Jimin with dancing eyes. "Is this the friend who's not a friend?"

Jeongguk tilted his head in confusion until he remembered their conversation when Jimin had picked him up for practice the first day. He wished he had a different answer for her, but unfortunately for him, their 'friendship' hadn't developed much.

"Yeah, that's Jimin," he eventually replied, unable to find another adjective for him.

"He doesn't seem bad."

"That's because he's with Miri. Just a minute ago, he was making me cut onions."

Mrs. Byun faltered, looking at him with wide eyes. "He made you cry?"

"What?" It took him a second to understand her speculation, she thought he was talking figuratively, making him let out a startled laugh. "I mean he literally made me chop onions. Nobody cried, don't worry."
Although, he couldn't say that for the upcoming night. Perhaps Jeongguk would cry in frustration.

Later when Chansung and Seohyun arrived, they weren't visibly distressed but Jeongguk could hear from the strain in Mrs. Park's voice that she was still fretting over her furniture. But dinner was a peaceful affair nonetheless since everybody had their preferred company. Jimin was preoccupied with Miri, Haewon and Seohyun had a good catch up, while Chansung just chatted with Jeongguk about his school and football.

Afterwards, when Jeongguk had done washing the dishes with his mother, he couldn't help but whine at her. "Can't you stay over at Koosung's house? Don't you miss your boyfriend?" If she left, there would be a spare room which Jimin could sleep in.

"Don't be ridiculous, Jeongguk. I'm the host, I need to be here for them."

"I can take care of them too."

"I can't believe you're being so petty over sleeping next to Jimin-ah, he won't bite."

*He won't bite but that's all he won't do.*

"Mum, don't you understand? He's like my mortal enemy."

She laughed like it was the most absurd thing she'd heard. "You boys make me laugh."

Jeongguk eventually gave up, she really didn't understand the gravity of the situation. But maybe she did, because as he started to leave for his room, she warned him, "Be nice or else."

So he stood outside his bedroom door, unable to gather the courage to walk inside.

*I can do this,* he told himself. *I've been with him in a room alone before, I can do it again.*

*But you weren't sleeping on the same bed before,* his brain unhelpfully supplied.

*Fuck it. I can do this.* He finally knocked on the door and at seeing Jimin's face in the doorway, he bolted out again.

*Nope, I can't do this.*

"Jeongguk? Where are you going?" Jimin called after him.

He turned back around, suddenly mad that he had to act like an intruder in his own bedroom. He barged inside with the slight bravery he'd acquired due to his anger. He could sense Jimin watching him, a little bewildered, before taking a seat at the desk and presumably continuing with the book he had been reading. Jeongguk sighed, this wasn't that bad. He could surely manage to get through the night.

He opened his wardrobe to take out his pj's, which weren't actually for nightwear, per se. Just a pair of sweatpants and an old t-shirt. Whoever wore actual pyjamas to bed could come fight him. He was too old and disgruntled with life for that.

Okay, time to stop delaying what was inevitable. Jeongguk probed his brain for any excuse to not sleep with Jimin, but even his brain had given up on him by now. He thought about Haewon's last words, *"Be nice or else"* and finally accepted that this was happening.

But just because he'd been forced to comply didn't mean that he was going to go easy on Jimin.
Because his mother was right. He was petty. Just as petty as Jimin.

Jeongguk lied down right in the middle of the bed, spreading his legs considerably so that the space on either side of him was barely enough to fit another person. He would see how Jimin tried to fit his frame into that tight space, maybe he would finally get the message and leave to sleep somewhere else.

"I sleep in the middle," Jeongguk said petulantly.

"That's alright. I don't sleep at all," Jimin murmured nonchalantly from his seat, legs sprawled out onto the desk as if he owned the place.

What?

Jeongguk gaped at him when he remained unmoving, trying to make sense of what he'd said. Surely Jimin meant that he slept later, and not that he stayed up the whole night. Because that would be absurd, even when taking account of how strange Jimin already was. The older boy seemed oblivious to Jeongguk's mental struggle, casually flipping through the book a page after the other.

"Are you actually gonna stay there the whole night?" he asked.

Jimin glanced up from the page, giving Jeongguk a dumb look. "Didn't I just say that?"

"No, you said you don't fucking sleep which I'm sure makes you a zombie."

"Of course, I sleep. I'm not in the mood today."

"What the fuck?" He stared, stupefied. "Who actually feels like they're in the mood to sleep?"

"Just go to sleep, Jeongguk. This doesn't concern you." He sounded a little peeved and Jeongguk remembered his touchiness to being asked about himself.

So he stopped then, leaving him be.

The literal list he had of 'things that made Park Jimin strange' would keep on growing, it seemed. A part of him thought Jimin was just acting tough, perhaps he didn't want to sleep next to Jeongguk either. But he stayed on the chair for another three hours.

Jeongguk was keeping an eye on the clock. For some reason, he couldn't sleep either. It wasn't like Jimin was disturbing him or anything, no, he was silent except for the sound of his faint breathing. It probably had more to do with how Jeongguk was again compelled to figure out this peculiar boy.

Sometime during the night, Jimin finally closed the book, making Jeongguk sigh in relief that he was going to come to bed after all. But the older boy just slumped down onto the window bay seat, putting his headphones on and staring out into the night. Jeongguk kept watching him in the dark, the way his silver hair gleamed in the moonlight, the way his fingers opened and curled in his lap, how his lower lip would disappear into his mouth until his teeth finally released it.

He couldn't sleep. Jimin's silent actions, so ordinary but so hypnotic, wouldn't let him look away.

Jeongguk couldn't believe that he suffered the whole day, trying to think of reasons to make Jimin not sleep in his bed, only to have this as a result. What was the point of that struggle? It was irritating, to say the least. He, even more so, couldn't believe that he was entertaining the idea of just dragging Jimin to bed.
Wasn't this what he'd wanted anyway? He reasoned with himself that he couldn't spend the whole night watching Jimin like that, it would be better to at least close his eyes if Jimin finally lied down.

The clock hit three-thirty, and that part of him ultimately won. He stood up from his bed, stalking over to the older boy and taking the headphones off his head. Jimin looked at him in startlement, mouth opening and closing to speak but no words seemed to form. Jeongguk jerked him up from the bay, starting to pull him towards the bed, but Jimin wouldn't stop trying to tug his wrists free from Jeongguk's grasp.

"What are you doing, Jeongguk? Let me go," he said, still struggling in his grip.

"I'm making sure you sleep like a normal person so that you can function properly in the morning," he snapped.

"I will function in the morning like I always do, stop trying to be my mother," he retorted.

It astonished Jeongguk how desensitised Jimin seemed to acknowledging what was wrong with not sleeping the whole night.

He shoved him down onto the bed. When Jimin made a sound of protest, Jeongguk slammed his palms down on either side of his head.

Staring at him darkly, he spoke in an unyielding voice, "Shut up and go to sleep. Don't make me tell you twice."

Jimin looked stunned, his gaze uncanny and a little dazed, as though he couldn't fathom Jeongguk acting that way with him. Jeongguk couldn't blame him either, but the older boy's insufferable habits had driven him to this stage.

When he walked to the other side and lied down, he could see the older boy lying shock-still in his position. Letting out a breath of exasperation, Jeongguk finally closed his eyes. Hopefully, sleep would come to him now, even if he was hyper-aware of Jimin's warm body beside him.

It didn't, though. He was finding it hard to stop seeing the strands of silver hair shining in the moonlight and that plump lip reddening as Jimin's teeth dug into it.

"Jeongguk-ah, are you asleep?"

"Jimin, go the fuck to sleep or God help me—"

"But I can't sleep," he said in a small voice.

Jeongguk sighed. Would he have to indulge him now?

"Why can't you sleep?"

"I can't sleep."

He pinched his nose bridge. "I gathered that," he said through gritted teeth. "Why can't you sleep?"

Jimin was quiet then, but his breathing was loud. "I'm sorry for disturbing you. I can go outside?"

"You're not disturbing me, Jimin, I'm not saying this for myself. But you need to sleep. It's not healthy to stay awake the entire night."

"I know. I'll try. You go to sleep, Jeongguk."
What was this? Was this how a good-natured Jimin felt like? So ... pliable? Because that was how Jeongguk was perceiving him, Jimin was so attuned to his every word, so considerate about how the younger boy could be feeling. Was it because he felt guilty? But little did Jimin know, he wasn't troubling Jeongguk at all; it was his own stupid brain which wouldn't shut up. Jeongguk could get used to this, though. It was nice to feel like his feelings meant something after being ignored by Jimin for so long.

Normally, he felt like the older boy couldn't care less about whether Jeongguk was mad or annoyed at him. He just blanked his existence like it was no effort at all. But now, this mindfulness Jimin showed towards him was different, it was nice. Yet it again irritated Jeongguk how Jimin could console him as easily as he provoked him.

A long while passed before Jimin spoke again. "Jeongguk-ah, are you asleep?" he asked, the second time that night.

Jeongguk wanted to snap that, of course, he wasn't asleep, as if Jimin laying next to him would ever let him rest. But all his thoughts came to a sudden halt when he felt a soft brush of fingertips on the back of his hand. He remained unmoving, partly out of shock and partly to see what Jimin would do next.

Then slowly, the cold fingers enclosed around his hand, the touch light but firm, before Jimin interlocked their fingers together. Jeongguk heard his stuttering breath, almost like a sigh of long-awaited solace. The younger boy was now laying immobile, unable to even breathe properly. What was happening?

He wondered when Jimin would pull away but his hand stayed there, his thumb caressing the back of Jeongguk's hand so gently that he wouldn't even notice if he wasn't paying attention.

He didn't know why he was going through with this, he should just pull away to give Jimin a taste of his own medicine, but he couldn't. Not when Jimin's cool touch felt so tender against his heated flesh. As time went by, Jeongguk noticed how the warmth from his palm clung onto Jimin's hand, withdrawing the cold from him.

Did Jimin need to hold something to sleep? Is that why he couldn't sleep? Or did holding Jeongguk's hand have nothing to do with it? Was he simply an insomniac? Or was Jeongguk assuming that too?

As he kept thinking, sleep slowly started to pull him under. He forgot about Jimin then, didn't remember to check if he had gone to sleep too. Jeongguk was just appeased at finally being able to rest after such an eventful day. He slept like any other night, absorbed way too deep into his dreams, and woke up feeling refreshed. Nothing too unusual.

But the only unparalleled thing was the hand still curled into his.

It seemed like Jimin hadn't let go the whole night. The thought made Jeongguk smile, he finally had something to hold over the older boy. But he wouldn't use it against him. When Jimin woke up after him, he didn't mention anything of it to Jeongguk. So the younger boy decided he wouldn't let Jimin know that he was aware of it.

It might just be his sole secret.

The next day was nothing out of the ordinary, unlike how Jeongguk imagined it to be. Maybe he'd had an unreasonably negative outlook on how the Park family staying at his house would affect him. He went to his lectures, drove to his football practice because the parking space had finally finished being rebuilt, hung out with Mingyu and Yugyeom afterwards for some street food, and talked to
Jihyun over a video call.

He thought nothing much of the Parks' whole arrangement. He came home at around six and found Seohyun cooking in the kitchen. It made him beam because he wouldn't be deprived of good food anymore.

"Jeongguk-ah, did you just come back from practice?" she asked.

"It finished a little earlier, but I went out for some eomuk afterwards."

"Is that so?" Seohyun smiled. "I think the only good thing coming out of those pipes bursting is that you can have my food again. Or maybe you prayed for it too hard," she added conspiratorially.

"I would never!" He laughed.

She chuckled, too, before continuing in a quieter voice, "Are things alright with Jimin-ah?"

"Sure," he said vaguely, grabbing a carrot from a basket and taking a bite.

Seohyun was hesitant. "Is he ... okay during the night?"

Jeongguk would have been confused if he hadn't spent last night with Jimin, but he understood her underlying meaning. "He's fine," he reassured her.

She looked surprised. "Okay, dear. I'll call you for dinner," she said with kind eyes.

Jeongguk smiled back at her before leaving. He needed to have a quick shower as well because he had only dried himself with a towel after practice.

When he got to his room, Jimin had his artwork spread all over the floor, seemingly working on that same hand drawing he'd been doing last week. He wasn't aware of Jeongguk's presence yet since his headphones were pulled over his ears. But when the younger boy stepped further into the room, Jimin looked up in surprise.

"Oh, I hope you don't mind," he said sheepishly. "I needed space for the references and—"

"It's alright," Jeongguk interrupted, flinging his school and practice bag onto his bed. "I've got stuff to do after showering as well. I'll just work on my bed."

Jimin nodded, giving him a small smile.

It was things like that which still spun Jeongguk's mind, like how easily Jimin smiled at him now compared to before. Would that change when his family moved back to their house? Was he only doing it because he felt indebted to Jeongguk?

Goddammit. When would this confusion in his head stop?

The following days passed similarly. Jimin worked in silence, more often than not having Miri beside him too; Jeongguk had to hold back a scream when he saw his dog covered in black ink one day, which Jimin apologetically explained as her stepping into his ink tub. Seohyun made dinner every day after coming back from work despite Haewon insisting that she was a guest and should let her cook. And Jeongguk had to goad Jimin to come to bed every night.

Jimin was still unbearable, saying little things that would pester Jeongguk all day, overtaking the younger boy's room as if it were his own, and smiling at him when he least expected him to. But he still had his days where he would blank Jeongguk completely, working on his artwork on the
bedroom floor without so much as a glance in the younger boy's direction.

But of course, Jimin held his hand every night no matter what his mood was like throughout the day. Every morning Jeongguk would disentangle their interlocked fingers, making sure to wake up before Jimin so he wouldn't find out that Jeongguk knew. The innocence of the gesture made Jeongguk lose any sort of animosity he'd held towards Jimin for maddening him, but only until the next day when the older boy started bothering him again.

And Jeongguk, he couldn't stop his every thought consisting of Jimin.
While It Lasts

Jeongguk had just finished washing up the dishes after dinner, a task which had now become permanent after the first day where he’d simply wanted to get on his mum’s good side so that she wouldn’t force Jeongguk and Jimin to sleep in his room. As it turned out, karma didn't favour those who had wrongful intentions from the start.

He thought he should make some hot chocolate, too, since it was getting cold and he didn't want his bones to tremble at night, even though having another body beside his considerably warmed up the bed. Grabbing a croissant from the shelf, he heated it in the microwave to have alongside his drink.

As he trudged up the stairs to his bedroom, he entertained the thought of having an Overwatch marathon since it was the weekend tomorrow. He could text the boys on the group chat to ask if they wanted to play. But then he remembered that Jimin would be in the same room as him and Jeongguk's distraction would definitely get the best of him. It would be better to do something that involved the older boy too.

When he walked into his room, Jimin was sprawled onto his couch, feet up on the armrest and face hidden by one of Jeongguk's anime. The younger boy had a massive problem with Jimin treating his room and possessions as his own, he couldn't imagine ever being that casual in Jimin's room. In fact, he had never even caught a glimpse inside of Jimin's bedroom, never mind step a foot in it.

Before he could confront Jimin about it though, he distantly recalled Haewon's condescending words: Be nice or else.

He sighed. Life was fucking unfair.

"None for me?" Jimin queried, eyeing the mug in his hand.
"What have you done to deserve it?" he asked with a scoff, munching on his croissant as he walked across the room.

"What haven't I done to deserve it? I've been a good boy."

Jeongguk nearly choked on the bite, coughing a little while rubbing his chest to ease the breathlessness, but Jimin just watched him with a strange look. "What are you, five?" he said, recovering from the older boy's words.

Jimin simply huffed in response. "I'll just tell Haewon you didn't take care of your guests."

"Guest," he corrected. "It's only you I have no wish to take care of."

"You're rude," he sulked before going back to the anime.

But Jeongguk didn't care, he was nice enough to be sharing his room with a boy who hadn't acknowledged his existence until a few weeks ago, he'd like to say he had enough proof of his goodwill. And if he did do some trivial things like hoarding up most of the bed at night, well, he had never claimed to be a saint.

Although, he did have to be nice.

"So, do you wanna watch a movie?" he asked reluctantly.

If there was one thing about Jeongguk, it was that nothing could distract him while watching Iron Man. And he wanted an escape from the constant fixation of Jimin in his head. For him, an hour couldn't pass without some sort of a lingering, random thought about the silver-haired boy. It ranged from methods of permanently avoiding him if he annoyed Jeongguk enough—which just didn't seem realistic—to wondering how Jimin was feeling towards him that day.

He desperately wanted—needed—to stop his world from revolving around that infuriating boy. The only way to do that was by preoccupying himself with a greater addiction. And that was where Iron Man came in. But one thing to know before proceeding was that Jeongguk definitely did not have a crush on Tony Stark. Not at all.

"What do you have in mind?" Jimin asked lazily, peering over the anime at him.

"Iron Man."

"I'm more into DC."

Jeongguk shot him an unamused look. "Get out of this room."

Jimin's lips curved in response. "Batman could beat Iron Man's ass."

He scoffed. "No, he couldn't. I'd like to see him try."

"He wouldn't have to try. I mean, have you seen his build?"

"So you're into Batman, huh?"

"I'm not into anybody."

Jeongguk cocked an eyebrow. "Why are you getting defensive, then?"

"I'm not getting defensive," he said, scowling at him. "I just think that Batman is more heroic than
Iron Man, not just in terms of his abilities, but also his revival from his past."

"So you *are* into him."

"Say, children are more into Marvel than DC, aren't they?"

*What a bitch.* Jeongguk glared at him, watching his smug face and taunting eyes in disdain. "Marvel Universe is so much better than DC."

"Come on, DC has better superheroes."

Jeongguk grimaced. "People who think that shouldn't be trusted."

"True. Those people would be adults, not children."

"Don't make me kick you out."

"You didn't deny being a child."

Jeongguk stalked towards him, one hand settling on the back of the couch and the other beside Jimin's head as he hovered over him, stopping just short of his face. He could smell the faint hint of Jimin's orange blossom scent from this close. "Do you want me to show you how much of an adult I am?" he murmured, but the tone of his voice couldn't be misunderstood as anything but goddamn dangerous.

Jemin's gaze flickered down to his body before meeting his eyes. "Let's not have a battle of masculinity."

Jeongguk poked his tongue into his cheek, giving him an appraising look. "That's what I thought."

"Gosh, you're cocky." He kicked his leg at Jeongguk's chest to push him away. "Let's watch the kids' show, then."

Jeongguk had to stop himself getting riled up again and continuing the bicker which couldn't be won. He searched through the DVD rack and picked out *Captain America: Civil War* because he had to show Jimin just how good Marvel was. He remembered to also grab his cookie jar from a shelf because popcorn was overrated.

It wasn't until he'd started the movie and was walking back to his bed that he realised how suggestive his little argument with Jimin had been. It made him stop in his tracks, eyes travelling towards Jimin in horror. The older boy was already getting comfortable on the bed, but he paused in his movements when he saw Jeongguk standing in the middle of the room, looking at him, transfixed.

"You having an existential crisis over there?" he asked with raised eyebrows.

"N-no."

"How do you go from an insolent brat to this?" Jimin huffed.

Jeongguk didn't respond, his actions had only now begun to catch up with him and he was debating throwing himself out of the window. He slowly approached the bed, making sure that when he finally sat down on it, the bed wouldn't tip too much and alert Jimin. God, why was he like this? Why was he so reckless when it came to Jimin? The older boy could've easily taken his actions the wrong way earlier, after all, who fucking caged in another man on a couch like that?

Jeongguk was lucky Jimin didn't snap, or worse, slap him for doing that.
Just a week ago, he was sure that something like that would have enraged Jimin and caused him to snarl at the younger boy like he'd done in his studio. But he had been very tolerating of it. Did that mean they were now friends?

Snap out of it, Jeongguk told himself.

He angrily opened the jar and shoved two cookies into his mouth. Fuck this. He was going to enjoy his favourite movie starring his favourite superheroes without any dumb silver-haired boys bothering him. And like he had said before, there was nothing Iron Man couldn't distract him from. Soon, he was enjoying the movie like he'd had no troubling thoughts before, hand diving back into the cookie jar to grab more right after he'd finished the prior one.

Jeongguk could faintly sense Jimin's consistent shuffling around but he thought it was because he wasn't liking the movie too much. After all, it was hard to allow yourself to like Marvel movies if you were a DC fan. The thought of sharing his cookies with Jimin crossed his mind but then he saw Iron Man emerging from a helicopter in all his glory, and he forgot all about it again. Which was okay, he had never been particularly generous.

He was too immersed into that fictional universe, mouthing each dialogue with the actors because that was how often he'd watched the movie. So that was why when Jimin's quiet voice interrupted the silence, he didn't register the sound until a second too late.

"I'm sorry, Jeongguk."

Jeongguk kept on staring at the TV screen, unable to decide if he had imagined that soft voice of Jimin's or not. Maybe he'd had too many cookies. Could sugar make you hallucinate too? He slowly turned his head towards the older boy.

"For what?"

"I'm sorry for snapping at you the other day at my studio, and for doubting your intentions. It's a sort of reflex, to be honest. I don't mean to sound so harsh."

The sudden shift in the mood left his mind reeling. "It's okay," Jeongguk said just as softly.

If one of his friends ever caught him talking like that, they'd never let him live it down. He could meet Jimin full-on with equally hostile retorts if Jimin ever taunted him. But it was that apologetic tone of Jimin's that made him so weak. It was so different to the usual, self-assured boy he saw, and he couldn't help but think that perhaps this was the only real Jimin he'd seen.

Jemin chuckled woefully. "Why does everyone do that? Don't say it's okay when it isn't. I could see how it affected you, you've been so jumpy and avoidant around me."

Jeongguk's eyes widened. Now, this was news to him. "You noticed?"

"Of course, I noticed. Do you think I'm blind to you?"

"You sure act like it."

"I see you, Jeongguk."

His tone was too emphatic for Jeongguk to even consider meeting his eyes.

Jeongguk looked away. "Uh … it's not like it hurt my feelings or anything," he tried to say cleverly, wanting to break the tense atmosphere.
"I hurt your feelings?" Jimin wondered out loud.

"I just said you didn't," he said stubbornly.

Jimin gazed at him for a while. "Has anyone ever told you that you look like a bunny?"

"Yes, you're not very original. And can you stop talking to me? I can't handle how you're suddenly not ignoring me anymore."

He frowned in confusion. "Do you think I ignore you?"

"Are you saying you don't?"

"Of course, I don't," he said, mildly offended.

Jeongguk scoffed disbelievingly. "Then why do you never talk to me?"

"It's not like you ever talk to me."

"That's because you're like my best friend's cool older brother," he defended fervently.

"C—?" Jimin laughed incredulously. "You think I'm cool?"

"Obviously not."

He sighed in response, staring up at the ceiling. They had both long stopped watching the movie, but Jeongguk let it play because he couldn't imagine how more awkward this conversation and the following silence would be if not for the background, filler noise. This was annoying. Jimin was annoying. Now Jeongguk could no longer say that Iron Man could distract him from anything.

"Are you pouting?"

"No," Jeongguk said, pouting further.

"You're cute, Jeonggukie." He sighed again.

It was safe to say that Jimin had finally managed to deep fry his brain. He got up from his bed and walked around it determinedly to the window. He twisted the latch before shoving it open and sticking his head out.

"What are you doing?" Jimin asked, dumbstruck.

"Cooling my overheated brain because I've experienced too many whiplashes for a day."

"You're a piece of work, aren't you?"

"Hush, I'm trying to fall back into the normal functioning mode."

"Take your time," the older boy said amusedly.

Jeongguk did, indeed, take his time. He stared into the night, the faint sound of cars and the distant nightlife drifting through the autumn wind, the row of streetlights illuminating the street except the one from across Mrs. Byun's lawn which hadn't worked for three years now, old Mr. Yoo, who had a habit of reading with his curtains opened, curled up on his armchair. Everything was typical of an ordinary Friday night, but the rhythm of Jeongguk's heart was foreign. The rush of indescribable feelings across his chest was unfamiliar.
He sighed, starting to walk back to his bed.

"So does me talking to you overheat your brain?" Jimin asked in his perpetually amused voice.

"Maybe."

"Is that what's making your cheeks red?"

Jeongguk’s head whipped in his direction. "Are you flirting with me, Park Jimin?"

"Is that what you think I'm doing?" He smirked.

Glaring at him with fiery eyes, Jeongguk grabbed a pillow and showed no mercy in swinging it at his head. Jimin laughed in surprise, tumbling back against the pillows, silver hair falling around his head like a halo. He looked like an angel, but his eyes were of the devil.

"Stop looking at me like that," Jeongguk said in a low voice.

"Like what?" Jimin stared up at him, his tongue—coincidentally—sliding out to lick across his lips, and Jeongguk looked away at sight of that barbell pierced into his tongue.

When he turned around to him again, he stared back scornfully for a moment. "You know what? Fuck you." He exasperatedly grabbed his pillow back and threw it on his side of the bed. The movie was nearly finished by now so he turned it off, it was getting late anyway.

Tidying up the leftover things, still a little miffed, he finally collapsed onto the bed with a huff.

"What did I do?" Jimin said in a daze.

"Why don't you figure it out?"

"Are you gonna make me beg now?"

Jeongguk stilled, looking at him mildly. This boy was really driving him over the edge. Did he not realise how uncomfortable he made Jeongguk with his suggestive language? Of course, his friends and he always had sexual innuendos in their conversations that could get pretty vulgar. Hell, Yugyeom, who was a dancer, even offered them lap dances. But this was Jimin, and he wasn't Jeongguk's friend. The younger boy couldn't handle having ordinary chats with him. Just the concept of it was too weird.

"Are you gonna shut up now?" he retorted.

"What?"

"Did I fucking stutter?"

"Look at you swearing. Where's the bunny gone now?"

"You tell me. You normally have mastery in these sort of things, don't you?"

Jeongguk saw him pause at his words, he knew Jimin understood what he meant. The older boy was the one who could change appearances so easily, not him. He was the one who excelled in the art of making somebody feel as capable or as pathetic as he wanted.

But Jimin didn't indulge him. "Don't answer me with questions."
"What are you gonna do? Punish me?" he said, playing Jimin's own game.

"You like that sort of thing?" he replied without missing a beat.

Jeongguk sighed. Of course, he couldn't win this game. There was no way he could ever handle people the way Jimin did, how he knew about their every weakness and how he always had the last word.

"I can't get used to you being like this," Jeongguk spoke into the silence. "So playful and oblivious. Normally, I feel like every move of yours is calculated."

Jimin's smile died on his lips, and the sadness which hadn't made an appearance all night wafted across his eyes. "Don't worry," he whispered. "I won't be like this for long."

Jeongguk realised that Chungha had been right. There was only one way to rightly describe Park Jimin's eyes, and that was sad. He had sad, sad eyes. And Jeongguk didn't know how to hold Jimin back as he felt him slipping into that desolate void again.

"Why, Jimin?"

Jimin gazed at him, eyes glinting in the moonlight. "It's getting late," he said softly. "Let's go to sleep, Jeongguk-ah."

"You're shutting me off again. I didn't say that for you to start ignoring me."

His tone was rich with feeling when he spoke in a shaky murmur. "I'm not ignoring you, Jeongguk. I never ignore you. I'm just—" his voice broke a little before he breathed in deeply "—I'm just finding it difficult to not overwhelm you with myself."

Jeongguk didn't say anything in response to that. "Will you be here in the morning?" They both knew what he meant. Will you be the same Jimin in the morning or will your mask replace you?

Jimin didn't answer, he gave him one last look before turning to face away from him. That night, he didn't hold Jeongguk's hand, and the younger boy pretended that he didn't feel empty. He pretended he couldn't have known that Jimin didn't sleep all night.
Chapter Notes

I didn't realise how dark this chapter would get before I wrote it so just a bit of a warning: there will be subconscious suicidal thoughts and negative perceptions induced by insecurity.

What Jimin experiences here is called dissociation as a result of anxiety, it's a strange experience where you feel a vivid sense of confusion over the outside world and/or yourself. The best way to think of it is like being in a dream, you know what's going on but you're not always in control of your thoughts and feelings and everything just seems vague.

Don't worry if some things don't make sense to you because that's the portraying the extent of Jimin's 'confusion'.

"Oppa, can we move the date to next week?" Chungha said, almost breathless, into the phone. "I've been organising the Christmas fair performances with the committee and I know it's nearly two months away but the auditions need to be sorted out—"

"Chungha," Jimin cut in, she didn't need to give that many explanations. "It's okay. We can do it next week."

In the background, the events committee could be heard as they discussed the fair. It seemed like Chungha had received his call in the middle of a meeting. "Are you sure?" she asked in a meek
voice. "You were really looking forward to it, though."

He was looking forward to it. After spending so much time at her dance studio, Chungha had proposed they meet outside of their regular sessions. Normally, they just hung out together to practice some of her choreos and most of the time just talking between the two of them. Those moments were something he knew he'd miss when it ended. It was nice how their time was spent together. How they laughed at each other when one of them messed up a move but with a subtle endearment, how Jimin smiled at her with a newfound respect when she danced with overflowing passion in her eyes, and how Chungha enfolded him into her arms at the end of each night.

She picked up on the subtlest of his emotions, on his unspoken yearnings. Her eyes never, ever, drifted away from his form. Jimin couldn't hide from her like he could from almost anybody. He felt vulnerable around her but she understood that too. She never pushed him into a place where he didn't feel comfortable. Perhaps that was why she was such good friends with Seulgi. They both had an apt for knowing exactly what to say to ease somebody.

The first time she had kissed Jimin's palm, he'd felt like crying because how did she know? How did she know that he wouldn't let her touch him anywhere else? Was it because Chungha was too perceptive or was Jimin too transparent in his feelings? It was unlikely to be the latter. Everybody stayed distant to him because they thought he was an aloof person. Or maybe they simply disliked him too much to associate with him.

He shouldn't neglect the possibilities which hurt to think about.

But out of all the people, Chungha liked him. He knew her feelings extended romantically as well but that wasn't the main issue at hand. It was merely that she liked Jimin as a person. The thought left him perplexed because how could she be so fond of him when she didn't even know him?

The realistic part at the back of his head told him that was exactly the reason. Chungha liked Jimin because she didn't know him. She hadn't seen how jealous he could get. How detestable his never-ending sorrows could get. How his unstable moods could draw people to the brink of their patience. It was best if Chungha always saw this composed image of him. And it would be best if he could prevent the ugly, inevitable end by pulling away earlier.

"I'm okay with it, Chungha," he repeated. But how he wished she would ask if Jimin was okay in that instant.

That was why he'd called her, he had wanted to seek some comfort from her. For the past few days, his thoughts and feelings had been eating up at him. He wasn't able to take a single breath without feeling the ache in his chest with each one. He was hurting, the reasons were ambiguous to him, but Jimin was hurting and he needed somebody to convince him that it would get better.

He wouldn't believe them, but he wanted it anyway. God, he was so insufferable. Why would anybody want to be near him at this time? His brain didn't file the logical reasonings, though; his heart just wanted an embrace. He wanted somebody to envelop him into their warmth and tell him that they would stop the pain, that they knew how hard this was for him even if he tried so earnestly to not let it show.

He wanted somebody to see him. To just see the Jimin that was begging to be freed.

Of course, Chungha wouldn't know and Jimin would never tell. How could he tell her that he needed her presence right now when she was so occupied with her responsibilities? But most of all, Jimin's insecurity wouldn't let him admit that his biggest restraint was the fear of Chungha saying no even if he did ask her to come to him. He craved the warmth of her caresses, he missed the kisses on
his palms, he wanted the security of her hugs.

It was all too much to ask of someone he'd known for too little time.

"Jimin oppa," she whispered. "I'm happy to know you."

He breathed shakily.

She knew, goddamn it. Chungha knew how he was feeling. Jimin was stuck between feeling overwhelmed and angry. Overwhelmed at how she seemed to know him so well but angry because why didn't she still come if she knew?

How could she not run to him if she knew he was one breath away from collapsing?

"I'll talk to you later," he said shortly. He wasn't in a stable mindset to act upon either of his feelings. In these kinds of moods, Jimin always said something he regretted afterwards so it was better to cut off the call before he damaged their relationship.

It should signify that he was getting better at controlling his emotional urges, but that wasn't true. Jimin was still so far gone into his irrationality that even identifying the signs of his upcoming distress was of no help. He was drowning in his unjustified thoughts which wouldn't stop looming over him.

Why didn't it get better? Why did he have to ruin something before it even started? He was so fucking toxic to himself and other people, it was of no wonder why they couldn't handle him.

But how was he to stop feeling so betrayed? Chungha knew what Jimin was going through, fuck, he could tell by her tone that she was aware of his condition right now. Why couldn't she abandon her work and just come to him? Why couldn't she just embrace him when he called her in a time of such need? That's what a friend was for, wasn't it? To hold you together when you felt like you were gonna break?

It was pointless to think like that, though. Jimin didn't have any friends. Unlike Jeongguk—

Oh, God. He needed to distract himself.

Jimin searched the room blindly. At catching the sight of Miri sleeping on the bed, he ignored the sensible part that told him to not disturb her in her sleep. But Jimin desperately needed to anchor himself to something. And if that was Miri, who couldn't ever directly express her dislike towards him, then all the better.

He cradled her into his lap on the bay seat, fingers raking through her fur as he tried to think of anything but the baseless anxiety that was luring him in. Miri let out a small mewl when Jimin tugged on her fur too hard and it made him sigh, enchanted. She was an adorable little thing, so affectionate and so demanding of reciprocating love. Jeongguk was lucky to own her—

Jeon Jeongguk. The perfect distraction. He was the epitome of everything Jimin wanted in his life. His life composed of what could never be Jimin's. A stable family bond, a group of friends, a sociable personality, full of natural, endearing talents and an even more endearing smile.

Jimin envied him too much, but not in a hateful way. He didn't lie when he said Jeongguk was the perfect distraction for someone like him. He was special. So buoyant and full of life and so ... gentle. Of course, Jimin hadn't personally experienced his benign nature but he had seen it. In Jeongguk's eyes when he made somebody laugh, in his actions when he helped around the house without being asked to, and in his voice when he spoke to Miri.
If Jimin was being honest, he had never seen Jeongguk as anything other than a boy who just spouted the most random things. From the day he'd started hanging out at their house as a child, his exuberant nature had never subdued. In fact, Jimin's earliest memory of Jeongguk was probably when he and Jihyun got ill after swimming in their outdoor pool on a Christmas. Jihyun's fever had quietened him down but Jeongguk still wouldn't stop prattling to his aunt about all the presents he had received.

Albeit the shy, sometimes timid, moments, Jeongguk was always that in-your-face sort of a kid. He grabbed attention wherever he went, whether that was with his appearance or his abilities, he could never be overlooked. Jimin, despite having no interest in his little brother's best friend, was always aware of Jeongguk. He knew about his relationship with his friends, his upcoming schedule, and his opinions on all the video games because Jeongguk and Jihyun were very vocal about their ins and outs at the dinner table.

They had never interacted much, Jimin thought, Jeongguk and Jihyun had a different friendship circle to him most likely due to their age. But Seokjin was a part of it nonetheless, so maybe Jimin's excuse to console himself was foolish.

A part of being mindful of Jeongguk meant that he'd also not been unaware of Jeongguk's aversion towards him. But Jimin didn't blame and neither held that against him. He knew he didn't have the most likeable disposition. Jeongguk had all the reasons to dislike him. In fact, Jimin could say that it didn't even hurt anymore.

Jimin had made a few friends in elementary school, some more at the start of high school but gradually they drifted away. Jimin kept losing friends and Jeongguk's clique kept growing.

It made him want to avoid the younger boy even more because weren't the people with no friends seen as freaks? It wasn't untrue. But Jimin had learnt about not caring about other people's opinions the hard way.

He wasn't impervious to them yet, but he was getting there. Perhaps if it hadn't been for Yoongi, Jimin would still be struggling. His hyung had this blunt manner of speaking which was like a breath of fresh air in his pretentious world. Yoongi knew how to pull Jimin out of his delusions when he started lying to himself. He knew what was best for him. Jimin always thought that Yoongi was his saviour, he didn't heal him but his hyung saved him from falling too hard.

Yoongi understood his silence.

Perhaps that was the reason behind Jimin being unable to keep friends, his standards were too high because of Yoongi.

His hyung had taught him how to find solace in his solitude. He made him realise that he didn't need other people to be happy and that letting them define his self-worth was a toxic way to live. Jimin wished he'd reached that healthy mindset, but he hadn't. All the things Yoongi showed him, he understood but never took on board. He needed people's opinions like his final lifeline to survive.

But Jimin had never succeeded in many matters anyway. Failing one more thing wouldn't kill him.

So when it came down to it, he couldn't deny that talking with Jeongguk that night would remain a pleasant memory in his heart. It didn't matter how it ended, that little moment of happiness was good enough for him.

No matter how much Jimin criticised Jeongguk for never shutting up, it had been nice to talk about useless things for once. To have a conversation outside of his regular appointments with his shrink.
and the obligatory talks with his parents, to just hang out with a similar-aged person and have conversations that boys normally had with their friends. Because that was how Jimin would be if he didn't hurt so much.

But perhaps it was too strange for Jimin to be like that. Perhaps that 'carefree' and 'oblivious' Jimin, as Jeongguk had said, wasn't a part of who he was. Because people would always question that side of him. Jeongguk did so, anyway. He asked him, not blatantly, why Jimin was happy for once. Wasn't that essentially what he'd meant?

Jimin had wanted to scream at him that he did have happy moments. He would just never show them to Jeongguk because he didn't trust him to know Jimin. If nobody was there for him during his hard times, then, they didn't deserve the good side of Jimin either. He'd lived his whole life justifying his seclusion like that.

But sometimes, he thought that if there was nobody to witness his happiness, could he really prove that that moment had existed? His brain was already too good at making up scenarios, how could he know he even felt anything? Nobody ever saw him when he was breaking down, was that even real?

Maybe his brain had conjured it all. Maybe nothing about him was real, did he even exist?

Even if he did, it would be better if he didn't, wouldn't it? People would appreciate being ridden of his sight, he would like to fade away from their sight too. If he wanted it so badly, why couldn't it happen? Why did he never get what he wanted? If this world was so against him, didn't it make sense for him to just go? Jimin wouldn't mind, no. In fact, he did want to disappear most of the time too.

He could disappear. He could leave for good—

*Now's not the fucking time, Jimin.*

But could he?

Jimin shut his eyes tightly, he couldn't control the thoughts circling around his head anymore. The room felt unfamiliar, the washed out colours and the leaden space was making it even harder to identify his surroundings. How did he end up here? Why did the world appear so foreign? He felt powerless against the numbness that had invaded his body, his eyes couldn't seem to distinguish one form from another and his senses were dulled to everything around him.

Out of the window Jimin could see a man mowing his lawn, the faint noise of the machine infiltrated his ears but the concept of it didn't make sense to him. Why was he doing that at this time? Ordinary things and instances wouldn't register in his head. *What's going on?* his mind repeated persistently but no reply came.

He was too immersed in his dream-like state, knowing what was happening but being unable to respond do it. Jimin tried to pull himself out of it. He tried to focus on himself, on his breathing and the rise and fall of his chest but his distorted sense of reality was winning over his attempts. His inability to do anything to help himself was starting to make him feel hysterical. He wanted to get up and snap himself out of it but his body wouldn't coordinate.

*What's going on?* the thought intruded again in futile hopes of an answer.

It got to the point where Jimin couldn't figure out where his thoughts were coming from anymore. His own reflection in a distant mirror was puzzling to him. He felt like he could snap out of this dream any second now. It reminded him that he needed to ground himself.
Jimin looked around him helplessly. Miri's white fur was curled in front of him, and at seeing her probing eyes he wondered when she'd woken up and how she'd moved out of his lap. The curtains were swaying back and forth in the late autumn wind but even the cold was of no effect to him. Vaguely in the background, he could hear soft clicks but he couldn't understand which direction they were coming from. There was a person standing in the doorway, he could make out the figure. But straining his eyes made his head spin, he bent his knees to his chest and placed his throbbing head on them.

"... Jimin?"

"—saw you ..."

"Jimin?"

Yeah, that was him. He was Jimin. And the person was talking to him. He lifted his head to find a brown-haired, doe-eyed boy staring at him searchingly.

"—okay?"

Jimin squinted his eyes at him. He knew this boy.

"Are you okay?" Jeongguk repeated.

Was he okay?

Yes, he'd be just fine. But words couldn't seem to form on his tongue. He opened his mouth to say something, anything, yet nothing came out. He put his head on his knees again, eyes squeezing shut to focus on one thing at a time.

"I have a headache," Jimin finally mumbled.

"Oh. Shall I get you some painkillers?"

"Please."

Maybe if he took enough—

Stop it, he snapped at himself.

"Okay. I'll be back soon."

Don't come back. Just leave me alone so I can learn to take care of myself on my own—

But Jeongguk didn't leave him for long enough to entertain any more thoughts. He handed him the painkiller, only one tablet, and a bottle of water. Jimin took the medicine reluctantly, whatever his problem was would definitely not be solved with a painkiller. But he appreciated Jeongguk's attention anyway. It was nice to feel like somebody was taking notice of his condition.

"I'm sorry for taking pictures of you before. I didn't realise how intrusive that could be."

Jimin wished he could tell him that nothing he said was registering with him properly. After a while of reciting Jeongguk's words several times in his head, the younger boy's actions finally started to become discernible. So that was where the clicking sounds were coming from.

"You took pictures of me?"
"Yeah, earlier when you uh ... had a headache. When we talked about my project once, you told me to start from silhouettes and I saw your profile in the window and I thought—"

"It's fine. Don't worry about it." Jimin waved him off. He couldn't handle the noise in his ears anyway, he didn't need unnecessary explanations.

"Are you sure it's just a headache? You don't look well," Jeongguk continued dubiously.

"Why do you care?"

There was utter silence for a moment that made Jimin look up at the boy. Jeongguk was glaring at him with absolute fury in his eyes, jaw clenching around nothing so hard that the older boy could hear his teeth grinding against one another. "Don't get on my bad side, Park Jimin," he said with a quiet rage in his voice that almost made Jimin cower. "I asked you nicely and I expect you to respond in an equally agreeable manner. I don't have to fucking care about you to ask how you're doing."

"I don't appreciate you hovering, Jeongguk. Back off."

The younger boy only watched him patiently, his big eyes scrutinising him to the point of discomfort. "You know, someday, Jimin, you're going to really struggle when you do want to share your feelings with someone," he said, not unkindly, but with a knowing perception in his voice.

"I don't need your concern."

"Who said it was concern?"

"Then, fuck off, why don't you?" Jimin then sighed. "I'm saying this in the nicest way possible. Please leave me alone, Jeongguk."

The younger boy only hesitated for a moment before he grabbed the silent figure of Miri from the seat and left the room. Only then did Jimin let out the tears that had been brimming for so long now. He was so tired, so exhausted from thinking the same things and feeling the same emotions. It just wouldn't end. Why did nothing change for Jimin?

It was just so tedious how he'd pick himself up from the bottom when he knew he'd inevitably fall again. So Jimin sat there, as the dusk turned into night, as the moon greeted him sheepishly knowing the melancholy its accompanying darkness brought him, it would always be the same. Jimin would always stare at the stars in faltering hopes that one day he'd become one of them.

The real world would always wrench him back in the form of people like Jeongguk, who wouldn't stop reminding him of everything he was hiding away from. When the younger boy came back to his room later that night, he silently lay down next to Jimin's motionless body. "So you didn't stay," he concluded. "You hid behind this mask again but I just wonder how long it'll be before it wears away." He glanced at him mildly. "Because I liked that Jimin."

But, of course, he liked him. Why wouldn't Jeongguk like the boy who forgot about his misery once in a while?

Jimin looked away, eyes wavering over anything to focus on except for Jeongguk's face, his heart felt heavy with his words. "What do you want from me, Jeongguk?"

"Nothing that you can't give."

"What if it's not enough?"
"Why don't you let me decide that?"

"But I won't let you take chances on me, Jeongguk."

Because Jimin wasn't a plaything who people could decide if they liked enough to not discard after they'd had their fun. He was too breakable, too tender to be treated that carelessly. And it'd be worth something if they were there to pick up the pieces afterwards. But it would always be Jimin by himself. Picking up the broken shards with his scarred hands that knew how to avoid the edges now.
Jimin was back to the silent mode. And these days it looked like even Chungha couldn't change his behaviour. He seemed exhausted when he came back after meeting up with her, always letting out a drained sigh as he closed the door behind himself. Jeongguk would watch him from the living room where he'd be catching up on some tv series, wanting to ask Jimin about the matter but the futility of the action always stopping him.

It still left his heart aching though, when he watched the silver-haired boy not get an ounce of sleep most nights. Jimin would hold his hand the entire night, playing with Jeongguk's fingers absent-mindedly and then simply caressing his knuckles. It still didn't make him fall asleep like it used to. Jeongguk could hear Jimin's irregular breaths into the daylight hours, unable to go to sleep either.

Jeongguk couldn't stop feeling guilty about the way he'd handled the whole situation with him the other day. He should have been more understanding, more kind in the way he approached him, instead of just blaming Jimin for the things that he perhaps couldn't help himself with. Jeongguk knew he had difficulty opening up to people, Jimin had himself said that he tended to snap at people as a reflex when asked about himself. Despite that, the younger boy had still chosen to place his frustration before Jimin's feelings. But this time, Jeongguk was hellbent on rectifying the situation.

He had his eye on the clock, Jimin would be coming back any minute now since it was approaching eleven o'clock, and the older boy seemed to have a curfew for himself lately. He never came home after half eleven at most, always before midnight. As the front door opened, Jeongguk sat upright.

"Jimin?" he called.
There was silence on the other side, Jimin was probably contemplating if he wanted to deal with Jeongguk at this time of the day. He heard a sigh before the silver head of Jimin's poked into the living room.

"Do you need something?"

He shook his head. "I'm watching some re-runs. Do you wanna join me?"

"I'm tired—"

But Jeongguk wasn't having his excuses. "Come sit down," he said firmly, patting the space beside him.

Jimin's brows rose in surprise, probably wondering why Jeongguk was bothering with the niceties. He caught Jimin's quiet mutter of "what's up with him?" under his breath before he slumped down next to him. Jeongguk didn't wait for him to get settled before getting straight into the matter. He wasn't known for his subtlety anyway.

"So, will you tell me what happened?"

"What happened?" Jimin played dumb.

"The other night in my bedroom."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Jeongguk pinched the bridge of his nose. "When you said you had a headache but it was obviously not that."

"It's nothing."

"I want to know if you genuinely think I believe you when you say that," he said incredulously.

"Come on, Jeongguk." Jimin sighed exasperatedly. "We're not friends—we don't talk about these things. That's not how you and I work. I can't just start unfolding to you and pretend we haven't overlooked each other all our lives."

"There's always a first time."

"Not for us."

"Why not? Do you dislike me that much?"

Jimin laughed soundlessly. "For God's sake, Jeongguk. I don't dislike you. Where do you get these ideas from?"

"Perhaps when you say things like 'we're not friends'," he deadpanned.

"That has nothing to do with you. It's all me."

"I don't really believe you, Jimin."

He gazed at Jeongguk quietly, eyes not drifting away from his form as the minutes rolled by and the tv kept running in the background. There was something obscure in that look, something so earnestly searching. Jeongguk wondered what Jimin saw when he looked at him like that, whether he found the incentive to trust him or not. "Why do you do this?" Jimin finally asked. "I'm sure you know
trying to talk to me is a lost battle. Why do you keep making efforts?"

Jeongguk scoffed, running his tongue along the inside of his cheek as he looked away. "You never seem to ask Chungha that. When you hang out for hours on end, I'm sure you two must talk."

"That's diff—"

"It's not different," he said roughly. "She was just a stranger a month ago, but you let her in. Why won't you allow me to do the same?"

Jimin looked at him coaxingly. "But I never tell her anything, Jeongguk. She just figures it out on her own. I don't think she has ever asked me questions like you do."

"So that's what makes me so bad, huh? The fact that I'm not able to just read your thoughts—"

"Don't put words into my mouth. I didn't say that," he snapped.

The younger boy sighed. He was doing it again, blaming Jimin essentially for not confiding in Jeongguk. He shouldn't question how the older boy basically went through his life and people. Everybody approached different situations in different ways. But he wasn't giving up on what he'd started.

"Fine. Tell me more about Chungha."

"Why?" Jimin asked, baffled.

"Because I obviously need to learn from her if I want to talk to you," he said, poker-faced.

"You're so petty."

"And you're not?"

Jimin growled. "You get on my nerves."

"And you don't?"

"Fuck you."

"Huh. You're playful today." Jeongguk smirked. If probing Jimin didn't work, he could always provoke him in other ways.

In the end, he did manage to aggravate him as Jimin grabbed a cushion from the sofa and launched it at Jeongguk, not in a gentle manner either. But the animosity of the action was lost on the younger boy who was merely happy to have gotten under Jimin's skin.

"Okay, all pleasantries aside," Jeongguk said. "Your parents are concerned, you know, and even Jihyun was worrying when I called him earlier." He raised his palm when Jimin started to interrupt. "And before you say I'm only asking because of them, I'm not. I genuinely want to know."

"Well, you don't always get what you want."

"I do." Jeongguk smiled self-assuredly.

Jimin narrowed his eyes at him. "You're so full of yourself."

"I agree. I'm conceited as well and totally used to getting what I want."
The silver-haired boy merely looked at him in disdain. "Keep talking like that and we'll see if it gets you anywhere."

"Into your heart, hopefully." Jeongguk winked.

Jimin got up with a sigh, collecting his stuff as he made to leave the room. "I've had enough of you today." And Jeongguk would agree, even he was having trouble comprehending his new approach to Jimin. But he felt like he had tried all the methods of getting Jimin to talk but none of them seemed to work. If acting like they were suddenly friends and banter was a common occurrence between them helped to make Jimin interact with him, then Jeongguk would go ahead with it.

So he grabbed Jimin's wrist, yanking him back down onto the sofa. When the older boy protested against the movement, he fixed him with a serious look.

"Tell me what's wrong."

"I don't want to talk about it, Jeongguk. This is not me being aloof—"

"Yes, it is. But continue," he interrupted.

Jimin's lips twitched. "You're too bratty these days. How did this Jeongguk replace the boy who was afraid to look me in the eye?"

Jeongguk huffed petulantly. "I was never afraid of looking you in the eye." He paused. "You're changing the topic again, aren't you?"

"I just wasn't feeling well that day."

"Stop lying to me. You didn't even have a headache."

"Yes, I did."

"You've been ... off for a few days now. I've noticed. You're not as good at hiding as you may think."

"I'm good enough."

"Tell me why you were sad, Jimin," Jeongguk said softly.

The silver-haired boy didn't respond at first, bringing his knees to his chest and wrapping his arms around his legs. He stared at the TV blankly, his mouth not saying much but his eyes said more. "I don't even know you, Jeongguk. And I'm not comfortable around you to talk about this."

"You're not comfortable around anyone, though. You're not even comfortable in your own skin."

Jimin rested the side of his face on his knees as he faced Jeongguk. "You're talking like Yoongi hyung. Have you spoken to him lately?"

"Why would I talk to that grumpy old man?"

"Hey," Jimin reprimanded, punching his arm in a lazy but playful manner. Jeongguk could detect the reluctance in his voice, he could see the extent of his evasiveness in the way he persistently tried to change the topic. But Jeongguk would get him to talk, he'd been ignoring Jimin in the fear of pushing him too far for too long. Nothing would come out of this if he didn't prompt him.

"Please." He gazed at him imploringly.
"I was tired, Jeongguk," he finally said. Something about the defeated tone of his voice told Jeongguk that Jimin wasn't being vague when he said that. There was something more behind his words which the younger boy couldn't understand yet. It prodded him to ask Jimin for more, so maybe he could receive an explanation that would make sense to him.

"What are you tired of, Jimin?"

The older boy looked away. And Jeongguk knew he couldn't get anything more out of him. It really was a lost battle trying to get Jimin to talk, as he'd so said himself.

Jeongguk slowly lifted his hand towards Jimin's, tugging it out from underneath his chin and resting it on his own lap. He played with his fingers for a while, interlocking them with his own and then untangling them whilst Jimin watched on, bemused. His hands were smaller than Jeongguk's own, he'd noticed, but more sturdy. And they were as cold as always, it felt like he was holding a block of ice, but which was gradually thawing the longer he held on.

"I know you hold my hand every night, Jimin," he eventually said, still staring at their adjoined hands.

Jimin visibly froze beside him, trying to draw his hand back from Jeongguk's grip but the younger boy didn't let go. He glanced at Jeongguk tentatively. "I'm sorry."

"You say sorry way too often," Jeongguk mumbled, finally staring back at him.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because you didn't want me to find out."

Jimin laughed breathlessly, almost like a scoff. "Why does that matter?"

"Why wouldn't you matter?"

Jeongguk didn't think he'd ever seen Jimin look so afraid. His hand had started to tremble in his hold and his eyes were blinking rapidly as though he was trying to will away the brewing tears. Jimin wrenched away from him, shakily moving to stand up. "Stop it, Jeongguk."

"Sit down," Jeongguk said adamantly.

"I told you I was sorry."

"Did I ask you for an apology, though?"

"Wha—"

"You haven't been sleeping these days either."

"What do you want from me?" Jimin cried, distraught.

"You don't need to get defensive, Jimin. I'm not telling you off. I just want to know why."

The older boy looked hesitant, mauling his lower lip between his teeth as if the thought of divulging in Jeongguk was daunting.

"Sit back down," he repeated, pulling at the older boy's wrist.

Jimin fumbled with the bottom of his shirt, fingers knotting into the fabric and then clenching tightly.
"I don't know why I hold your hand."

"That's okay," Jeongguk said placidly. "There doesn't have to be a reason."

"But it's weird!" Jimin burst out. "Out of all the people, why does it take holding your hand to feel like—to feel ..."

He watched him softly, not alarmed by his exclamation because he was used to it. He was used to questioning himself for all the little things Jimin made him feel. "How does it feel?" he murmured.

The silver-haired boy closed his eyes, craning his neck to face the ceiling. "It feels like home."

Jeongguk nodded, choosing not to question him because some part of him knew that there was no explanation for it whatsoever. "Sometimes it takes strangers to make you feel at home, Jimin."

"That's the problem, Jeongguk. You are a stranger. You're more unknown to me than a random boy I could pick up from the streets."

"I don't want to be."

He laughed, but the thing about Jimin's laughter was that it was rarely meaningful. It seldom consisted of genuine humour or amusement, he laughed in a cynical manner, almost mockingly like he knew something you didn't. But only now Jeongguk realised that that wasn't because Jimin felt superior to other people. He was just bitter about the fact that people thought they knew him; that they understood the intricate and complex layers that made up Park Jimin.

"We've changed so much," Jimin said with a weary sigh. "I can't imagine having a conversation like this with you even a month ago. When did you decide I was important enough to pay attention to? Jeongguk was bewildered by his mind, by his harsh words. "What made you like this?"

He shrugged.

"Don't act all indifferent with me. Haven't we established that I know there's more to this act you put up?"

"Have we?"

"I still don't know you."

"What do you want to know?"

"You didn't answer me properly about holding my hand at night."

"What about it?"

"Do you need to hold something to sleep, is that it?" Jeongguk asked.

"I don't need to hold something to sleep, Jeongguk," Jimin said, exhaling before continuing. "I just feel so empty at night, it's like I'm gonna drift away and I need something to ground me. To remind me that it's okay to stay. And even though I thought you didn't know, it felt good to know that somebody was there for me."

"I am here."

"For how long?"
"Until you push away."

Jimin looked down woefully. "But I will always push you away. How long will you deny me before you get tired?"

"Is there a right answer to that?" Jeongguk pondered.

"You caught me." His eyes smiled at him despite the wandering sadness surrounding them. He looked defeated, though; and so spent.

"I'll be here."

"I don't believe you, Jeongguk, but thank you for saying that. Thank you for being my distraction."

Jeongguk knew what Jimin meant when he said that. After all, he was nothing but a distraction in the silver-haired boy's life. Nothing that occurred between them was ever real, it was like a false visage of what a relationship between two people could be like. Even if they didn't inherently lie to each other, they didn't ever reveal the entire truth either.

So Jeongguk contemplated speaking again, wondering if it was best to just remain quiet but his heart urged him to confess the truth which had been swirling around in his head. He wanted to base their bond on some form of honesty.

"You can continue to hold my hand, Jimin. I don't mind it."

Jimin looked surprised. "Why?"

"Some things you just don't have the answers to."

Things between Jeongguk and Jimin had been mild after that revelatory confrontation, it would have been mindless of Jeongguk to assume that they'd talk or interact more after that so he didn't. He kept his distance and as did Jimin. Jeongguk knew that he'd have to take this slow because pushing Jimin to reveal more only shoved him deeper behind his walls.

But the driven part of Jeongguk was giddy that he was finally starting to understand the older boy's nature. If only a little. Maybe it was a good thing that Jihyun had burst the water pipes in their house, if it weren't for living together with Jimin, Jeongguk wouldn't have been nearly as successful in unravelling him. But that wasn't to say he was an expert on him yet. Jimin's questionable habits still made him want to pull his hair out.

As of now, Jeongguk was stuck in the kitchen, staring at Jimin as he cooked dinner for the two of them since his mother and Jimin's parents had to leave urgently to go to their mutual friend's house. Haewon had hurriedly uttered something about how "Naeun fell down the stairs and fractured her ankle" but she had been so breathless while speaking that Jeongguk hadn't managed to catch anything properly.

Mrs. Park had reassured them before leaving that Jimin could cook something while they were away. But Jeongguk had been surprised to see the silver-haired boy nod his head agreeably as though it were a common matter. Because since when did Jimin know how to cook?
Haewon had told him where the ingredients were so Jimin wouldn't have trouble in the kitchen, adding, "Jeongguk can help you if you get stuck but don't count on it since that boy is useless" while Jeongguk had mumbled with a frown, "Mom, I'm literally right here." It hurt his pride to see his own mother berate him in front of Jimin who was so skilled in many tasks.

And so what if the things she'd said were true nonetheless? Jeongguk was a capable boy who also had an ego the size of Alaska, so he would never admit to his faults. But although he had vehemently denied whatever he was accused of, his current state wasn't helping his situation.

Jeongguk sat at the kitchen island, face resting in his palms as he watched Jimin's back. After being inherently lost when asked to guide the older boy even on where the bag of rice was, he'd accepted defeat. His Golden Maknae title failed him here. He didn't know anything about cooking. All he could make that was worthy of respect was ramen, cereal and toast. It was no wonder why he'd eaten at the Parks' house half his life.

But after still finding things about Jimin that surprised him, Jeongguk was starting to question his perceptiveness. How had he never known that Jimin liked to cook even after practically living with him for so long? Was Jimin that good at hiding himself or should Jeongguk be worried about his awareness of things? Although, in all honesty, he should stop criticising himself for not figuring Jimin out by now. Jimin's complexity had nothing to do with Jeongguk's level of intelligence.

He sighed out loud, tilting his head with an incoming yawn. His thoughts bore him now. All he ever did was question or rebuke himself. And that had a lot to do with the addition of a certain Park Jimin to his house.

The silver-haired boy was still totally absorbed into his cooking, paying no heed to him. He was making Kimchi fried rice, Haewon had suggested it'd be the most practical since there was pre-made Kimchi in the fridge. But something about the domestic sight was evoking tender feelings inside Jeongguk. He watched, almost in a daze, as Jimin manoeuvred around the counters and cabinets while making the food. There was a certain grace to his movements which had the younger boy transfixed. He'd chop some vegetables, then use his free hand to stir the pan on the stove beside him before going back to the former task. Amidst it all, Jimin would run his fingers through his hair multiple times, but the silver mop would end up falling back into his eyes.

Jeongguk would muffle his laughter every time Jimin grumbled under his breath, the entertainment attained from watching him was nothing short as that of a good movie. He almost proposed the idea of giving a bobble to the older boy so that he could tie his hair back, but then the image of Jimin with a man bun infiltrated his mind and he violently shook his head to get rid of the thought. No, he certainly didn't need that visualisation.

His dumb brain thought of enough nonsensical stuff as it was, there was no need to go as far as imagining Jimin with enticing ideas. But then the universe decided that Jeongguk didn't necessarily have to imagine anything.

The torment presented itself in the form of Park Jimin himself.

It was when he bent forward to check the stove at eye level that his shirt rode up his back and Jeongguk couldn't remove his eyes from the sliver of exposed skin because, goddammit, there was a hint of a tattoo disappearing beneath the waistband of his jeans. It looked like some type of a bird, in mid-flight, but only one wing could be seen.

Jeongguk's breath catching in his throat. Fuck, that was hot. That was so fucking hot.

Just the concept of a tattoo on somebody's lower back was such a turn on. Of course, Jihyun had
informed Jeongguk of his brother's penchant for getting his body inked but he had never, before this
day, even tried to picture how Jimin's tattoos could look like and where on his body they would be. *Wasn't that goddamn tongue piercing enough?* Seeing that ink as well had taken Jeongguk by
surprise, and what a pleasant surprise it was. But that thought shut down any following musings.

What was he even thinking? Jimin was a man, for fuck's sake, what was he doing entertaining such
thoughts about a guy? He had always objectively admired the sight of Jimin's body and his
appearance in general, but finding his tattoo hot was too personal to Jeongguk's own tastes for him to
disregard the thought as a mere observation.

This was all his mother's fault though, for not letting him get tattoos and therefore Jeongguk never
being able to sate his thirst for them. Obviously, he would want to jump someone at the sight of ink.
Especially if they looked as good as Jimin. Jeongguk would definitely react the same way if one of
his friends got a tattoo. Probably.

It wasn't much of a surprise then when Jeongguk lifted his hand and slapped his own cheek. Jimin
turned around at the sound, looking at his reddening face with furrowed eyebrows.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing," Jeongguk grunted, feeling like he was going out of his mind. As if he could tell his best
friend's brother that he was admiring him as a potential—

Nope. He wasn't going there.

Jeongguk tried to distract himself by looking around the kitchen, he even trained his eyes on the
steaming pan for five minutes straight but that tattoo wouldn't slip from his mind. It was probably
because he hadn't witnessed the full image, seeing only a part of it teased him further. He saw Jimin
reaching for a cabinet to take a dish out, his biceps protruding under his tight shirt and Jeongguk
almost groaned.

What was he doing? Seriously, what the fuck was he doing? It wasn't like a sight of muscles was
foreign to him, heck, he was much more built than Jimin himself. Forget that, he saw the half-naked
bodies of his football team members at least twice a week, but that only made him *a little* hot and
bothered.

But this full-on revelation was something he couldn't get used to. Was it because he couldn't deal
with thinking positive things about Jimin? It made sense, Jeongguk had never admired him for
anything, always choosing to note his intolerable side instead. And he'd never had the chance to
observe Jimin like this as well. Maybe that was making it difficult for Jeongguk to get used to
complimenting Jimin. Maybe that was also making him lose his mind. When he face planted onto the
kitchen island this time, Jimin turned around again, but looking a little exasperated now.

"What the fuck is wrong with you today, Jeongguk?"

"I wish I knew," he moaned truthfully.

"Why don't you make yourself useful and cut some salad?" Jimin suggested pointedly.

Jeongguk got up begrudgingly, anything to distract himself. He lumbered to the counter behind Jimin
where the vegetable basket was. Gathering some cherry tomatoes, beetroot and other basics, he put
them onto the chopping board. At seeing Jimin standing in front of the cabinet where the jar of olives
was, Jeongguk almost retreated in case he started hyperventilating at the thought of his tattoo again.

But then he told himself to snap out of it. He was acting too strange.
Jimin was unaware of his inner dilemma as he worked raptly when Jeongguk approached him from behind. At reaching him, their size difference struck Jeongguk like a revelation. He stared bewilderingly at the boy. "Wow, I never realised how small you were until standing right behind you," he said offhandedly. Jimin let out a soft gasp as he turned around, startled to find Jeongguk not more than an inch away from him.

Realising their uncomfortable position, he awkwardly cleared his throat. "Did you need something?" Jimin asked.

"Just getting some olives," Jeongguk murmured nonchalantly, trying his best to act cool.

"And I'm not small, you're just an overgrown bunny," Jimin said when he had moved away from him.

"Whatever makes you sleep at night," He smirked, moving to start cutting the vegetables.

"Maybe I should have just let you think I hated you, that way you wouldn't be this cheeky." "Don't pretend that you don't like it."

"You wish, Jeon."

"Are we downgrading to last names basics now?" Jeongguk clutched at his heart with the hand holding the knife. "How could you dismiss the progression of our relationship like that?"

"What relationship?" Jimin smirked.

"You wound me, Park Jimin."

"In the hopes of taking down your ego a notch."

"How couldn't you have an ego like mine if you were as handsome and talented as me?" Jeongguk said ludicrously. He stopped in the middle of cutting the lettuce, throwing a stray leaf at Jimin.

"Who misled you into thinking that about yourself?"

"All the noonas who like to call me oppa."

Jimin laughed then, a full-blown, unrestrained bout of laughter that made Jeongguk's heart warm. It was such a stark change from his usual behaviour that Jeongguk couldn't help but grin back, it was infectious the way Jimin's giggles transformed into little squeaks amidst it. He couldn't believe this was what he'd missed out on all these years.

"Why do they call you oppa?" Jimin asked, still reeling from his breathlessness.

"Who knows? But I can't really blame them for seeking that masculinity and adulthood from me."

"Adultness?" Jimin repeated with a hysterical chuckle. "From you?"

"Why not?" He scowled, in a serious pout this time.

"Because you're like a baby bunny."

"I could literally throw you across the room," Jeongguk argued.

"Do you always feel the need to flaunt your strength?"
"You literally just called me a bunny twice in a day."

Jimin smiled at him sweetly. And the younger boy felt truly accomplished to say that he was finally on the receiving end of Jimin's honeyed, crescent-eyed smile.

_Hah. Take that, Chungha._

"I don't know if you act like this to make me laugh, but I really appreciate it, Jeonggukie."

"It's not an act. Maybe it's just me who makes you laugh."

"Maybe." Jimin smiled shyly.

They finished up their respective tasks, Jeongguk went ahead to set up the table while Jimin filled their plates. It was a nice atmosphere, Jeongguk admitted. He'd like it to continue for as long as it could. Even though they both knew it had to end at some point.

The food was excellent, good enough that it had Jeongguk wanting to outright kiss the ground Jimin walked on. He wondered how the older boy had hidden his culinary skills from him for so long. But dinner was a silent affair nonetheless, after the grateful nod from Jimin when Jeongguk complimented his cooking. But something had been bugging him since the prior day, wanting to be asked.

"If I stay long enough," Jeongguk spoke. "Will you promise to let me in?"

Jimin hesitated.

"Please."

He watched him warily, features gentle despite the distrust in his eyes, before murmuring, "Okay."

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Chapter End Notes

This is the most dialogue I've ever written in one chapter yet but here you go, finally some jikook. I hope it sated your hearts even if the first part gave you a whiplash. But that's how jikook operates around here so ˘\_(∪)/˘
"So I talked to Seulgi noona about modelling for my project."

Jimin looked up from the floor where he was working on a drawing, pausing in his motion to look at Jeongguk who was idly scanning through his camera. "Oh?"

"She agreed to do it," he replied, then glanced down at Jimin with a lopsided smile. "After I mentioned that it was your idea."

"What does that having anything to do with it?"

"You tell me," he said, raising his brows at him expectantly. But the older boy was oblivious to whatever Jeongguk was trying to imply, he just watched him confusedly, his hand which held a piece of charcoal hovering in midair. When he continued to stare, Jeongguk decided to put him out of his misery. "You wouldn't have said anything about me to her, would you?" He cocked an eyebrow.

The brunet could see when the information registered in Jimin's mind, his eyes widened in an adorable way, as though he hadn't expected to get caught. He then looked down sheepishly, cheeks tingling with the slightest shade of red. It was a strange sight. "I might have said that you talk too much," he mumbled.

"What was that?" Jeongguk asked, prodding him on purpose but with a teasing lilt in his voice.

Jimin just puffed out his cheeks. "I told her that you're too chattery."

"And isn't that incredibly mean of you to say?"

"But you do talk too much," he insisted. "Tell me about a single time you've shut up since I've been
Jeongguk gave him a shit-eating grin. "All the times that you ignore me."

"I don't fucking ignore you," Jimin growled, hurling the charcoal stick he was using at him. When the younger boy merely dodged it, he glared at him. "Even if I did, it's not like you'd ever stop talking my head off."

"Hmm, that's strange," Jeongguk said, tapping his chin in feigned wonder. "If I do recall correctly, you seemed to like me talking your head off yesterday in the kitchen."

"Once in a while, yes, but not incessantly."

"It makes you smile, though. So how could I ever stop?" he said in theatrical torment.

Jimin gave him an unamused look. "I really shouldn't ever tell you anything, should I?"

That had Jeongguk's mind snapping out of the deceptive sense of satisfaction he gained from bothering Jimin, signalling him to stop before he took it too far. "No, you should!" he blurted before saying in a smaller, coaxing voice, "You should tell me things." Damn him if the stupid things he said were going to make Jimin not talk to him anymore. But it was almost embarrassing how Jimin could turn the confident Jeongguk into a spluttering mess.

The older boy just gave him an incredulous look before turning back to his drawing, the same hand he'd been working on for almost a month now. Even Jeongguk had grown attached to the drawing after seeing it lying around in his bedroom. He thought that Jimin had drawn it beautifully, he felt a lingering ache in his heart when he looked at it. Jeongguk couldn't understand why, but it made sense somehow because the work exuded such emotion.

It made him recall what Seulgi had said about Jimin: "He's not very articulate, he doesn't know how to express himself through words. But his art communicates everything he can't say. So either you understand his unsaid words or his art." It was very thoughtful how she'd worded that, Jeongguk had realised.

He himself had also noticed how much Jimin struggled with expressing himself, whether that was with normal speech or an idea he was trying to explain. But then Jeongguk was torn between thinking the otherwise because, at times, the silver-haired boy had such a way with his words that it amazed him. How he said so little but it spoke volumes. Sometimes his words really resonated with Jeongguk.

"I like your friendship with Seulgi noona," he said suddenly.

Jimin chuckled. "At least you approve of one of my friendships." When Jeongguk scowled at him at that, he continued, "What made you reach that verdict?"

"I think she really cares about you."

He paused, turning to the younger boy warily. "What exactly did you two talk about?"

"Just this and that." Jeongguk shrugged.

"You really do get on my nerves, you know that?"

He smiled. "That's what I aim for."
But Jeongguk was only playing coy. Seulgi and he hadn't talked much about Jimin at all, only a little
discussion when she'd asked Jeongguk how things were at home with the Park family around. She
understood Jimin's personality, though; not through communication but mere observation and
experience. Jeongguk hadn't been wrong when he'd thought that Seulgi and Jimin weren't actually
close, they were simply just two people who saw art through similar eyes.

Yet he couldn't write that off as something superficial. Their friendship was special; it was unlike
anything Jeongguk had ever seen before. He saw the way his little comments about Jimin's sleeping
or eating habits made Seulgi worry even though they hadn't known each other for long. It was
amazing the amount of admiration and regard they had for each other despite not being the best of
friends.

"Noona said this is the first time you're going all black and white for your theme," Jeongguk said.
"What made you decide that?"

"Nothing in particular."

"Don't you think monochrome is limiting?"

"You only think that because your boisterous world is engulfed in so much colour." Jimin chuckled.
"But you don't essentially need hues and shades to express something, I think the lack of colour puts
an emphasis on the message being conveyed."

"'My boisterous world'?" he repeated.

Jimin ducked his head, almost shyly, but Jeongguk knew that he only wanted to hide his face from
him; as if he didn't want to give the younger boy too much leeway over his thoughts. "I always
thought that you were too bright, Jeongguk-ah. Sometimes it hurts to look at you."

Jeongguk felt confounded, not being able to wrap his head around the fact that Jimin just
complimented him, and probably in the most beautiful way. But it didn't make him feel good, he
didn't like how that compliment was at the expense of Jimin himself. "Why would you say that?" he
responded quietly.

"Just look at you, Jeongguk." Jimin sighed, hair falling into his eyes as he continued to shade in a
knuckle distractedly. It seemed like he was contemplating explaining himself. When he exhaled
audibly again, Jeongguk could see the weak resolution in his features. Jimin laced his charcoal
covered fingers through his hair, smearing streaks of black into the silver locks. "You embody all that
a person could want to be, it's surreal," he said softly. "You handle people and matters so practically.
I didn't even realise until living with you but you make time for everything. Every day you work on
your project, you hang out with your friends, you tidy up around the house, you call Jihyun without
missing a day—" he chuckled "—you even find time to play your stupid video games. And these are
not even tedious tasks for you, you care so much about everything that you do, it's enviable.

"Amidst all that, you find time for me as well. You ask me something new every day, you make me
laugh all the time, you hold my hand every night. And you have this precious curiosity inside you, to
know people and to make their day better. I don't think you're a social butterfly, despite what your
growing clique of friends would suggest. I know you get shy when you have to reveal your personal
thoughts, like that's something people wouldn't want to know about the golden boy." Jimin looked at
him with his smouldering eyes, making Jeongguk feel like he'd catch on fire if he weren't careful.
"You're pretty damn special, Gguk. I don't think you even know."

The younger boy just stared at him owlishly. His doe eyes were unavering, cheeks now fully
blossomed with the shade of cherries. He quite simply didn't know how to respond, he couldn't
fathom Jimin ever knowing him and thinking about him in such a kind way. He didn't know what it meant for them. Surely they weren't strangers anymore.

"Hyung," he said, almost as a question, a little overcome by the flattery.

Jimin gave him a mellow smile. "Why are you calling me hyung?"

"I used to call you that when we were little. As we got older, I thought you blatantly ignored me on purpose. So I remember thinking that if I disrespected you by not saying hyung, you'd call me out on it one day. I just wanted your attention. But you either didn't notice or you didn't care. Then, it became a habit, I guess. But I think I finally believe that you've never ignored me."

He shrugged. "Maybe I did to an extent. I didn't want to get involved in your life. Like I said, you're too bright for me."

"Hence the black and white theme?"

"... hence the black and white theme," Jimin mumbled back.

Jeongguk was quiet for a while. "Do you really think that about me, hyung?"

"Of course."

"Thank you."

He chuckled. "You have nothing to thank me for, it's all you."

The brunet watched him then, that soft glow on his face when Jeongguk smiled at his words, the way his eyes twinkled even in the dim lighting. "You like complimenting people, don't you?"

"I like people's nice habits."

"But you're too harsh on yourself."

"I don't have much I consider admirable."

"Hyung," Jeongguk said with a sigh. "Why are you like this? You're one of the most interesting people I know—"

"Don't make me laugh." He snorted.

"You're impossible!" Jeongguk grabbed a pillow and flung it at him. But Jimin had learnt to dodge the objects flying towards him by now since a day couldn't pass without one of them hurling something at the other. The white pillow landed on the pile of charcoal sticks strewn over the floor and Jimin grinned.

"Great. Now you've got a stained pillow to sleep on."

"I hate you."

Jimin simply hummed in response before going back to his work. Jeongguk returned to scrolling through the pictures he'd taken of Seulgi the prior day. Jimin had been right, she knew exactly how to capture the right amount of emotion and the fluidity of the human body into a picture. Jeongguk hadn't even needed to give her many instructions while she posed.

He thought he could work on the whole project with just Seulgi as his model. But still, Jeongguk
wouldn't stop being picky. There was something missing that wouldn't let him recreate the original perception of the human condition he'd had in his mind in the beginning.

"Don't you think I'm boring?" Jimin spoke randomly into the silence.

"A little," he said offhandedly.

Jimin let out a loud laugh. "You're so fucking cocky, Jeon Jeongguk."

Jeongguk gave him a toothy smile, forgetting about his prior musings. "So I've been told," he said. "Why'd you ask?"

"Just." He shrugged. "Aren't interesting people interesting?"

He paused, looking at Jimin absurdly. "Are you okay?"

"Huh, peachy."

"Alright," Jeongguk said, straight-faced. "I'm going to pretend you didn't just say that."

Jimin pouted, still looking down. "You're not scared of me anymore."

But the younger boy didn't pay attention to his words, more captivated by his lower lip sticking out petulantly. So he didn't think twice before snapping a picture of Jimin on his camera. He didn't seem to realise but he did glance up when Jeongguk didn't answer him.

"I was never scared of you," he belatedly said.

"You were." Jimin sighed like it was the greatest misfortune. "You'd think twice before saying anything to me. Now you're just mean."

"As much as I would like to indulge you." He paused. "I don't wanna."

"This is exactly what I meant."

"Whatever. Now, I was thinking we could watch a movie since it's the weekend and we're obviously gonna sleep in—" he gave Jimin a pointed look at that since the older boy had a habit of waking up at godforsaken hours even on the weekends "—so we can stay up late."

Jimin shrugged, but quickly shifted his drawing underneath the couch and tidied up after himself. Rewatching movies at weekends had become their thing now. He joined Jeongguk on the bed, pulling the duvet over himself and snuggling inside.

"Do you want to pick a movie today?" Jeongguk asked.

"I don't really watch many movies."

"What's your favourite genre?"

"Comedy."

Jeongguk couldn't stop the cackle that escaped him but he forced himself to quieten down when he saw the offended look on Jimin's face. He disguised another laugh with a cough before saying in a deadpan tone, "Your favourite genre is comedy."

Jimin kicked his leg and it set off another bout of laughter inside Jeongguk.
"Okay, okay. I'm sorry."

"The hell you are," he grumbled, elbowing him this time.

"So what do you want to watch?"

Jimin mentioned some French movie he'd watched before, saying it was really funny and touching. Jeongguk put it on with no qualms, but with a certain curiosity inside him. After all, a person's favourite song or movie could tell you a lot about them. And he wanted to know everything about Jimin.

As it went on though, Jeongguk wished he could say that he learnt something about Jimin. But he was more consumed by the honeyed laughter from the silver-haired boy than the characters, letting himself become addicted to the warmth spreading in his chest when he saw Jimin being happy.

Jeongguk's friends had all gone out for dinner, something he should have joined them for, too, but Eunbi wouldn't stop bugging him to finish off his latest overdue assignment. Their main professor, Mr. Cho, always liked to pester Eunbi for Jeongguk's delayed work because he knew how tenacious she was in getting the boy to hand in his assignments.

But it just aggravated Jeongguk the ridiculous amount of written work he had to do for his photography major. People doing a history course probably had fewer essays to hand in. It took him almost three hours to finish, along with several phone calls to a very patient Eunbi who helped him through some analyses albeit her exasperated complaints like, "Jeongguk, you should know this by now. Don't you pay attention in class?" and "I'm gonna drill this into your stupid head the next time I see you."

But Jeongguk was grateful nonetheless. It was almost half nine when he finally stretched back onto his bed. He still hadn't eaten dinner because once he started doing something he didn't get up until it was finished. It was a known fact that Jeongguk's distraction could easily get the best of him. If he'd gone downstairs to grab something to eat, he wouldn't have come back until two hours later.

Just as he was about to make himself a quick cheese sandwich, Seokjin called him and the brunet sighed in relief. Hopefully, his hyung could treat him to a decent meal.

"Seokjinie hyung," he whined as soon as he answered. "Please feed me some samgyeopsal, I'm craving it."

"I've never seen a bigger leech than you and Jihyun combined," Seokjin said in disgust. "That brat is away and he still doesn't refrain from whoring himself out to make me promise to give him food when's he back."

"But we're broke students, hyung." Jeongguk sulked. "How could you be so cruel?"

"Broke, my ass. You drive a Range Rover and that bitch has a BMW."

"Is that you saying you're taking me out for dinner?" he said prettily.

"I'm not taking you anywhere. I'm still working so come over to Epiphany if you want to stuff yourself," Seokjin said exasperatedly. "Anyway, I didn't call you to humour your charity case
tendencies. I need my power grip back that you stole over a month ago."

"But I need it for my camera!"

He tutted. "That's too bad. Go buy yourself another one."

"You probably don't even need it."

"Of course, I need it. It's going to be Christmas season soon and I want some pictures of Eomuk and Odeng. You peasants can't relate, obviously."

"If only you cared about your human friends as much as those ugly sugar gliders," Jeongguk grunted. "I'll bring it over."

"Don't call them ug—"

But the younger boy was feeling too petty over Seokjin asking for his power grip back to let him finish his sentence. Although he couldn't really deny that he was a leech, so he quickly swapped his sweatpants into a pair of jeans and flung on a hoodie before grabbing that cursed power grip and leaving for Seokjin's restaurant.

It wasn't a long drive to Epiphany, Jeongguk got there in about a quarter of an hour. It was still quite busy even though it was nearing the end of dinner time so he just sat at an empty booth and waited for Seokjin. But his hyung didn't come over for another ten minutes, and when he did, he was flanked by another tall guy.

"Lucky for you," Seokjin said as he sat down, "I hadn't eaten yet so I'm blessing you with my presence while you're here."

Jeongguk scowled at him. "And what about this uh ... tall presence?" He gestured to the other guy.

"Don't you know each other?" he queried, looking uncertainly between the two of them while the subjects shook their heads. "Namjoon is Yoongi's friend. And Namjoon, Jeongguk's half of the parasitic duo who mooch off me. The other one is Jihyun, you know him, right?"

Namjoon gave Jeongguk a dimpled smile before nodding at Seokjin. "Yeah, I know Jihyun," he said as he took a seat. "We're doing the same major but he's a few years younger than me."

"Let me guess," the oldest said blankly. "Jihyun asks you for help on his homework."

"More like copies it right off, but yeah, more or less." He chuckled.

Jeongguk was starting to feel only a little embarrassed of himself and his best friend. He pulled his hood up to hide his face from his hyungs, crossing his arms onto the table.

"Aw, Jeonggukie," Seokjin sang. "Look at you being ashamed of your actions for once."

"Hyung," he whined. He didn't deserve this treatment.

But the oldest only let him go when their food arrived. He'd ordered some samgyeopsal as Jeongguk had requested. Seokjin said Namjoon really liked the dish, too, so it was a good choice. Only two bites into the food, Jeongguk was already moaning lewdly, forgetting about his prior embarrassment.

"Seokjin hyung, you know I love you the most in the whole, wide world, right?" he proclaimed.

"Just eat the food, you brat."
"Oh, wait." He fumbled through his hoodie's pocket. "Here's your power grip."

"I actually believe that you might one day become a decent human being, Jeongguk," Seokjin said seriously, making the younger boy grimace at him.

Namjoon and he chatted while Jeongguk only focused on eating, he caught some parts of their conversation and it seemed like they knew each other well. Seokjin said that they met when Yoongi once mentioned that his childhood friend, Namjoon, was an awful cook and he needed some nutritious food to keep his 'abnormally long bones' in good health. Obviously, he didn't cease from complaining that all his dongsaengs only liked him for the free food.

Jeongguk let them bicker in between themselves, thinking about all the coursework he had coming up. Along with the preparations for his end-of-year project and normal schoolwork, he would barely have any time to himself.

"Did I tell you guys," Seokjin interrupted his musings, "that Yoongi is coming back for Christmas?"

Jeongguk froze.

"Oh, I think he did mention that he hasn't had homemade Korean food in months," Namjoon recalled.

Seokjin guffawed. "Yeah, right. I think we all know it's because Jimin was missing him and nothing else."

Jeongguk felt a sudden apprehension take over him, he couldn't help it. Surely if Yoongi came back, Jimin wouldn't want him anymore. He'd have somebody else to make him laugh and to hold his hand at night. What if he started to ignore Jeongguk again?

"Park Jimin?" Namjoon asked. "Isn't that Jihyun's brother?"

"How have you heard of Jimin but didn't know Jeongguk?" Seokjin said incredulously.

Namjoon laughed. "Jihyun mentioned him once or twice, I think."

"True. You weren't a part of our friendship circle until a few months ago."

"Are Jimin and Yoongi hyung close?"

"Namjoon, I don't think 'close' even begins to describe their relationship. They're like—I don't know, like those type of people who you think have known each other forever. When Yoongi was here, we would all go out together but his eyes would be trained on Jimin. He was so attuned to him that if Jimin as much as sighed, he'd jump up and say 'let's go home'. We always found it weird but they have this special bond. I actually believe that they can talk telepathically." Seokjin laughed at his own words. "I think Jimin only hung out with us because Yoongi was there, ever since he left I haven't seen him once. They're probably soulmates or something ..."

It was too much. It was too much for Jeongguk who had been trying to know the silver-haired boy for so long that he felt like he wouldn't even begin to reach that level of familiarity with Jimin. Jeongguk tried convincing himself that Jimin wouldn't let him go just because Yoongi was here. He must mean more to him.

But then, what was the guarantee that he meant anything to Jimin?

Jeongguk got up suddenly, almost toppling over his water in the hurry to leave. "I just remembered I
had to do something," he mumbled fretfully. "It was nice meeting you, Namjoon hyung." He didn't wait for his hyungs to respond before scurrying out of there, hearing Seokjin's alarmed calls after him.

But Jeongguk was panicking, he couldn't stop. Jimin was probably his biggest endeavour right now, he wouldn't know what to do with himself if Jimin left. He couldn't imagine the emptiness that would be inside him.

He wondered how a person could be responsible for making him feel so worthless. It wasn't even Jimin's fault, Jeongguk knew that, but he also knew that nobody else could drive him to that point of desperation. It was only Jimin. He didn't even know how much power he held over Jeongguk.

The house was still vacant when he got back. Haewon was at her boyfriend's house and God knew where the Park family was. Jeongguk needed a distraction, he needed to stop thinking about things he couldn't control. He didn't feel so golden anymore. He was weak and helpless. What the point of trying so hard if he'd only ever be a stranger to Jimin?

Sometimes Jeongguk wondered if doing all this was worth it, it wasn't like he could ever have one up on Jimin anyway. He'd only wanted to get under Jimin's skin, and at times, he achieved that. Now his reasons for wanting to unravel Jimin were becoming muddled up. Jeongguk wasn't sure why exactly he'd wanted to figure him out, had it simply been his competitiveness? The more he talked to Jimin, the more frivolous those reasons seemed, like they were an excuse he'd desperately tried to conjure. A part of him also knew that his curiosity was aroused by Jimin's mysteriousness and nothing else.

The sort of mystery that wasn't enticing as much as it was questionable. Jeongguk wanted to know things about Jimin but he was also afraid of what he would discover. What would happen if he didn't like what he saw? What if he couldn't keep his promise of being there for Jimin? How could he be sure of anything when he hadn't interacted with Jimin outside of his house's safe haven?

A dire thought struck him that Jimin and he only ever talked at night, when the sun wasn't out and the moon's deceptive light enveloped them in a false sense of reality. Nothing was ever real at night. It probably meant that their conversations were feigned, all the words spoken between them were insincere.

Did Jimin even consider him a part of his life?

Jeongguk didn't know how things would change when Jimin finally went back to his home. The older boy's moods and demeanour were as wavering as the ocean. And that scared him. What if everything he thought he'd built with Jimin came to a stuttering stop when he left? What if Jeongguk did the same, what if he left Jimin when it got too much? What if all the things the silver-haired boy made him feel became too strenuous on him?

Or maybe his jealousy when Yoongi came back would drive him away. But Jeongguk didn't want to leave, he wanted to stay. He wanted to keep his promise.

When Jeongguk heard the front door open, it was nearly eleven o'clock. He forced himself to breathe regularly, he really needed to calm the fuck down. It appeared as though Mr. and Mrs. Park were also back. They seemed to talk to Jimin for a moment in the foyer before their voices drifted away towards the living room. He could hear the familiar footsteps of Jimin on the stairs before he entered Jeongguk's bedroom, looking surprised to see the younger boy just standing there unoccupied in the middle of his room.

"Hello, Jeongguk," he said, almost melodically.
God, how had Jeongguk failed to notice how saccharine Jimin's voice was?

He still looked as weary as he always did when he'd been out, but he smiled at Jeongguk as he came in further. The brunet nodded at him, telling himself that he'd wait until Jimin got changed before unleashing his thoughts at him. He was wearing dark wash, skinny jeans and a dress shirt, it would probably ease his body to get out of those clothes.

But despite his reasonings, Jeongguk's agitated mind just wouldn't let him wait. Jimin had only sat down on the couch to take his shoes off when Jeongguk was suddenly in front of him, he felt like Jimin would disappear before he got to him. He always felt like that, like he was running of time before things went bad.

"Jimin-ah."

The silver-haired boy startled at the pronunciation. His breath hitched in his throat as Jeongguk kneeled in front of him so they'd be at eye level. Now that Jeongguk was finally looking at him, all his thoughts from earlier seemed to dissipate. He could only see Jimin's wide eyes and parted lips, he could only hear his shallow breaths and nothing else. Jeongguk took a hold of his hand, grasping it in his firmly. When it came down to it, he only wanted to say one thing.

"Don't let me go."

Jinmin's eyebrows furrowed confusedly. "What is this about, Jeonggukie?"

He shrugged. "I'm not as perfect as you think I am."

"Of course, you are—"

"I'm not. I'm scared and torn over the promises I've made, of the things I've said with confidence without knowing how much they might take out of me, and I'm just—I want to be real with myself. Because what if I fall short of your expectations? What if I can't keep my promises?" He gazed at Jimin with beseeching eyes, wanting him to understand his fears, to see through the perfect exterior he'd always flaunted. "Hyung, what if I'm not enough?"

But the silver-haired boy didn't indulge him. "Are you feeling like this because of me?" he asked softly.

Jeongguk looked away, and that was enough of an answer for Jimin. He shut his eyes tightly, letting out a faint breath. Slowly, he freed his hand from Jeongguk's grip. "I'm sorry."

"Hyung—"

Jinmin's phone suddenly blared, interrupting Jeongguk's next words. The older boy stood up and retrieved the device from his jeans, making his way outside the room as he received the call.

But Jeongguk wanted to know who he was talking to. Was it Yoongi? Did he somehow know that Jeongguk had made Jimin upset? Was that how 'special' their bond was?

When he stood in the gap between the opened door, he could faintly hear Jimin in the hallway. He appeared to be listening more and speaking less, which wasn't uncommon of Jimin's usual conversations. The only strange thing was the pretence he seemed to be putting up, pretending that whatever words the other person was uttering weren't affecting him.

"Don't worry about it, Chungha. I understand," Jimin said, but his fist was clenched.
At her name, Jeongguk leaned further to hear their conversation more clearly. He hadn't had the chance to ask Jimin about the progress of their relationship lately, but he didn't think the older boy would confide in him anyway.

"Sure, we can move it to next week."

A pause.

"I agree."

Another pause.

"No, it's fine. I was busy anyway."

A lie.

"I'll be there."

Another lie.

Why is Jimin doing that?

His humourless chuckle made Jeongguk's attention snap back to him.

"Don't do that, Chungha."

What did she do?

"I think you deserve better than to lie unwillingly."

Jimin laughed again. It was as empty as always.

"Go to sleep, baby."

And he hung up.

As he turned around, Jeongguk deliberately didn't move out of the way. But Jimin merely looked past him and walked back inside the room. Before the younger boy could as much as say a word, Jimin went to the bathroom and locked the door. Jeongguk was left reeling alone in his room. What just happened?

A part of him realised what had happened, though. He had made Jimin upset before Chungha seemingly rubbed salt in his wounds. Jeongguk thought it was heartbreaking that this always happened to Jimin; sometimes the younger boy would start it and somebody else would make it worse and other times he'd simply bring the situation to the head. They didn't let Jimin's scars heal before unknowingly damaging him further.

Jeongguk's guilt wouldn't let him breathe. But something else grating on his nerves was the persistent thought that Jimin had still called Chungha 'baby' before he ended the call. She wasn't worthy of pet names from his lips. It bothered him so much. Even though it shouldn't because Jimin had sweetly called him 'Jeonggukie' too. After all the times Jeongguk hurt him, the older boy always seemed to forgive him.

He waited restlessly for Jimin, walking back and forth but he didn't come out for almost twenty minutes. Jeongguk knew Jimin needed his space and privacy but a part of him also knew that he would disappear if Jeongguk let him be on his own for too long. So he waited. He waited until Jimin
appeared with silver dishevelled hair, a dripping face and those familiar sad eyes.

"Jimin hyung, what happened?"

"I'm not in the mood, Jeongguk. Please don't bother." He walked to the closet, pulling out a pair of sweatpants and a longsleeved t-shirt. He went back to the bathroom to change before Jeongguk could speak again.

It was another long while before he came back out. "Hyung, tell me," Jeongguk insisted fervently.

"It's nothing," Jimin said shortly. He grabbed his MacBook from Jeongguk's desk and sat down on the window bay seat. To make his message clearer, he shoved in his earphones as well. If Jeongguk wasn't feeling so scared of troubling him more, he would wrench his laptop away from him and make him talk. But he was equally accountable for hurting Jimin.

So he joined him on the seat, sitting down on the far end and cautiously pulling out one earpiece.

"Did I upset you too?"

"You didn't, but you will." Jimin didn't look up at him, pointedly staring at the screen.

"I don't want to, though," Jeongguk mumbled. "I just want to make you smile and be your golden boy."

Jimin chuckled softly despite himself. "You are my golden boy."

"It's not enough. You're still hurting."

"That's not your fault."

"It partially is."

Jimin only hummed.

"What can I do?"

"You can't do anything." He laughed, and Jeongguk thought he hated Jimin's dead laughter. "Even I can't do anything."

"Not talking about it won't make you feel better, though. Tell me what's wrong."

"Nothing much, you know," Jimin said forlornly. "Just that I'm hurt and it's my own fault and I can't do anything about it."

"It's not your fault that she hurt you, Jimin hyung," Jeongguk said softly.

The silver-haired boy gazed up at him. "What if I drove her to that stage?"

"It's still not your fault."

"You're only saying that because you don't know me well."

"Let me know you, then."

Jimin sighed, looking out of the window. "Why do people make such inadequate excuses, Jeongguk? They don't have to lie, I know what's happening. I can see the end when it's coming. I
know it before it even starts, honestly. Do they think I can't take it?"

"Are you talking about your relationship with Chungha noona?"

He hummed, his voice breaking as he whispered, "Promise me that you won't make excuses like that when you don't want me around anymore, Jeonggukie."

Jeongguk's heart was breaking at the sound of Jimin's melancholic voice. How hurt could a person be to become as jaded as him? How cruel must have people been for a person to expect the same treatment from everybody?

When Jeongguk didn't respond, Jimin continued weakly, "You know what the worst thing is? She's the first person I liked in a long time, I still do. I really like her and I can't blame her for anything. She used to be so real, you know? Being around her was like taking a breath of fresh air. But I made her become so cautious that she had to tiptoe around me. She started to lie because that's what I wanted her to do. It's not fair on her. I wish I never met her so we could both be spared of this pain."

"But hyung, don't you think a relationship goes both ways? If you changed her, she should've been able to change you too."

Jimin smiled at him. "Sometimes you talk too profound for your age."

In all honesty, Jeongguk didn't even know what he was trying to say. But that was okay, they were both in the same boat, where they felt too much and could tolerate only a little.

"I'll miss you, Gguk."

"Why?" Jeongguk said, alarmed.

"Don't you know? Our water pipes are finally fixed. We went to check everything today, the furniture is a little damaged but Mum is sorting all that out. I think we're going back to our house tomorrow."

"O-Oh," he breathed.

"Thank you for taking care of us."

Jeongguk tried to smile, but it probably looked very deformed. He didn't know how to hide the disappointment on his face, he wasn't ready to let Jimin go yet. But that was probably too much to ask for a person in his position, so he tried to make the situation lighter. "Sorry for constantly annoying you and hogging all of the bed."

Jimin laughed quietly. "I'll forgive you if you hold my hand tonight."

"I'll always hold your hand."

"Don't be so good to me," he said pleadingly, raising his palm as though he was going to cup Jeongguk's face but stopping just inches away. "How will I ever forget you, hmm?"

"Why are you talking like it's the last time?" Jeongguk couldn't stop his voice from breaking.

"Because I'm leaving."

"You can still come—"

"I can't." Jimin shook his head, gently caressing Jeongguk's cheekbone with the back of his index
finger. "You're too precious for me to ruin you, golden boy."
Jimin's phone was ringing incessantly. If he was a sane person, he'd at least have a less annoying ringtone, but he wasn't. He couldn't let it to become background noise, wanting to listen to it for as long as he could. So he let that shrill sound pierce his ears because it meant that somebody thought about him enough to call him several times. It was just so easy to feel alone sometimes.

If Jeongguk was here, he would snatch up Jimin's phone and answer the call, but he wasn't. So Jimin didn't feel obliged to turn the phone on silent. Whoever it was would get the message soon enough. They would leave him soon enough.

Jimin was a bit of a masochist, though. He let himself go through the torturous delay as he waited for the person ringing to finally give up. That period was more agonising than the final, expected pain where every second was filled with the tormenting question of whether they cared enough about him or not.

"Jimin-ah." Seulgi, who was silently working on her canvas on the other side of his studio, sighed. "Why do you do this to yourself?"

Of course, she had been listening to the bothersome sound for over half an hour now as well, but she still didn't complain about it— although her nose did scrunch up adorably—she was merely concerned about Jimin. It made him feel warm despite the guilt, he was grateful for the things she put up with for him.

"I love you, Seulgi bear."

She startled, but she had known that he would avoid her question. "I know you do."
Her answer made Jimin smile to himself, at least she knew. Most people just went by Jimin's life without having known how he felt about them. But Seulgi wasn't most people, she had always been a little more. More knowing, more accepting and more indulging. Jimin's shrink said that he needed people who pushed him out of his comfort zone in his life, that people like Seulgi who just let him be weren't good for him. They made him feel better, yes, but they didn't move him forward.

Jimin only partially agreed with Mr. Kwon. He knew that people who helped him to develop and to overcome the things he struggled with were beneficial. But they were too similar to those he was constantly surrounded by. They didn't necessarily push Jimin to become a better person, they just wanted him to change to suit their own needs. Those people were selfish, in short.

And the opposite of them was Seulgi, who didn't care if Jimin was a loner, a pariah or a willing masochist. She did question him sometimes, but not accusingly. Just so that he wouldn't damage himself more. Her nature might hurt him in the long term, but she let him breathe in the present.

"Are you going to let it keep ringing?"

"They'll give up soon," Jimin replied.

Seulgi didn't probe him further, she knew the extent of Jimin's stubbornness and he knew the extent of her leniency.

"Are you still talking to Jeongguk?" she asked after a while.

"No."

"Why not?"

The answer was simple, but Jimin felt like saying it would just further solidify all the reasons why he should stay away from the younger boy. He didn't want to accept the end of what they had just yet. It had been more than a fortnight since his family and he had came back to their house, and Jimin hadn't seen him after that. Jihyun had returned from his trip yesterday but Jeongguk hadn't even visited his friend yet.

Jimin blamed himself, and rightly so, for creating that rift between them again. Now, Jeongguk wouldn't come to their house anymore to avoid him. It should make him glad, the younger boy made Jimin's intention of staying away from him easier to follow, but he couldn't pretend that it hadn't been lonelier than usual without him. Although Jimin liked to think that he was learning to live without Jeongguk's cackle of a laugh and his warm hands.

"He's just Jihyun's friend, noona. I've got no business talking to him."

"I think he would be good for you."

"I wouldn't be good for him."

Seulgi sighed again, letting the matter go, like always. "I just want you to be happy, Jimin."

He hummed, but he didn't want to reply to that. "What about you, are you happy?"

"I am."

"Are you really?" he wondered, because Seulgi tended to hide how much people could affect her.

"I know why you're asking me that," she said, almost ruefully, as she continued to paint soft strokes
of orange on her canvas without looking in his direction. "Ever since Hyunwoo left, I'd taken to pretences of not caring to escape the reality. I didn't want to see the problem in case it was more impactful than the things that made me happy. I guess it was for a while. But I've given myself the closure I needed, it happened and now it's over. He can only mean as much as the importance I give him."

Jimin believed her. For some time, Seulgi couldn't even bring herself to say her ex-boyfriend's name, but now seeing the way she had accepted the situation pleased him. Although it didn't mean that the hurt had healed. "What about all the scars he left on you?"

"Maybe they'll always remain, I'll only know with time. I still don't regret our relationship or how it ended, Jimin, he's made me a stronger person."

"But noona," he murmured, melancholy lacing his voice. "How long until all the pain that's supposed to make you stronger starts to break you?"

Seulgi let out a pining breath. "Jimin-ah."

"Just stay like this, please, Seulgi bear. Don't ask me things and don't let our relationship change. I don't have many people like you in my life. Don't let me push you away."

"But we can't remain ignorant of—"

Jimin wondered why Seulgi was so insistent today, normally she understood how uncomfortable it made him to talk about himself. He was curious about what she saw in him today which made her probe. Though he wouldn't inquire her about that, you couldn't ask questions without giving some answers too. "Please," he implored. "I just want to stay like this."

She fully turned to him, tucking a strand of orange hair behind her ear. "Is this about Chungha? Did you two break up?"

"We weren't even together, noona."

"What—? But I thought you two were dating."

"We're just ... friends, I think. If we're even that," he added. "She and I both know that it would be better to create some space before it becomes too unbearable."

Seulgi dropped her paintbrush onto the palette, pushing back her stool and walking towards him. "Don't deal with this alone, Jimin. Talk to me, I know you're struggling."

"I can't, noona. Not you—I can't lose you."

Not Seulgi, with her bright orange hair and an even brighter soul. She was too good for him to involve into his mess. People like that, Jimin tended to be more guarded around, he didn't want to have an impact on them in any way.

But he still wanted her around, Seulgi was the only person he could pretend to be normal around. Who knew there was something wrong with Jimin but never acknowledged it. And that's what he wanted. Somebody to ignore his peculiarity for once. Jimin couldn't let her know how selfish and mean he could be, how unreasonable he could get when he started to feel wronged, how he clung to people and then pulled away without an excuse. She hadn't seen his bad side yet. They had only ever interacted willingly and when Jimin wanted to, he didn't want to imagine the tedious end if he let her in only to withdraw when even she wasn't enough.
Because nobody was enough for Jimin. Nobody could satisfy him for long enough.

"Does the contrast here look alright?" he mumbled, gesturing vaguely to an area on his work. He desperately needed to return to their usual dynamic where they only talked about work and that was it.

Seulgi sighed defeatedly, but didn't press further, giving him an affirmative nod at his question before returning to her place. They started to work silently again, it was their routine, but now where the usual soft breeze had been replaced by the chilly winter air. The fingertips of Jimin's hand were starting to become numb from the cold, falling further below the cool temperature his anaemic body always bore.

He rubbed his hands together for a while, but not helping them function properly in the slightest. His studio didn't have any heating since it was on the top floor, so he always suffered from the frigid temperatures up here.

"I don't think our fingers will let us continue, Jimin-ah," Seulgi said.

Jimin nodded. "We should call it a day."

As if on cue, his phone started ringing again. When he made no move to answer it, Seulgi rolled her eyes while he just shrugged in response. She started to pack up her equipment, leaving some work on the racks to dry and putting other references in her carry case. For a while, she fumbled with the panels she had been working on today before turning to Jimin.

"I've lost another piece somewhere."

His lips curved softly. Seulgi was so adorably clumsy. But that wasn't what made Jimin smile, he smiled because he was always glad when she lost something. It meant that Seulgi would come back again. Even if it was to just search for her work.

"I'll see if I can find it," he said. "It's one of those mock panels, isn't it?"

She nodded. "Please do. See you later, Jimin."

"Bye, Seulgi bear." His voice was almost drowned out by his phone's insistent noise. It had been ringing for too long now, though. Nobody cared about Jimin that much to keep calling him. It must be Yoongi, then.

Jimin thought he heard Seulgi talking to someone outside the door as he received the call, but as he heard his hyung's voice he forgot all about it.

"Hi, Jiminnie."

"Hello, hyung," he said, a breath he didn't know he'd been holding escaping him. "How are you?"

"More committed to talking to his best friend than you, and that's that."

Jimin sighed. "I've been too occupied with things. It's nearly the end of term and I've got assignments to hand in as well as the practical work. You know how busy you tend to get at this time of the year."

"Were you really that busy?"

"Yes?"
"So you haven't been avoiding talking to me for the past two weeks?"

"No?"

"You don't fool me."

"Hyung."

Yoongi just waited patiently. He knew Jimin like the back of his hand. He knew all the excuses the younger boy could ever come up with, the smoothness of his voice when he started to lie, and the defeat in his tone when Yoongi wouldn't let go. He knew him better than Jimin knew himself.

"Hyung."

"Tell me, sweetheart."

Jimin sighed again. There were those words that made him divulge his entire heart. No specific questions, no unnecessary expectations, just a request for Jimin to say whatever he wanted to Yoongi. He stood by the floor-to-ceiling window, letting the cold wash over him for no reason except for the urge to feel something other than the ache.

"Are you busy?" Jimin asked.

"It doesn't matter."

It did matter, though. Today, the kind of sadness he was drowning in wasn't something even Yoongi could pull him out of, he already knew. Jimin would only waste his time with nothing coming out of it. But he owed it to Yoongi to explain why he'd been ignoring his calls. All that he was and had in his life was given by his hyung, all the comforting words and quiet understanding and the knowing songs. Recently, Yoongi had sent him the draft of his song *Wine*, a duet sung by a male and a female. Jimin had been surprised at how closely it described his current state.

"How did you know, hyung?" he asked. "How can you just put into words everything that's so hard to communicate?"

"Are you talking about the song?"

Jimin hummed in confirmation.

"You've become too good at hiding yourself, Jimin. It's hard to talk when you won't let yourself."

"I've never been good at talking."

"I won't disagree with that. But you can't say that you haven't restricted yourself."

The younger boy chuckled. "I won't disagree with that."

Yoongi didn't say anything for a moment, listening to the silence as though it was speaking to him. If Jimin could guess, he'd say that perhaps it was. Maybe the lingering sighs and unformable words did speak to Yoongi, maybe they told him everything that Jimin would never say. He was perceptive like that. Because Min Yoongi had experienced it all, he had known the pain and happiness and the melancholy that came with living. Jimin wished he knew people like that, he wished he knew *himself* like that. But he was as much in the dark about himself as he was about others.

Everything was a mystery and his future was shroud in the darkness of what was to come.
Maybe it would never come.

He could make sure it never came.

Jimin shook his head absentmindedly. *What were we talking about?*

"Jimin?"

"Hmm?"

"What hurt you, sweetheart?"

"Just myself," he mumbled ponderously.

Yoongi kept listening.

"Hyung, I—I don't know. I don't know what happens," Jimin said, with a certain vulnerability in his voice that he wouldn't let anybody witness except for Yoongi, adding forlornly, "It just doesn't last. I try my best to stay the same. I try to keep everything the same but—*nothing stays, hyung.* When I have a moment of happiness, I lose my mind from the excitement. I rarely show it on my face, but inside my heart is on the verge of exploding from the relief. And then suddenly, it disappears like a mirage. Like it was never there. I can't even feel the remnants left behind. It's like destiny is jealous of us, of whoever or whatever I share my happiness with. Am I the only one whose pain can keep the world spinning?"

"It's not—"

"But it feels like it's just *me!"* he lamented. "Everybody decides if they want to leave or to stay but I never have a say in whether I keep them or lose them. They can choose if they like or dislike me but I never have enough time to decide my own feelings about them."

"Jimin—"

"I hate my name, hyung," he said, a pathetic sob escaping him. "I hate it when people call me by my name because it's always 'Jimin, do this' and 'Jimin, don't do that' and I'm fucking tired of not being enough. Of *never* being enough.

"Why can't somebody call my name without having an expectation attached to it? Why can't they just say it in consolation? But it's not even their fault, Yoongi hyung. If I'm sick of myself, then they must be too. What I do and feel is so goddamn repetitive. Everything is changing but I'm the same. Everybody else is moving on but I've been stuck in this place for so long now. Is this all I'll ever be? A broken record who won't stop—"

"Sweetheart."

"I'm *tired,* hyung."

Yoongi inhaled at his broken voice. "Don't cry, Jiminie. You know it breaks my heart to hear you cry."

"I can't do this anymore," Jimin whimpered. "I don't have the strength to hold myself together anymore. I've become so weak, Yoongi hyung. How do I keep trying when nothing will change anyway? When I find someone, I think that maybe they can be my reason to endure, but they only ever hurt me. They only ever leave me."
Yoongi hushed him, his voice a comforting lullaby. "You're not weak, Jimin. Nobody could bear as much pain as you. Don't ever think that you're not enough, those people haven't seen you like I have. You have so much love and tolerance inside you that you would make people jealous, just because they choose to not see it doesn't mean that you're at a fault. They haven't stayed long enough to know you. You're more than enough."

"You're only saying that to make me feel better."

"Have I ever lied to you?"

"No."

"Then why won't you believe me?"

"If I'm not bad, why am I still not happy yet, hyung?"

"Jiminie." Yoongi sighed. "That's not how it works. For the longest time, I thought that happiness was being rid of all your hardships and sorrows, but it's not that. It's when the little moments of pleasure outweigh the things that make you feel down. If in those moments, you can forget what the pain felt like, I think that's happiness. People like us, we rarely achieve that inner peace with ourselves because we're too focused on our wrongs. So you have to find something that gives you that joy. It can be a person or an idea, but let it consume you, sweetheart."

"At whose expense?"

"It doesn't matter. You deserve happiness."

Jimin shook his head, wondering how Yoongi could say that with such conviction when he knew how destructive the younger boy was. "I can't do this, hyung," he repeated.

"You can't give up, Jimin. I know it's hard but you're so strong, you—"

He couldn't let Yoongi continue, though; all those reassuring words and comforting lies had never agreed with him anyway. Jimin couldn't bring himself to believe them, to even try, when he knew that nothing would change. He thought he should probably hang up before the ocean of tears currently brimming flooded his face. "I miss you, hyung," he said. "When are you coming?"

Yoongi sighed at his tactics. "Miss you more, Jiminie. I'll be there in a little over a week."

"Thank you for calling me and still putting up with me and—"

"Jimin," he said in warning. "Don't start this unfounded blabber."

But he was too tired to continue that tedious back and forth. "I'll speak to you later, hyung." Tossing his phone onto a nearby table, Jimin leaned against the window to hold himself upright, feeling the resolve leave him. He rubbed at his upper arms, trembling from the cold and the effort to keep his tears at bay. What was the point of breaking down if he only had himself to pick up the pieces later?

As Jimin rubbed his eyes to clear his vision, he thought he spotted a familiar Range Rover through the window overlooking the driveway. He would have pondered over it more if it weren't for the resounding footsteps behind him. He began to turn around in startlement but was unable to detect who it was before strong arms wrapped around his middle, a chin coming to rest on his shoulder.

Jimin jerked in surprise, futilely trying to free himself until the comforting warmth and a familiar musky scent enveloped him.
"J-Jeongguk," he gasped.

"Shh, hyung," the younger boy murmured soothingly.

So many questions were running through Jimin's mind as he unavailingly attempted to register the current line of things. When did Jeongguk get here? Had he overheard his conversation with Yoongi? Jimin hadn't seen his car pull up into the driveway, did that mean he'd been here for a while?

He was finding it difficult to even process his overwhelming thoughts and confusion with Jeongguk's presence so close to himself. But unknowingly, Jimin slackened in his hold, exhaling stutteringly as the soft breaths emanating from Jeongguk brushed against the side of his neck. Then, as the brunet's arms tightened around his waist, more tears brimmed in the corner of his eyes and Jimin wondered if he'd stop crying today.

He belatedly tried to move away from him, but Jeongguk put a hand onto his stomach, fingers splaying to press Jimin's smaller body harder against himself. The warmth radiating from his chest sob made him sob.

"What are you doing, Jeongguk?" he mewled.

His lips grazed behind Jimin's ear, speaking to him softly, "Holding you together because I don't want you to fall apart."

Jimin stilled perceptibly, the younger boy's words were too reminiscent of his own when he was speaking to Yoongi earlier. "Were you listening?" he said agitatedly, starting to struggle against Jeongguk's grip in his panic and amidst a new urge to weep.

"I'm sorry."

But, right now, Jimin was too weak to argue with him about the invasion of his privacy. He sagged back against Jeongguk's muscular form. "You shouldn't have done that," he said, his voice totally drained of any energy to sound cross.

Jeongguk simply hummed, the protective cage of his arms embracing him so solidly that Jimin would think nothing could ever hurt him again. He swayed him from side to side gently, hushing the older boy every time a sob was too loud. Jimin didn't know how to acclimate to the shelter of Jeongguk's body, finding it difficult to accept his kindness no matter how much the thought of separating wrecked him. It felt so good to be held when his own strength had left him, even the false consolation felt necessary right now.

"I don't regret it, you know," Jeongguk said eventually. "All that you said to Yoongi hyung, you would never say to me. You won't let me in no matter how hard I try."

"Maybe I have a reason for that."

"There's no reason except that you fear me leaving you," Jeongguk whispered into his ear. "But I'm going to stay."

"You're lying, Jeongguk. You're lying like the rest of them." Jimin fumbled pathetically with his hands to remove the younger boy's arms from around him, almost hysterical in his manner. Why was he divulging himself into these lies? Why did the little hope of comfort always get the best of him? "Let me go," he snivelled.

Jeongguk sighed, but showed no indication of loosening his grip. "Turn around and let me hug you
properly, Jimin-ah."

"I don't want you to see me like this."

"You have nothing to hide from me."

"No, you don't understand—"

"Hyung, please."

It took a moment of coaxing for Jimin to finally face him. He looked at Jeongguk for the first time after so long, drinking in his features and those beautiful molten, doe eyes that were overflowing with gentleness. The younger boy's warm hands rose to cup his face, his thumbs wiping at the drying trails of tears and Jimin started to cry again at the action. Why was Jeongguk so sweet to him? He didn't deserve that benignity from him.

Not Jimin, who was so toxic to the people around him that nobody had ever left him intact, who relentlessly switched between blaming himself and others for his own misery, who couldn't ever love somebody without growing out of it.

"I told you to stay away, Jeonggukie," he sobbed, burying his face into the younger boy's shoulder.

Jeongguk circled his arms around Jimin's waist again, urging him closer to himself and rubbing his back consolingly. "I can't stay away from you, Jimin hyung. Believe me, I've tried. None of your warnings will stop me from coming to you, I won't pay heed. I want—" He sighed. "I don't know what I want from you. I just want to be near you."

"You can't." The caution in his words was genuine, Jimin wished Jeongguk would believe him. He pulled back to gaze at him with his tear-stained eyes. "I don't want to hurt you. Please listen to me."

The brunet stared back solemnly, but showed no response otherwise. The pad of his thumb brushed against Jimin's cheek, his eyes wholly trained on that action. For a while, he just caressed that freckle on the silver-haired boy's face, as though he was caught in a trance. Then his liquid eyes lifted to Jimin's. "Do you know how hard I've tried to not think about you these past couple of weeks?" he finally murmured and his low voice made something hot twist inside Jimin's stomach.

He snapped out of his daze before Jeongguk could continue, stepping back from his embrace, unable to meet his eyes anymore. "I think you should leave."

He frowned at him. "Why?" he said, not flippantly.

Jimin swallowed. He was starting to feel helpless against Jeongguk's persistence, no matter what he said or did, that boy wouldn't steer clear of him.

"You know, today," Jeongguk continued. "I didn't have any intention of seeing you when I came to meet Jihyun. But seeing Seulgi noona's car in the driveway made me so mad because if she can be friends with you, why not me? Why am I only one who you think can't handle you?"

He made Jimin want to rip his hair out. "I've told you," he bemoaned. "You are not the same. Fuck, Jeonggukie. I can't ruin you, why don't you understand?"

He stared resolutely back at him. "Tell me why not."

"Seulgi noona is ... She's like my pacifier, Jeongguk. And you're not, you—" He exhaled harshly. "I don't even know what you are to me."
"Why do we have to be labelled?"

"For us to make sense, goddamn it!" Jimin yelled. "What do you think we're doing here? All the things we say and do aren't normal! People don't fucking hold each other's hands at night and they don't come over and embrace those who are strangers to them. Because that's what we are, we're nothing more than strangers!"

"On your choice! You're the one who won't let us move forward! Do you even know how hard I've tried to know you? But you always run away and hide when I get a glimpse into your head." He took a deep breath, incensed, before chuckling bitterly. "Just admit it and say that you're scared of finding something in me that will make you want to stay, hyung."

His words made Jimin want to cower, the next string of accusations on his tongue dissipated right there, he hadn't been prepared for Jeongguk to give him a reality check. Sometimes, he just really said things whose honesty made Jimin blanch in trepidation. But he would never admit to it.

"Leave me alone."

Jeongguk scoffed incredulously. "You have another thing coming if you think I'm going to leave you in this state."

"Fuck off, Jeongguk." But Jimin's words carried no bite to them, his weakness was unveiling despite his efforts to persist, and perhaps the younger boy saw the cracks in his resolve as he approached him again, holding Jimin's face so delicately with the tips of his fingers.

"Why are you so adamant on being alone?"

"Because I'm not good for you."

"Tell me why you think that."

Jinmin didn't know how to evade him. How could he tell Jeongguk that all his complaints to Yoongi about people leaving him weren't exactly true? Jimin tended to victimise himself when his pain overwhelmed him, never mentioning his own faults or taking responsibility for his actions. It wasn't the people who didn't stay, it was Jimin who got tired of them first, he was the one who fell out of love first. All the time Yoongi was convincing him that he was enough, Jimin's guilt was tearing him up because nobody was enough for him either. He got sick of people just as easily.

He brought his own hands to Jeongguk's, squeezing his fingers gently before removing them from around his face. Jimin couldn't accept the solace his hands gave him anymore, he had already indulged himself by wallowing in the embrace of Jeongguk's arms. He needed to pull away before the younger boy's touch became as familiar as his warmth. Their presumed relationship was taking an unsafe turn and Jimin was too close to just allowing himself Jeongguk.

"Why did you come here?" Jimin asked quietly.

"I missed you."

Jinmin shut his eyes tightly. It was already happening. Despite trying his hardest to keep the younger boy away from him, his elusiveness had only lured Jeongguk in instead of driving him away. Jimin wanted to scream in agitation. Why did this always happen? People always took his warnings for granted, not believing him even when he told them to what extent he could damage them. "No, Jeongguk. You can't," he said, distraught. "For fuck's sake, you can't miss me."

"Why not?"
"Because I know what I am to you."

Jeongguk looked at him dubiously, eyes narrowing in scepticism. "And what's that?"

"Don't look at me like that," Jimin protested. "I'm just a challenge to you, Jeongguk. A puzzle you want to solve and a soul you want to heal. You want to fix me, don't you? You want to be the one to say you've remedied me. But it's not that easy. You'll be walking into a maze with nothing to guide you. Instead of figuring me out, you'll get lost. I'm not all the fun and games, I'll hurt you. Doesn't that scare you?"

"It doesn't scare me more than the thought of not seeing you again."

It didn't escape him how Jeongguk didn't deny Jimin being a challenge to him. But it didn't hurt him anymore. Jimin'd had plenty of conversations like this in the past, where people always underestimated the honesty in his words, thinking he was just being melodramatic. And when they finally left him, they didn't fail to remind Jimin of just how cruel he was. He sighed. "Let this go, Jeongguk."

"Maybe, I will," the brunet said, not as fiercely resolute as earlier, now a mellower look was adorning his orbs. He reached out to Jimin, an inviting, close-lipped smile playing on his lips. "For today, let me just hold you."

When the older boy continued to stare uncertainly, he tugged at his sleeve, almost childlike in his manner and Jimin melted. "For today," he mumbled, walking into his awaiting arms. He fist his hands into Jeongguk's shirt, pressing himself as close as he could before nuzzling at his collarbone.

Ji

Jimin told himself that he could never let Jeongguk know just how his touch both singed his skin and soothed the fire in his veins. Knowing the younger boy, he wouldn't ever let him go. If Jeongguk started to hold him and murmur beautiful little things to him all the time, Jimin would get too drunk on the warmth in his chest.

But he couldn't let that happen. It would make Jimin want to keep the golden boy to himself. And that was where the beginning of the end always begun.

Because Jimin calling somebody his was dangerous.

Chapter End Notes

p.s. You might've disagreed with what Yoongi said about using something to achieve happiness, but with Jimin's mindset, that something is a form of distraction, which is the best he could get at the time.
These days, Seohyun didn't let Jeongguk leave before dinnertime, saying that he had no excuse to not eat at their house since Jihyun was now back. Jeongguk didn't agree, the reason why he had avoided the Parks' house wasn't his best friend's absence, but rather Jimin's constant reluctance to see him. He knew that the older boy was going through a lot, and he didn't want to make it harder for him by not giving him space. But as the days went by, the dreadful realisation that Jimin might never talk to him started to take form.

The idea wasn't preposterous, seeing how the older boy was barely looking in Jeongguk's direction. His eyes were carefully directed away from him, which was applaudable since Jeongguk was sitting right opposite him at the dining table. He watched his parents as they talked, eyes occasionally slipping towards Jihyun when he inserted a comment but not once did they drift to Jeongguk.

It didn't make the brunet mad like it would've before, Jimin adamantly avoiding him meant that Jeongguk affected him enough to become this resolute. At least he was putting some effort into ignoring him.

Jeongguk wouldn't be able to handle it if Jimin became as impassive as before. Granted that now, he knew his reasons for being so distant, and so withdrawn from the world. He was delicate, fragile enough to break at his own internal storms. Jeongguk now heard the vulnerability even in Jimin's anger and snarls, he wasn't mean, he had just run out of other methods of protecting himself. And Jeongguk thought it was unfortunate that nobody would be shown that endeavouring part of him.

When the older boy had claimed to be a challenge to him, Jeongguk hadn't addressed it, because it was true. Jimin was still somebody he wanted to figure out, not for himself, but for Jimin's own sake.
Everytime those walls threatened to hide him, Jeongguk wanted to remind him of who he really was.

For that, he needed to know the real Jimin, that boy who hadn't been allowed to emerge from his cocoon before newer layers had built around him. Jeongguk had a clue of how he'd be like. He had seen it in those split seconds of tender looks before the mask slammed on, he had heard it in the tinkling of his uncontrolled laughter—that raw, unadulterated emotion which lit up his pretty eyes.

Even since Jeongguk had overheard his conversation with Yoongi, there was a lingering notion that, when it came to love, Jimin was probably the most naive person he'd come across. He was so unknowing of the comfort of emotional dependency on your lover, of that hot-blooded desire which only their skin quenched, and those butterflies when they looked at you too knowingly. Things that Jeongguk hadn't known before meeting Jimin either.

He looked at him from across the table, watched his pretty lips nibbling at those lamb skewers. As Jimin scratched the side of his neck absentmindedly, Jeongguk couldn't help but reminisce how it'd felt to burrow his face against that thick column of his throat, how his small body had felt so fragile encaged in his arms. It was all that had been on Jeongguk's mind lately. That and how he wished he could heal Jimin.

"What do you think about Hanseul-ssi's promotion?" Seohyun was saying to Chansung, they were discussing some office matters that only Jihyun was listening to with mild interest. Along with Haewon, Mr. and Mrs. Park worked at the same firm, occupying some top notch positions that Jeongguk hadn't ever bothered to learn. He simply found business affairs boring, the monotonous routine of reading documents, signing papers, and planning strategies just wasn't interesting to him.

"They must've based it on some positive feedback," Jihyun said, probably in response to his parents and Jeongguk elbowed him with furrowed brows.

"Why do you care?" he grumbled under his breath.

Jihyun looked back at him pointedly. "Hanseul is Nayoung's father, obviously I care. He's getting promoted to the head of human resources sector."

"What does that have anything to do with you?"

"Don't you know it's easier to pull girls when they're already happy?"

Jeongguk rolled his eyes. "When will you realise that getting cosy with the girl's parents is not the way into her pants?" He'd be more civil with his words if Seohyun and Chansung weren't so absorbed into their own conversation.

"We don't all have chicks lined up after us, Jeongguk," his best friend said theatrically, in his usual tale of woe. "Last time you went abroad on a school trip, three older girls were claiming that you slept with them and one even feigned pregnancy. Mingyu and I had to vouch for you by saying that you were seventeen and that would technically be illegal."

He smirked. "Noonas dig me, though." His eyes lifted to Jimin, and at witnessing that carefully composed—fake—facade, he smiled to himself.

"They probably don't see the child hiding under your clothes."

"Jihyunie," he drawled. "You wouldn't know what to do with yourself if you saw what was underneath these clothes."

Jihyun choked on his own spit and Jeongguk thought he heard a sharp intake of breath from across
"That's disgusting, bro. I don't care how hot you are, I'm not into you."

"Duly noted."

"Maybe those girls wallowing after you should know how you'll discard them when you've had your fun."

At this, the younger boy's eyes flickered to Jimin. He didn't want him to know about his fuck-boyish past with girls, albeit how rumoured it was. Jeongguk had a reputation for being uninterested and kind of a douche to the people who confessed to him. He had entertained some girls in the past, but when they failed to capture his interest, he'd left them. Relationships had never appealed him before and his needs were usually satiated with a night spent at somebody's house—eight and a half as Jaehyun had once counted.

But he didn't need Jimin getting the message that Jeongguk didn't take his relationships seriously. And he especially couldn't have him thinking that he'd discard him after some time. However, Jimin's facial expression didn't change much at all, although his grip on a skewer definitely tightened.

"I don't discard them," he defended. "They just get tired of the lack of attention from me."

Jihyun looked at him pitifully. "Was that supposed to make you seem like less of a dick?"

Jeongguk grabbed an empty skewer from his plate and dug it backhandedly into his best friend's stomach, to which Jihyun let out a pained yelp.

"Fuck you!" he cursed, rubbing his abdomen furiously.

"Boys," Chansung reprimanded, the racket catching his attention. "I do remember teaching you table manners."

"He needs some lessons on temper control as well," Jihyun said, shoving at Jeongguk's shoulder.

"Alright, that's enough." He sighed. "And Jeongguk, please refrain from your violent tendencies at the dinner table."

Jeongguk was affronted at being picked on, his lips jutted out to the fullest as he muttered, "I don't have violent tendencies. Jihyun is just a bitch."

"What was that?"

"I said the lamb skewers are really nice."

"That they are!" Chansung exclaimed. "Seohyun-ah, Mr. Kim pulled me aside the other day to ask if you had some recipe book that his wife could follow." Seohyun laughed merrily at his words, bashfully saying that Mrs. Kim was a good cook too. And then again, becoming too preoccupied with their own conversation. But Jeongguk couldn't care less about them. Not when a whole Park Jimin was sitting in front of him.

His recent penchant for him was bordering on an obsession, in a healthy way, he thought. Jeongguk simply couldn't stop thinking about him. If he were being honest, he'd admit that a part of his mind had always been attuned to Jimin. Even when he'd thought that the older boy ignored him, Jeongguk was always painfully aware of Jimin—where he was, what he was doing, how he was feeling towards him or how he could gain his attention.

But it had never been this bad. The past two weeks had been equable to torture for Jeongguk. A part
of him had wanted to listen to Jimin's warnings and stay away, but how could he do that when his every thought consisted of him?

After the Parks had left, every night Jeongguk would come back to an empty room. He couldn't stop silently, and foolishly, hoping that Jimin would be sitting on his bedroom floor with charcoal smudged fingers and his artwork cluttered around him. He hoped he would at least be there to hold his hand at night because, unknowingly, Jeongguk had come to need his touch as much as Jimin needed his.

The older boy had told him that their relationship wasn't normal, but Jeongguk didn't see a problem with that. They didn't have to make sense, and as reckless as the thought of going with the flow was, he thought it'd be good for them. They just needed to move forward from this stilted place where the risk of getting hurt stopped them from even basking in the warmth of what it could be.

Jeongguk knew what he wanted, and he had never been the one to cower from his needs.

His eyes unintentionally travelled to Jimin again, but he couldn't be blamed for it. Lately, Jeongguk found everything about Jimin entrancing. The brunet watched, stuck in a daze, as he combed his fingers through his silver locks, the gelled hair stayed secure on the top of his head this time, leaving tracks of his digits within the strands. He brought another skewer to his mouth, sliding the piece of meat off with his teeth and chewing unhurriedly, plump lips pressing together and his jaw moving deftly. Jeongguk couldn't look away even if he wanted to, feeling an inexplicable urge inside him to just keep staring, like a second of glancing away from Jimin's face would be culpable.

As the silver-haired boy reached forward to pour himself a glass of water, his eyes accidentally met Jeongguk's and he froze on the spot, fingers merely lingering over the jug. A long moment later, he returned to his previous action, this time a little unnerved. The surface of the water in his glass quivered, and when Jeongguk caught his trembling, Jimin placed the glass down heavily.

Seemingly forgetting about his prior thirst, he picked up his skewer again, only pecking at it now. After a while, he meekly snuck another look at the younger boy, eyes widening in a slight alarm at noticing that Jeongguk showed no signs of looking away. He desperately glanced sideways towards his family to indicate that they could catch Jeongguk's staring but the younger boy felt bold. His eyes were unwaveringly trained on Jimin, on the rising flush to his cheeks and that reddening lower lip that his teeth wouldn't let go of.

Jeongguk tilted his head slightly, eyes sparkling in amusement at Jimin's obvious panic. He realised that the older boy wasn't nearly as indifferent as he pretended to be.

Jimin swallowed apprehensively. "Jeongguk," he said out loud, the tremor in his voice barely hidden. "Do you want some salad?"

Jeongguk's lips curved into the tiniest smirk at Jimin's blatant attempt at distracting him from the ogling. He reached for the salad bowl without an affirmation from Jeongguk, placing it in front of him with a fraught expression. The Parks were staring at Jimin dubiously, probably wondering why he was bothering with what Jeongguk was eating.

"Don't be hesitant in taking whatever you need, Jeongguk-ah," Seohyun said, but not without a sceptical look towards Jimin.

"Oh, I have enough salad on my plate, Mrs. Park," Jeongguk said, gesturing at the big portion of greens he'd yet to eat. "I wonder why Jimin felt the need to give me more." He played dumb, peering at the silver-haired boy innocently.
Jimin seemed like he was entertaining the thought of choking Jeongguk then and there, but when his mother turned to him inquisitively, he feigned a smile. "I thought since Jeonggukie likes to eat a pig's worth, he'd like some more."

The brunet scowled at him while Jihyun only watched on, still dumbfounded. "Since when did you two start acknowledging each other's existence?"

Jimin shot his brother a withering look, shoving another bite into his mouth so he wouldn't have to answer.

"Don't be a child, Jihyun," his mother said, which was funny because her gaze kept switching back and forth between Jimin and Jeongguk bemusedly, as though she couldn't wrap her head around the instance.

"Well," Chansung said with a forced smile that looked more like a grimace. "At least you're friends now."

"We're not fr—" Jimin started but his mother interrupted him with a glare.

"Have you started Christmas shopping yet, Jeongguk-ah?" Seohyun asked.

"Ask a decent person, mom." Jihyun laughed. "Since when has JK been known for spending his money on others?"

Jeongguk glared at him. "I'm gonna kill you," he muttered under his breath.

"Can't handle the truth?" His best friend smiled back.

Seohyun looked exasperated with the two of them by now. She turned to her husband instead. "Chansung-ah, I was thinking we should host a party on the second day."

"Of course," he agreed easily. "Who are you thinking of inviting?"

She listed off some of their close friends and other work related people. Her husband indulged her, giving suggestions about the decorations and the catering but Jeongguk was no longer interested in the conversation. He started to mildly zone out until he heard Jimin's name.

"You know," Seohyun was saying. "It's been a while since we've celebrated Christmas together as a family. Because Jimin—uh, he's always gone to Busan at this time of the year."

Jeongguk frowned at her words. It had escaped his attention until now that Jimin had rarely been home whenever Christmas came around. His parents always said that he'd gone to visit his grandparents and like the gullible person that Jeongguk had been, he'd believed them. The thought of his own stupidity made him grimace, how could he realistically think that Jimin went to Busan three times a year?

God knew what the older boy must have been going through all those times. If how he was feeling now was any indication of back then, Jeongguk didn't even want to imagine how completely alone he would've been, how cold his small body would've been without someone to hold him. Just how had he managed to conceal so much pain? Thinking about it made Jeongguk's heart ache.

Why had he been so blind to Jimin? Why did he never look past his exterior? Jeongguk felt guilty and so damn apologetic for being just like the rest of the people in his life. Silently judging and outwardly cautious. The people weren't the victims in this, it was Jimin. Damaged but utterly incapable of letting those wounds be seen because nobody would see past his defence mechanisms.
Jeongguk's eyes involuntarily drifted to him, watching his soft features with a mellow gaze. He hadn't responded to his mother's comment, in fact, they all had yet to reply to her. But nobody did.

Again, the same old tense atmosphere had fallen over the dinner table while everybody ignored the elephant in the room. That was the problem with the Parks, Jeongguk thought, they were too unwilling to address the issues at hand, as if through avoidance they could pretend that nothing was wrong.

"I'm glad Jimin and you were able to interact more, Jeongguk-ah," Seohyun said. "Did our stay at your house help?"

"We're not friends, mom," Jimin said abruptly. "Stop trying to force something that's not there."

Jeongguk glared at him, his eyes burning holes into the silver-haired boy who wouldn't spare him a glance. He chose to remain quiet, though; it wasn't best to push Jimin while his family was here. But it didn't mean that his blood wasn't boiling at Jimin's vexing determination to stay away from him.

And he would beg to differ that holding somebody's hand so needingly at night made you friends at the very least. Just because Jimin refused to see that something didn't mean that it wasn't there.

"Don't be rude. The least you could do is say thank you to Jeongguk for taking care of us so kindly while we were there—"

"I've told him my thank you's and everything else that needed to be said," he said brusquely and pushed his chair back. "I'm done here." It seemed like his level of communication had reached a maximum by now. He rose from his seat, and without a second glance, he left the room.

Jeongguk sucked his teeth in annoyance, tongue poking into his cheek as he tried to quell the urge to storm after Jimin and confront him. What would it take for the older boy to not push him away so insistently? He felt like he'd tried every method to—

Maybe not every method.

After dinner, Jeongguk went with Jihyun to his room so he wouldn't raise too much suspicion from the Parks. They weren't aware of Jimin and his dynamic and he would rather not evoke assumptions. Though, his best friend didn't refrain from grilling him about his family's stay at his house, saying that something must have happened for Jimin to openly address Jeongguk at dinner.

The younger boy vaguely denied it, but he was partially being honest. If he thought about it, nothing relatively significant had occurred between Jimin and him, but considering their prior relationship, they had come a long way. But amidst all the talking and movie nights and hand holding, Jeongguk had taken a liking to him.

He liked Jimin.

He liked his faint breaths at night, he liked his quips during their playful arguments, he liked the softness of him, he liked his saccharine voice and the tiny lisp he spoke with, he liked his pretty eyes and his prettier lips. God, he really liked Park Jimin. It was the sort of feeling that would normally fluster Jeongguk because he wouldn't know how to make sense of it. But this was Jimin. Nothing about him made sense anyway and he didn't mind pouring all of himself into the silver-haired boy.

After a while of playing video games with Jihyun and asking him about his trip, Jeongguk excused himself. He couldn't bring himself to not see Jimin for another second. There was something magnetic about him, it pulled Jeongguk anywhere to be in his presence. Everything he did kept coming back to Jimin. The image of his face had been fluttering in and out of his mind. God, he
needed to embed it in Jimin's head that he wouldn't—*couldn't*—leave him alone no matter what he said.

There was Sunmi's *Siren* playing from the speakers as he walked in, which Jeongguk thought was different from the usual calm vibe of Jimin's studio. Maybe he was feeling as fretful as Jeongguk. He shuffled in further, noticing the older boy still working on the charcoal hand drawing, he wondered what was so special about that piece. Jimin worked on it so adamantly that it made Jeongguk curious as to what backstory it had. Was it simply the medium that he had grown so attached to or the subject?

Upon hearing his footsteps, Jimin turned around, looking at him warily. "What are you doing here, Jeongguk?"

But the younger boy was squinting at his work, noticing an addition which made him halt in his motion. That outstretched, monochrome hand could have been anyone's but the mole on the side of the pinky finger made it certain that it was Jeongguk's.

"That's my hand," he said hesitantly, peering at Jimin who looked between the artwork and Jeongguk wide-eyed.

"I-I didn't realise," Jimin stuttered. He looked breathless, and suddenly in a state of panic. "Didn't you?"

"It's not on purpose," he insisted.

Jeongguk hummed, gazing at it some more as he advanced closer to him. "Do you like my hands that much?" It sounded teasing the way he phrased it, but Jeongguk was serious in every sense of the word. He expected Jimin to deny it vehemently, having asked that question without much thought on his part, but the silver-haired boy was eerily quiet for a moment.

"I don't know." A moment passed. "Maybe."

"Why?"

"I've told you," Jimin mumbled.

"They feel like home?"

He nodded.

Jeongguk smiled at him, his heart skipping a beat at Jimin's accordance. "Let me stay with you, then."

"No."

He sighed defeatedly. Nothing would change his mind, would it?

"How long will you deny us for, Jimin hyung? Isn't it obvious that I mean more to you than you let on?"

"You don't mean anything to me."

In other circumstances, it would have hurt. But not now when Jeongguk knew how Jimin was searching for all the ways to deter him. It was quite hopeless of him, he was getting desperate and Jeongguk liked that. He smiled at him again. "Make me believe you, Jimin-ah." Tracing the boy's
lower lip with his thumb, he ran the pad over its inner rim. "These lips tell such lies."

Jimin jerked out of his daze, pushing him away fiercely. He wiped at his mouth with the back of his hand while his eyes glared daggers at Jeongguk. "Get out of here."

"Why?" he whispered, drawing closer to him. "Was that too real for you?"

"Jeongguk," he warned. "You are overstepping your boundaries."

Jeongguk shrugged. "Suit yourself." He walked backwards towards a couch, settling down comfortably with his legs spread, his eyes never leaving Jimin's form.

"What are you doing?" the older boy asked blankly.

"Watching you."

Jimin shoved his fingers into his hair. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Jeongguk looked at him with a wicked gleam in his eyes. "Hush," he breathed. "Your parents might hear, Jimin. You wouldn't want them to know that there's something going on between us, right?"

"There is nothing going on between us!"

"Lies, lies," Jeongguk tutted.

"Why don't you understand that I want nothing to do with you?" he cried, looking frantic at this point. But the younger boy still liked that, he wanted Jimin's exterior to break and break until he reached his carefully guarded heart.

"Don't you?"

"Fine," Jimin snapped. "Fucking watch me, then." He turned to face his easel again and picked up the charcoal stick he'd dropped earlier with a white-knuckled grip. Immersed in his rancour, he slashed black lines across the artwork angrily, the stick dug in so deeply at some places that Jeongguk was sure the paper had ripped. He continued, a vivid sense of hysteria behind his actions, until even the outline of the hand couldn't be seen.

Jeongguk could only gape in horror, staring in perplexity back and forth between Jimin and the wrecked artwork. Goddammit, just when he thought he had the upper hand.

The older boy faced him again with a heaving chest. "There you go. There was nothing special about your hands."

"What the fuck, hyung?" he shrieked. "You didn't have to destroy your work to prove a point."

"An important point," Jimin gritted through his teeth. "Why are you so infuriating? Just leave me alone."

Jeongguk huffed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "This is not going anywhere." He paced back and forth for a while, trying to think of something—anything—to move on from this tedious dispute. "What do I have to do, hyung? Tell me. How can I make you believe me?"

He laughed unamusedly. "You can't. That's the problem. You can't make me believe you."

"I just want to stay with you."
"You don't know what you're asking for."

"I'm asking for you."

Jimin shook his head, lips trembling as he gazed at him pleadingly. "Why can't you just let me go, Jeonggukie? I won't be able to handle your hate when the fire finally simmers. And trust me, it will. This will come to an end and you'll wish you'd listened to me. But at that point, you'll only blame me, you won't see past your hurt."

"Hyung," he murmured. "You said so yourself that I'm not like other people. Why do you think I'll treat you like them?"

"It's not about me, I'm saying this for you. You don't want this, Jeongguk. Trust me."

"I want you."

Jimin blinked. "What?"

"I want you, hyung."

"You want me," he said slowly, the utter bafflement clear in his voice. He looked sceptically at Jeongguk, like he didn't exactly understand what he'd said.

"Yes."

"What?" Jimin repeated dumbly.

"What's so hard to understand about that?"

"I-I'm not really following you, Jeongguk. Where is this coming from? What—Do you want to be my friend? Is that what you mean?"

"Do you want me to spell it out for you?"

Jimin let out a startled, patronising chuckle. His flustered gaze met Jeongguk's and he rolled his eyes, but when the serious expression on the younger boy's face didn't falter, he sucked in a breath.

"You're not saying what I think you're saying, right?" he said, half serious and half petrified.

"What do you think I'm saying?" he queried.

"What the fuck, Jeongguk?" He put some more distance between them, beginning to walk in distressed circles. "Do you even understand the connotations of those words? I think you're confused. Yeah, that's it," Jimin said, seemingly to himself. "You're really, really confused. I'm your friend's brother, for God's sake, how are you even thinking like that about me?"

"Is it because I'm a boy?"

Jimin's eyes widened, pausing to balk at him. "Are you even—" He shook his head. "You are way out of line, Jeongguk."

The brunet laughed soundlessly. "Don't pretend that this is news to you, Jimin hyung. You don't have to feel the same, but at least accept what I'm saying to you."

"No, I won't fucking accept it," he seethed. "You're deluded and out of your mind. Stop this insanity."
Jeongguk's molten eyes were smouldering with fury at the mocking approach Jimin had taken. He stalked towards him, seizing the underside of his jaw and tugging him towards himself. "Why can't I want you, hmm?" His thumb pressed against his raw, bitten lips, pushing in slightly and smearing the wetness all over the surface in a rough stroke. "Fuck. This mouth has been haunting me."

Jimin didn't wrench away like last time, he only looked back at him in dismay. "You're playing with fire, Jeongguk."

"Yeah? Let me see how it burns, then," he growled, with a ferocity that hinted at his concealed rage.

He stared at Jeongguk for a moment, and the tenacity on his face made him groan. "I've had too much for today," he finally said, pulling back. "Please see yourself out, Jeongguk."

Jeongguk scoffed, his tongue running along the lining of his cheek as he looked away in derision. He wanted to argue but the defeated tone of Jimin's voice stopped him. "I will," he said, fixing the older boy with an intent look. "But we're not fucking done here, Jimin. Remember that."

Chapter End Notes

p.s. Guys, I don't have a hands kink despite what my profile pic and this chapter would suggest. Really.
If Jeongguk thought he'd seen the extent of Jimin's elusive skills, then boy, had he been in for a surprise. For the past several days, Jimin had avoided him like the plague—literally—he ran like a bat out of hell every time he saw the younger boy's face. It would have been comical if it weren't so maddening. Even the usually impassive Park family would look after Jimin with wide eyes when he fled the house as soon as Jeongguk stepped a foot inside.

Of course, they didn't know the reason behind Jimin's cagey behaviour was Jeongguk, which made it even more alarming for them.

Ever since he had divulged his feelings to the older boy, instead of becoming closer, he thought he'd lost him even more. At least Jimin had been more respectful of him before, now he treated Jeongguk like a child who needed to be rebuked, and it drove the brunet to the brink of his patience. How long more would he have to wait until he could hold Jimin's hand again?

Jeongguk had already spent nineteen years of his life believing that he disliked Jimin, without any valid basis. He had spent that long missing out on the endearment in his teasing words, the fondness behind his honeyed smiles, and every little thing that Jimin could give him. He had wasted all those years simply being blind to him.

But Jeongguk couldn't stay away from him any longer. Neither physically nor emotionally.

He desperately needed to fill the hollow that Jimin's absence had created in him. But the longer the older boy evaded him, the more frantic he became. Jeongguk understood how difficult it was for the Jimin to let someone in after all that he'd been through, but he wanted to try. Wasn't Jimin the one
who named him golden boy? So why did he still think that Jeongguk couldn't heal him? Jimin's refusal to acknowledge his attempts left him with a feeling that made his heart wrench, and there was only one word for it: pathetic.

It didn't matter that Jimin verbally expressed that he thought so highly of Jeongguk, what was the point if his actions didn't coincide with his words? Wasn't his denial merely a way for him to say that Jeongguk wasn't enough? He felt insecure when it came to Jimin, which was such a rarity for Jeongguk that it scared him. He was usually so self-confident. But that fear couldn't override how the older boy evoked such raw feelings inside him.

How he made his heart race.

Jeongguk's conscience yelled at him that somebody having such control over his feelings couldn't possibly be healthy, but he was powerless against the utter yearning he felt for Jimin. To hold him close to his skin and never let go. Although he had only acknowledged that sentiment recently, he knew this want had been blooming inside him for quite some time now.

He hadn't realised it was romantic until he'd started to feel his absence every night in his bedroom. Jeongguk longed to feel the tender touch of Jimin's skin against his own, to behold his pretty, so pretty, eyes glinting in the moonlight, and to watch those reddened lips as he mauled them with his teeth. Jeongguk wanted to taste them, God, he wanted to fucking devour them like a starved man.

Thoughts like that made him flounder at how startling they were, but they weren't without a reason. Because even when Jeongguk had assumed to feel an aversion towards Jimin, he'd still found him handsome. Beautiful, even. He wouldn't deny his sexuality anymore, albeit how unknowing of it he was. Growing up, he'd felt an attraction to boys; he liked the contrast of their firm bodies with girls' softer ones, he liked the homely feeling they radiated, he liked the idea of not having to be in charge with males, but Jeongguk had always disregarded that awareness since it never stayed on his mind for long. It had never been serious until Park Jimin came into the picture.

Park Jimin. The absolute embodiment of the human condition.

The things Jeongguk felt for him, he had never felt towards anyone. Or perhaps never to that extent. Did it make him gay? Jeongguk didn't know. Did it make him bisexual? Jeongguk didn't know that either. Maybe he was pansexual. But he had never been the one for labels. Although uncertainty still scared him to the bone, he realised that when it came to Jimin, he had to be open to the wavering nature of their relationship. And a part of him thought that the abstraction of life was what made it so beautifully unknown.

Then again, the only way to proceed was by letting the older boy know of his thoughts. Which was beginning to look impossible considering how hellbent Jimin was on pretending nothing remotely significant had occurred between them.

It especially didn't help that Min Yoongi was now back. Along with spending his entire day with Yoongi, Jimin also stayed the nights at wherever his hyung was lodging. Jeongguk had an inkling that if it weren't for their latest conversation, Jimin wouldn't be so fixated on avoiding his own house. He seldom came back, even to collect his clothing, in the fear of running into the younger boy. Which was warranted since Jeongguk barely left the Park mansion in the hopes of catching Jimin at least once.

After attending his lectures, and sometimes their football practice, he would lounge with Jihyun in his bedroom. They did their school work, played some Overwatch, and ate utter junk in the name of being teenagers. All the while, Jeongguk's eyes wouldn't stray too long from the window overlooking the driveway, diligently watching in case Jimin returned.
It was hopeless, though. As long as Min Yoongi was here, Jimin wouldn't be coming back home any time soon. At dinner times, even Mrs. Park grumbled about her son being too preoccupied with Yoongi, and that he wasn't concentrating on his schoolwork anymore. Chansung, ever the mediator, reassured her that Jimin was just catching up with his old friend.

But Jeongguk only scoffed bitterly whenever he tried to excuse Jimin's behaviour. Partially jealous and partially disgruntled over how far the older boy was going to avoid him. Goddammit, what did he gain from making Jeongguk so miserable?

"What's going on between you and my brother?" Jihyun asked suddenly.

The brunet's eyes snapped from the window looking out on the darkening driveway to his best friend. "What do you mean?"

There were mid-match, it was obvious that Jihyun sensed his disinclination towards the game but he didn't directly call him out on it. For the past few days, Jeongguk's skills had gotten exceedingly lousy and he didn't seem eager to righten them either.

"You're like passive-aggressive with each other. There's no blatant hostility but I can sense the tension."

Jeongguk gripped his controller more tightly. "It's nothing. He's just ignoring me again."

Jihyun laughed. "When did he even stop ignoring you?"

A month or two ago, he would have laughed along with his best friend, believing himself to be no wiser when it came to Jimin's seeming distaste towards him. But now, he paused, mind drifting back to that one conversation where Jimin's earnest words had convinced him that he was always aware of Jeongguk. "Turns out, he kind of never ignored me."

"What even went on while I was gone?" Jihyun said, baffled.

Jeongguk only shrugged in response.

"Why are you being all nonchalant with me?" He narrowed his eyes at him, smacking the side of his knee. "Did you two talk?"

That question made the younger boy laugh sardonically, as if he could figure Jimin out just by talking to him. "Jihyun, you're deluded if you think that talking with your brother would get you anywhere."

"Did you have a fight, then?"

"I wish he cared enough to actually fight with me, but he's simply hiding like that's going to solve anything." He was being very cryptic with his answers, he knew that. But it was impossible for him to give Jihyun a straight explanation when he was in the dark about everything that was going on between Jimin and himself.

"So he's avoiding you?" Jihyun mused. "It makes sense, Jimin hyung doesn't spend every waking hour of the day with Yoongi hyung, no matter how long it's been since they saw each other. I was surprised that he was staying the nights there too—"

"Where are they staying?" Jeongguk quickly asked.

"Namjoon hyung's apartment."
He nodded, that wasn't unexpected. Namjoon and Yoongi were childhood friends, and since Yoongi's home was in Daegu, he wouldn't be spending that long staying at a hotel considering the costs of living in Seoul. Recalling what Seokjin had said about the tall man's culinary skills, Jeongguk thought he would at least be consuming good food because Jimin was a talented cook.

"Why?" Jihyun asked belatedly.

"Hmm?"

"Why are you asking?"

Jeongguk shrugged, sensing the wariness on his best friend's face. "Just curious."

He sighed. "Don't do anything stupid. I understand your vagueness, matters concerning Jimin hyung are not very simple to tell. But I'd be right in saying that your relationship isn't the best, right?"

The brunet nodded reluctantly.

"Yeah, don't make it worse."

He was quiet after that. Jihyun didn't know anything about their relationship, and whatever he was assuming was most likely untrue considering his prior impression of Jeongguk disliking Jimin, but the younger boy allowed the caution in his words. He couldn't afford to mess things up with Jimin any further.

When Jeongguk's eyes drifted to the window again, Jihyun exhaled defeatedly. "He's not coming back, JK."

"I know," he admitted. "It's just a habit now."

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So Jeongguk decided that if he couldn't catch Jimin at his house, he would seek him out at their university. He had never harboured the notion of ever interacting with the older boy between his lectures or classes, mostly because he feared people's and Jimin's own reaction to approaching him in public. Jeongguk was well known on their campus, mainly due to his position on their football team and the matches which more than half the student body regularly attended.

And Jimin, let's just say that he also had quite the reputation, especially among girls, for being very unsociable. Jeongguk had never seen him around the university quad or the local spaces. Now, he clearly knew his reasons, but to a regular person it was difficult to see past the stand-offish exterior.

It would require some effort to chase down Jimin when he was quite simply known for being remote.

So Jeongguk started with the fine arts department. It wasn't located far from the photography building since both departments came under the visual arts faculty. There were students milling about around the reception and common area, all of them bearing carry cases or storage tubes which Jeongguk thought was as expected as a photographer supporting a camera. Having never visited the place before, he was clueless about where to start looking for Jimin. He contemplated asking people for him but he didn't think the older boy would appreciate being scoured for like that.
In the end, Jeongguk opted to look in all the studios, starting from the ground floor to the fourth. Just the thought of climbing those winding stairs made his legs ache. Each floor had three sets of stairs to reach the next one which made Jeongguk want to hunt down the architect of the building and fight them. But so he started, encountering puzzled faces and some offended looks. He'd stumbling into five people yet, and counting.

All the while, Jeongguk cursed the imbecile who didn't think to have an elevator to make manoeuvring easier.

As he was pacing through a corridor, he detected the bright orange hair of Seulgi's through a glass door and instantly backtracked into the workroom.

"Seulgi noona!" he said breathlessly, surprised at his luck.

Seulgi turned to him in startlement, giving his form a once over before tilting her head questioningly. "Hi ... What are you doing here?"

"I'm looking for Jimin hyung," he started. "Do you have any idea where he might be? I do realise it would've been helpful to check his schedule first before coming in here like a mad person."

"Or just text him," she supplied helpfully.

"I don't have his number."

Her brows rose, almost balking at him. Jeongguk thought it was a justified reaction since they lived in the twenty-first century. "You just missed Jimin," she replied to his earlier question. "He's probably by the elevator as of now. If you turn right at the end of the hallway, you'll hopefully find him."

Jeongguk felt scandalised, his first thought was 'there's an elevator in this building?' before he rushed to express his gratitude to Seulgi and raced out of the room. He followed her directions, steering around people to reach the elevator which wasn't that difficult to find. He probably was just stupid. He spotted the back of Jimin's silver head just as he was entering the lift.

"Jimin hyung!" he called.

Jimin whirled around at his voice, and at seeing Jeongguk's face, his eyes widened. In a startled panic, he hurriedly jabbed at the buttons to close the doors before the younger boy could reach him, but they kept reopening and closing because he was clumsily pressing both the door operating buttons in his rush. Jeongguk gave him the most absurd look as he ran towards the carriage, staring dumbfoundedly as Jimin still didn't give up on the pressing.

From his periphery, he could sense other students pausing to watch the exchange, most likely supporting the same expression as Jeongguk. When he finally reached the elevator, he stuck his hand between the doors, ready to give the older boy a piece of his mind at how ridiculous he was being.

"Are you for real?"

But the silver-haired boy didn't pay him any mind, as soon as Jeongguk had walked in, he dashed around him and ran back out of the lift. His backpack thumped against his spine loudly with every step and he barely managed to keep a hold on his art case. The few loitering students were still staring at the two, quite baffled to even laugh. And before Jeongguk had the chance to even utter a word, the doors finally shut to his gobsmacked face.

Wow.
That just happened.

He ran his fingers through his hair, trying to make sense of the occurrence. When he reached the ground floor, he just walked out in a daze, willing his mind to come out of the stupour Jimin had induced in him. Of course, the older boy's attempts to avoid him at his house were silly, too, but not nearly this nonsensical. Jeongguk had never seen him like that, and he wondered whether he was the one to drive him to this stage or if Jimin had hidden that level of absurdity from him.

He dejectedly walked back to the building where his next class was, thinking Jihyun's advice of not doing anything stupid was irrelevant if Jimin was driven to make such a fool out of himself.

The next day, Jeongguk decided to try again, writing yesterday's incident as a one-off thing. The plan only formed when he saw Taehyung coming out of the volunteering society room with his girlfriend, Joohyun. Jeongguk thought since Jimin and he were both in the same year, he might know of his whereabouts.

"Hey, hyung," he greeted, fist bumping him and then waving at Joohyun. "How are you, noona?"

"Not bad, Jeongguk-ah. How about you?" Joohyun said with a pleasant smile. She was easily the most charming girl on the campus, considering her beauty and a matching attractive personality. "I haven't seen you since the last game, you must've been busy."

Jeongguk chuckled. *If only she knew.* He scratched the back of his head. "Yeah, something like that."

"What's up, Jeongguk? It isn't like you to initiate contact with us peasants," Taehyung said sarcastically. "Do you need something?"

"Shut up, hyung." He shoved at his shoulder with an embarrassed smile. It seemed like his leeching habits were widely known. "I was wondering if you know where Jimin hyung is? You know, since your common area is the same and all."

Taehyung immediately gawked at him. "Back up a little, Jeongguk. First of all, did you just call Jimin 'hyung' and since when did you acknowledge him enough to be looking for him?"

The younger boy groaned, but he really had this coming. "Hyung. This is serious. Stop teasing me."

"I'm not even teasing," he deadpanned. "I'm quite shocked if you can't tell."

"Yeah, Jeongguk," Joohyun said uncertainly. "Since when did you start talking to Jimin?"

Jeongguk only grimaced, choosing not to answer that question.

"Fine," Taehyung relented. "He's probably at the café behind the southside halls. Jimin loves their frappés, even in winter. And I only know from my previous *failed* attempts to befriend him." He gave him a pointed look.

But Jeongguk ignored it, smiling widely at him before he started to leave.

"Wait, Jeongguk!" Joohyun called. When the brunet turned around, she quickly told Taehyung something which he nodded at and left them, but not without a dubious look between the two.

She then faced Jeongguk, pulling him by the sleeve to a more secluded area. "I just wanted to talk to you about something."
He was confused. "Sure?"

"Why are you looking for Jimin?"

"I need to ask him something," Jeongguk said, which was only partially a lie.

"Are you two friends?"

"Kinda?"

Why was she probing him like that?

"Look, Jeongguk. Seulgi is a close friend of mine, you know that, don't you?" Jeongguk nodded, unsure where she was going with this. "She spends quite a bit of time with Jimin, and just watching him from the sidelines for the past few years, I've noticed that his friendships don't end well," Joohyun said, looking apprehensively at the younger boy as though she was afraid of how he'd take her words. "I'm afraid for Seulgi. She's already recovering from a rough break and I don't want her to get hurt. But she vows that Jimin wouldn't ever cause her any sort of pain. But you can understand my concern, right?"

Jeongguk didn't know how to feel about this, he didn't like—no, he hated how Joohyun seemed to be putting all the blame on Jimin. But he still wasn't sure why she was directing this at him, and he didn't want to let his feelings get the best of him before knowing everything. "I don't understand what I have anything to do with it."

"I feel the same way towards you, Jeongguk," she said. "You're a good friend of mine, and Taehyung and I both care about you. I've seen some changes in Seulgi, not necessarily positive, since she's been friends with Jimin. And I just want you to be careful—"

"I'm not walking into this blindly, I know that things can go bad—"

"But Jeongguk," she insisted. "Just being aware of it doesn't mean that you're not going to get hurt."

Her tenacity caused him to watch her suspiciously, how much did she know about Jimin to be warning Jeongguk? Just being friends with Seulgi couldn't possibly expose her to Jimin's nature so well. "Why are you telling me this? We've never even talked about Jimin hyung before."

"A month? Or two? I don't know."

"And nobody knows about your ... Nobody knows that you're acquainted?"

"You're being really weird about this." Jeongguk had too much already happening in his head to indulge Joohyun's obscure responses as well. Of course, they were good friends through Jeongguk's relationship with Taehyung, but they'd only ever had light conversations. Nothing that consisted of double-edged words. "Have you met Jimin hyung before? Is that it? I didn't even think you two knew each other."

She sighed. "This is not about me, Jeongguk-ah. I just want you to be wary of him. Please."

"What about Jimin hyung, noona?" Jeongguk's throat clogged up with emotion, feeling wronged in Jimin's place. "Who's gonna worry for him? Who does he have to tell him that he should be careful with people?"
Joohyun's eyes softened. "I didn't mean it like that."

"I know you're coming from a good place, and perhaps if I were you, I'd say the same thing. But I've seen Jimin hyung, he couldn't nearly hurt me, or Seulgi noona, as much as we could hurt him." He wished he could explain to Joohyun just how sweet Jimin was, just how much love he could offer but the same judgement he was receiving from her was what kept him so distant. People being afraid of getting hurt but not considering how they could be the ones doing the hurting.

But it wasn't their fault either. They couldn't be blamed for wanting to protect their hearts. Love and hate were dangerous things, but fear and pain were the worst of them all. They could cause people to do unimaginable things.

"I can worry for you, can't I, Jeongguk?" she murmured.

Jeongguk sighed, drawing her close and circling his arms around her. "You can, noona." He gave her a firm squeeze, wanting his embrace to be a reassurance to her. She had every right to be concerned about the well being of her friends. "I appreciate you caring for me, but I'm not going to let the chance of getting hurt stop me from being friends with Jimin hyung."

Joohyun's hands curled tightly into his hoodie. "It's not just a chance. It's a given."

He pulled back to stare at her. "You know more than you're letting on."

She shrugged. "Maybe."

"Why does everyone who associates with Jimin hyung become so cryptic?"

Jeongguk had meant it as a joke but her serious response silenced him. "He has that effect, doesn't he?"

His eyes narrowed at her. "How do you know him?"

"I'm getting late for my workshop, Jeongguk. I'll catch you later," she said dismissively. He knew Joohyun was lying but he let her go, he wasn't impervious to avoiding matters that had difficult answers.

As she became a distant figure in his vision, Jeongguk sighed. Great. Another thing he would have to prod Jimin about. Although he was certain that he wouldn't find anything out. His life just wasn't that easy.

Jeongguk started making his way to the cafe Taehyung had mentioned. A part of him wondered if he was a sane person: going after Jimin despite the onslaught of warnings, from the silver-haired boy himself and other people. Then his heart replied that no amount of caution could stop him from seeking him out. He liked Jimin, plain and simple. And he missed him. Jeongguk wasn't getting out of this until he'd experienced every inch of him. His body and his mind. He wanted to see it all. To unravel him like perhaps Yoongi hadn't done either.

Upon reaching the cafe, Jeongguk realised why he had never come across Jimin before. It was right on the outskirts of their main campus, close to the residential halls. Only the local inhabitants and the students from the humanities department, which was the closest, probably came here. It wasn't hard to locate his silver hair among other people, or perhaps it was merely the fact that Jeongguk was like iron in Jimin's magnetic field.

He pulled open the door, grateful that it didn't have a chime which would alert Jimin. He needed to cautiously approach the older boy because, after last time, he knew that Jimin would dash as soon as
he saw him.

Before Jeongguk neared him though, he took his time to just watch the silver-haired boy. He was fully absorbed into his work, some sort of written pieces were spread out before him, probably for his recording journal. There was an empty frappé container beside his hand and a half eaten pastry. His hand was constantly raking through his hair, either from frustration at his work or because his hair wouldn't stop falling into his eyes. The sight evoked a certain fondness inside Jeongguk, he could probably watch him for hours, the way his small fingers flipped through the pages and how he'd bite that lower lip of his from time to time.

Jeongguk felt his hands shake from how much he wanted to touch him, to just be close to him. As Jimin rested his jaw in his hand, the neckline of his jumper slid down one shoulder, revealing his clavicles and Jeongguk offhandedly thought he would like to kiss that tanned skin. The fact that Jimin was a boy made it even more enticing, because there was this firmness yet grace to the column of his neck, the outline of his windpipe and Adam's apple was tantalising. He wanted to kiss up the line of his throat, suck on it, maybe. Leave a mark.

Leave his mark.

To just taste those spit-licked, rouged lips for once.

It was only after a moment that the thought fully registered in Jeongguk's head and he gulped in apprehension. Fuck, he was so far gone that Joohyun's earlier warnings were the last thing on his mind. How could anything refrain him when his mind was in a haze from all the things he'd come to feel for Jimin?

Nothing could stop him. Jeongguk genuinely believed that. The way he had started to fall into the abyss that was Park Jimin was incorrigible. He wasn't willing to listen to anyone, himself or others, if they told him to stay away.

Jimin then took a bite out of his pastry, his pierced tongue appearing to lick off the stray crumbs from off his mouth, and coincidentally, his eyes rose to meet Jeongguk’s. The effect was immediate. He practically choked on the food, eyeballs looming out of their sockets, and he patted his chest desperately, coughing along the way.

His gaze frantically tore between the door behind Jeongguk to him and then back again, causing him to swallow with fear written across his face. The younger boy saw the resolution in his eyes when he swept his arm across the table, sending all his equipment and work tumbling down into his large carry case. He didn't seem to mind that half the paperwork was being scrunched up and ruined, some of his stationary actually clattered onto the floor.

But Jeongguk was nonplussed as to why he was being so hurried, it wasn't like he would let Jimin leave anyway. The only exit was behind him and the older boy had another thing coming if he thought he could escape Jeongguk this time. He would have to face him sooner or later.

Or maybe, he wouldn't. The brunet watched in quiet astonishment, frozen on his spot as Jimin unlatched the window behind him, making a cold gust of wind bluster inside. He put his legs through the opening and then squeezed his small body out of the space before wrenching his carry case behind himself. He scurried away like something was hot on his heels while Jeongguk could barely snap out of his stupified position, never mind even think to chase the boy.

In just mere seconds, Jimin had managed to get away as though it was nothing. And just like the last time, he could sense people staring, gawking, but his mind was in a frenzy. What the fuck? Honestly, what the actual fuck?
Was this person even Park Jimin?

If Jeongguk was petty, then goddammit, Jimin wasn't even on the scale. That level of immaturity was something he never thought he'd associate with him. But then when it came to Jimin, could Jeongguk really say that he could foresee anything? He walked out of the cafe, blinking from the shock that was only slightly starting to wear down.

Jimin really didn't want to talk to him, did he? He was scared more than anything, Jeongguk had seen it on his face. So Jeongguk decided that by the end of the day, he would get him alone and say everything that was on his mind. Whether he was being forceful or not, he was meeting Jimin tonight.

Jeongguk checked the time on his watch, it was five o'clock and dusk would soon fall upon them, and Jimin would definitely be getting home soon. He needed Namjoon's address. He retrieved his phone from his pocket, texting the person who would be the most unassuming about it.

Seokjin put up a fight nonetheless, pressing for details when Jeongguk simply said that he needed help with his assignment. He sent him Namjoon's address with no more qualms, but Jeongguk didn't doubt that this conversation would come up again. It wasn't like his hyung to just give up on a matter when his heart wasn't sated. It didn't worry the younger boy, though; and it was much better than asking Jihyun who would have chastised him to leave Jimin alone.

But if only Jihyun knew, Jeongguk couldn't leave the silver-haired boy alone, not anymore. Not when he'd started to crave his presence like an addict craved a drug.

Jeongguk drove to Namjoon's apartment straight away since all his classes for today were done and he wanted to get there before Jimin. It wasn't a long drive, taking around fifteen minutes considering the rush hour traffic too. He didn't know whether to expect Yoongi to be there, but he decided it was probable that he would be present. A part of him wished he could do this without other people around, because Jimin wasn't going to be easy on his own. And he didn't know what to expect from Yoongi either.

Maybe he would be all protective of Jimin and make this harder for Jeongguk, or he might not care much about either of their affairs at all. But Jeongguk didn't have time to ponder much on the subject before Namjoon opened the door to his pensive face.

"Jeongguk? Hi. What brings you here?" He looked startled to see him.

"I wanted to meet up with Jimin hyung," he replied.

"Oh, is he expecting you?"

"Not really."

Namjoon gave him a weird look, which Jeongguk didn't mind since they were mere strangers and he must've had some questions.

"Okay," he mumbled. "Come in and sit down, though. Jimin will probably be back in half an hour. He's been staying a little after class times because of his practical work."

Jeongguk nodded at him as he walked inside, sort of dreading to look around the apartment because he didn't want to see Yoongi, not when he possessed an unreasonable amount of dislike towards him already.

"Do you want something to drink?" Namjoon asked in good conduct, making the younger boy look
at him in surprise. He didn't realise how intrusive his sudden appearance at his house was; although Seokjin and Namjoon were very close, this was only Jeongguk's second meeting with the man, and he definitely should have thought this through beforehand.

"No, I'm fine, hyung," Jeongguk said sheepishly. "I'm sorry for just showing up unannounced, it's just that I've been trying to catch Jimin hyung for days now. But he's avoiding me and I thought confronting him here would stop him from running away."

"It's fine, Jeongguk. Don't worry about it," he said. "But why is he avoiding you—"

A bedroom door opened abruptly, and out walked Min Yoongi, looking every bit the grumpy man Jeongguk always associated with him. He had fading bleach blond hair, which seemed to merge with his pale skin and made him look like a ghost. And quite simply, he terrified Jeongguk. He didn't seem to notice the younger boy at first, but when he walked into the living room further, he glanced at the two of them.

"Uh. Welcome back, hyung," Jeongguk started, because he was younger and he didn't want to offend Yoongi by not greeting him.

He couldn't recall the last time he'd seen the man, it was most likely when he was around fifteen, or something. They had never interacted with each other, having very different friendship circles with only Seokjin as their mutual friend. Jeongguk's relationship with him wasn't different to what he'd been like with Jimin before. Acquainted, but not enough to hold a conversation.

Yoongi furrowed his brows at him. "*Jeongguk*?" he recalled. "Boy, you've grown up."

Jeongguk was startled, to say the least, that the older boy even remembered him. He didn't think Jimin would have mentioned Jeongguk to Yoongi, but it was faltering how much the blond man had appeared in their usual conversations. He tried smiling at him, but his undying jealousy was probably starting to take form because his lips just wouldn't coordinate.

Goddammit, Park Jimin was messing everything up for him.

Yoongi didn't take notice of his dilemma, simply walking past them to the kitchen area where he started to rummage through the fridge.

Namjoon then steered him back to the original matter. "So, why is Jimin avoiding you?"

Jeongguk saw Yoongi's head tilt in their direction at Jimin's name, but he continued with his actions nonetheless. The younger boy faced Namjoon, shrugging in response. "I'm not exactly sure. Maybe I scare him, who knows?"

The taller man laughed, but Jeongguk hadn't meant it as a joke. "I wouldn't be surprised, that boy jumps at the slightest of things. Yesterday, he put the pressure cooker on and screamed when the whistle started to blow."

He smiled at that, that seemed like Jimin. "I assumed he'd be the one doing the cooking." Jeongguk chuckled. "He's amazing, isn't he? His family had to stay at our house because their water pipes burst and he made me kimchi fried rice. I licked my fingers clean, I promise."

"He is," Namjoon agreed. "I might have to keep Yoongi hyung so that Jimin can cook for me every day." There was a scoff from the kitchen but he only laughed at it. "Don't scoff at me, hyung," he called. "You came back just so you could have homemade food."

Jeongguk glanced at his watch. "How long until Jimin hyung is back?"
"I'm not sure what's taking him so long. He's usually back by this time."

He hummed, but he was getting restless the longer he sat there. Had Jimin somehow found out that Jeongguk was at Namjoon's apartment?

"I believe what you said about Jimin avoiding you, though," Namjoon admitted. "He has been a little jumpy lately."

"Really?" Jeongguk wondered.

He hummed, pausing to think with a speculating look on his face. "Especially at the doorbells, he looks ready to make a run for it every time." He stared at him. "What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything!" Jeongguk defended, a little affronted. "He's just acting like a child instead of sorting out whatever problem he has with me."

"I'm sure he isn't," Namjoon said placatingly. "Jimin just—"

"Hyung." The brunet gave him a serious look. "He jumped out of a fucking window to get away from me, I'd say that's called being a child," he deadpanned.

Namjoon's brows rose to his hairline, seeming speechless and sort of dubious. But Yoongi, who had been passively listening in to the exchange, stepped out from behind the kitchen counter and approached them.

"Jeongguk," he called, eyeing the younger boy in chary contemplation. "Let's have a talk, why don't we?"

Chapter End Notes

p.s. Joohyun is the real name of Red Velvet's Irene. She was previously mentioned in the first chapter!

p.p.s. the window jumping scene was inspired by that one BTS Run episode where Jimin escaped the 'jail' by climbing through the bars.
"Tell me about Jimin and you."

It was a vague request.

Yoongi didn't make any assumptions. He merely asked Jeongguk about himself and Jimin, not intruding by posing a question or by insinuating that they had any sort of a relationship. If he did, maybe then Jeongguk could have avoided him by denying that something, if anything, was going on between them.

"I don't know, hyung." He sighed. "That's all we are, Jeongguk and Jimin."

Yoongi's eyes were earnest, gazing at him keenly and with a subtle concern behind them. They were also chasmic, reminding Jeongguk a little of Jimin's orbs. You could be fooled into searching their vastness for answers, but you'd only keep falling into their depth, never quite discerning anything. Jeongguk could try to read Yoongi's intentions, but he would only be revealing his own thoughts.

"For how long have you been 'Jeongguk and Jimin'?"

A second passed. Then Jeongguk laughed suddenly, very much impressed by his clever question. "You're good," he said. He had nearly fallen for it.

Answering that query would first require knowing what Jeongguk and Jimin actually were. But he really didn't know. Jeongguk knew what he wanted to be, what he wanted to experience and feel with Jimin, however, he couldn't articulate much else. To Yoongi, he could have replied by saying any period of time, per se. But when did Jeongguk first start to see Jimin as something more? He
didn't know. Yet he thought the notion had always been a part of him somehow.

He'd always found Jimin pretty.

"I'm not trying to be obscure, Jeongguk," Yoongi said. "I just don't want to put words in your mouth."

Jeongguk sighed, nodding in concedence as his gaze wandered around. They were in Yoongi's burrowed bedroom, and there was only a single bed, the place void of Jimin's belongings. It reassured Jeongguk's anxious heart. He wasn't being replaced; at least not by Yoongi. He would no longer have to spend sleepless nights wondering if Jimin's small hand was clutched inside Yoongi's, if his presence was warming up somebody else's bed when Jeongguk's own remained so cold.

He let out a relieved breath. It wasn't much, but for now, Jeongguk was sated. His insecurity was within its bounds and his jealousy was leashed. He hoped it stayed that way, he didn't want to unnecessarily dislike people.

"He doesn't sleep here," Yoongi said eventually.

But a surprised chuckle escaped Jeongguk regardless. Of course, Yoongi noticed. It was embarrassing how easily he could read the younger boy. Jeongguk recalled Jimin telling him that the blond-haired man understood all the words you couldn't say, and now he was seeing it firsthand.

"I prayed he wouldn't, hyung." He let out a self-deprecating laugh. "I don't like the thought of it."

When Jeongguk met his gaze, Yoongi held it. He peered over all the edges of emotions that Jeongguk's eyes were betraying, and for the first time, Yoongi smiled at him. It was small, barely there, but his liking was tangible. "That's okay."

"Why are you smiling at me?"

"Because you remind me of Jimin."

Jeongguk was startled. "Really?"

Yoongi hummed, but didn't elaborate, merely continuing to look at him. The younger boy hated how uncomfortable he felt under his penetrating gaze; God knew what Yoongi saw in him, it could simply be a tactic to make Jeongguk divulge his heart, but he was unnerved nonetheless. Maybe he should try it with Jimin some time, make the silver-haired boy think that Jeongguk knew something when he actually didn't.

Everybody should have a technique to fluster someone like that. If they were as successful as Yoongi with it, they could go places with that talent.

"So?" he spoke after a while.

Jeongguk stared blankly. "What?"

Yoongi shifted on the couch they were sitting, uncrossing his legs and putting an elbow on the backrest so he was facing Jeongguk directly. "Jimin usually dives into things head first. But you're making him run," he said. "That's quite rare."

"Why?"

"It's usually from what he wants."
Jeongguk's eyes widened involuntarily, and he floundered like a fish out of water for a moment. Did Yoongi just confirm that Jimin wanted him too? Jeongguk tried to will his heart to stop pounding so violently, it wasn't like the older man had specified if he meant that in an intimate or platonic way. "What do you mean by that?" he managed to get out through a choking breath.

Yoongi cocked an eyebrow. "What do you want it to mean?"

"Don't talk to me in your riddles," he said. "I get enough of that from Jimin hyung."

"You don't mind them, though. Otherwise, why would you still be here?"

"What?"

"It's obvious that you have a romantic interest in him, Jeongguk." He sighed with an underlining exasperation. "You'd know if you could see yourself. Nobody's face flushes like that at the hint of requited want. You look like a tomato."

"I don't look like a tomato," he grumbled.

"What about the first part?"

"That may or may not be true."

"I thought so." The blond man looked smug.

Jeongguk glowered at him, hating to be so completely exposed to Yoongi like that. It was so irksome that he seemed to know everything about the younger boy when Jeongguk hadn't even properly met him until today. Was Yoongi one of the maddening things that came along with Jimin? Wasn't the silver-haired boy's trying nature enough?

"Be careful of your tendencies, though," Yoongi interrupted his musings. "Jimin is taken and you wouldn't want to do something stupid."

His head jerked towards him in shock. "He's still dating Chungha noona?" Jeongguk cried. He had been sure that the two weren't talking anymore, considering how their last conversation in his presence had gone.

"As far as I know, they haven't broken up."

Jeongguk pouted. "Wasn't it enough that I had a cagey Jimin hyung to deal with? Now I have competition too."

"Not necessarily," Yoongi said. "Jimin has a particular liking for her, but it's more so towards her character than her as a partner, I'd say."

"What does that mean?"

"Chungha is a good person, but not necessarily good for him."

"How will I ever compare?" Jeongguk said glumly. "I'm not even a good person."

"That's what makes you perfect for him."

"What?"

Yoongi looked at him in a deadpan manner. "Are you stupid?"
"That's debatable."

The older man merely sighed in disdain, but Jeongguk begged to differ with his scorn, it wasn't his fault that Yoongi believed Jeongguk had enough of a brain to decipher his cryptic words. So he decided to ignore Yoongi's riddles because he could never figure them out anyway. It was no wonder Jimin and him were such good friends, they probably thrived off each other's ambiguity. Meanwhile, Jeongguk was a simple person, he liked clear feelings and spoon-fed information.

But there was one thought nagging at him, "Should I even be pursuing Jimin hyung? I mean, he's technically with someone else."

Yoongi snickered quietly at him. "Pursuing? What are you, a Victorian gentleman?"

"You know what I mean," Jeongguk grumbled the second time that day. But considering how he'd always labelled Yoongi a grumpy old man, he should take that title because his actions suited it more than the blond man's.

"As long as you're not overstepping your boundaries, I don't see any problem in talking to Jimin," he replied.

"If I walk into Jimin's hyung studio he'll consider it as me overstepping my boundaries," the younger boy snorted.

"He'll have to live with it, then."

Jeongguk paused, wondering why Yoongi was in favour of him. "You don't like Chungha noona?"

"I don't dislike her," Yoongi rectified. "She's just not stubborn enough for Jimin."

"Jimin hyung doesn't like people who push him too much."

He gave Jeongguk a canny look. "Then that's what you need to do more, isn't it?"

A moment passed and neither of them looked away, Jeongguk was frowning and Yoongi had an expectant look on his face.

"You're scary," Jeongguk finally said.

"Jimin would say the same about you," he retorted.

The younger boy grimaced. "Why?"

"Hasn't he given you his warnings?"

"Yeah?"

Yoongi smiled again. "He's terrified because you won't listen to them."

Jeongguk's lips parted in surprise. He had always unconsciously wondered the reasons for Jimin's persistence to evade him, sometimes blaming it on his own incompetence and sometimes on Jimin's nature. He wouldn't have thought that his tenacity to chase after him would be good, but telling by Yoongi's expression, it was.

"How do you know him so well, hyung?"

"I've known him for a long time, Jeongguk," he said. "He's been through a lot, and I've seen how
things have shaped him to become the person he is today. Jimin might be unpredictable, but he's not hard to understand. Once you learn his fears, you can easily identify his motives. I, for one, know that Jimin's also scared because he doesn't know what you want out of him."

The younger boy halted. Yoongi's last words were almost identical to what Jimin had demanded from him on multiple occasions, "What do you want from me?" He should have known. Jimin was afraid of Jeongguk's intentions with him, and it made sense, considering how the silver-haired boy feared abandonment so extremely.

"But hyung, if you want something enough, don't you work with the difficulties? I'm still talking to you."

Yoongi looked at him ruefully. "Will you still be talking to me in a few months time?"

Jeongguk frowned. It wasn't fair. He was only human. Yoongi couldn't expect him to stay consistent with his current feelings when he didn't exactly know what he was getting himself into. Wasn't it enough that he was willing to try his hardest for Jimin? There was no way to be certain of what the future held.

"I can't answer that."

"Of course, you can't," Yoongi said with kind eyes. There was a solemn understanding in them, but it did nothing to soothe the agitation inside Jeongguk when faced with the context of his words.

What if Yoongi was trying to let Jeongguk down in an easy way? He would know what type of a person Jimin needed and it probably wasn't Jeongguk. And what if the blond man was right in questioning his constancy? After all, it was the thing Jimin wanted the most and Jeongguk couldn't offer that to him.

"It's so hard, hyung."

"I know."

Jeongguk nibbled on his bottom lip, biting down onto the flesh until it stung and then letting it free. It was saddening how quickly a conversation could take a pessimistic turn when talking long enough about Jimin. It was like something was trying to tell Jeongguk, warn him, that he should listen to the silver-haired boy when he urged him to stay away. But he couldn't, and that made it worse because a sense of despair was starting to fall onto him as he tried to conjure up ways to know Jimin. "When it comes to him, every road is a dead end," he said. "I feel so stuck."

"I'm sure Jimin didn't promise you much else."

Jeongguk looked away bitterly. "He didn't promise me anything."

But Yoongi was unfazed, he gave him a knowing look. "At least you know that."

The younger boy sighed, he was only distressing himself the more he spoke with Yoongi. He knew that it wasn't the older man's intention but how was he to stop feeling so dejected? Although nobody could be blamed for the intricacy of the situation, neither Jimin and nor Jeongguk, it was difficult to accept the reality.

"I can't give up just like that."

Yoongi watched him carefully. "I didn't once ask to you tell me how you felt about him, Jeongguk. That's only for you and Jimin to know. But I'm hoping he's not a conquest to you, don't hurt him just
to satisfy your personal challenges."

"He's not a fucking challenge to me!" Jeongguk lashed out, enraged over his incentives being constantly questioned. But more so, he was hysterical over the chances of Yoongi's words being true. What if even healing Jimin was some sort of a way to assure his competency? He was almost pleading as he murmured in an anguished tone, "I don't want him to be a challenge, hyung."

"Sometimes you have to know when to let somebody go, Jeongguk." Yoongi sighed, and he was compassionate as ever.

"I don't even have him in the first place, how could I let him go?"

"That's not what I meant. Of course, I want this to work between you two, God knows Jimin deserves someone who would fight for him. But I'm saying this for you too. Later on, if you are still hopelessly struggling for it, you need to let him go."

Jeongguk gazed desperately at him, wanting Yoongi to reassure him that it would get better. But it was obvious by his words that there were slim chances. Yoongi would know, he had seen all of Jimin's relationships build and their ends too.

"Don't feel the pressure to stay, Jeongguk-ah," he said softly. "You can leave when it gets too much."

"How can you say that? You know how much Jimin hyung fears people leaving him."

"Because I'd rather he was left alone than hurting in an unhealthy relationship," Yoongi murmured, squeezing the younger boy's hand consolingly. "And I'll be there for him."

But I want to be the one who's there for him.

"Leaving doesn't mean that you weren't strong enough," he continued. "It's just that you valued your own self too."

More than everyone's warnings on how things could wrong, Yoongi's gentle words were what scared him the most. Jeongguk felt like he'd lost even before anything had started. Giving him a way out only disheartened him, because that path wouldn't exist if others hadn't take it. It was merely an escape route.

"Hyung, I feel like it's already ended."

"But you haven't even begun, sweetheart."

Jeongguk stared back into his kind eyes, thinking there was this particular homely that Yoongi radiated which made you feel like you could tell him anything. It was of no wonder that Jimin turned to him in his times of need. Yoongi just understood you so completely, creating a sense of familiarity which was hard to find in people.

"Say something to make me feel better, hyung."

"Jimin wouldn't be hiding like this if he didn't care about you," Yoongi said in a mellow voice. "He runs from what he wants and he yields to what he doesn't. Let him take his time. He'll only return to you, I promise."

"Okay," Jeongguk mumbled. "I believe you."
He watched the younger boy's sullen expression disapprovingly, then nudged him with his elbow. "Want me to tell you a secret, Jeongguk-ah?" he asked with a mischievous glint in his eyes.

"Sure?" He looked back unassumingly.

"You're exactly his type."

Jeongguk gaping. "Me?"

Yoongi had a triumphant smile etched onto his face. "That's what I said."

But the brunet was still staring at him in shock. Never in a million years would he have thought that Jimin had a type, never mind it being him. From what he could recall from his memory, the girls he'd seen with Jimin in the past didn't have much in common. "Jimin hyung has a type?"

His eyes lingered over Jeongguk's body deliberately, and when he finally met his gaze there was a smirk threatening to take over his features. "Oh, if only you knew."

Jeongguk forgot all about his prior dismay, tugging at the older man's sleeve in a frenzy. "Hyung!" he exclaimed. "You can't leave me hanging like that!"

"Technically," Yoongi countered. "I shouldn't be telling you anything about Jimin's taste. But you looked like a pouty bunny so I thought I'd indulge you."

"His taste?" Jeongguk parroted, licking his lips.

"Mm-hmm."

"If I'm his type," he wondered out loud. "Then, does Jimin hyung like boys?"

Yoongi fully smirked this time. "Boys like you, in particular."

Jeongguk's heart skipped a beat. Fuck. He needed some time to fret and also revel over this piece of information. "Boys like me," he mouthed to himself, eyes vacantly staring into space.

The older man seemed to be greatly enjoying his stunned reaction. "Are you that surprised, Jeongguk-ah? Jimin's very open about his sexuality."

He laughed breathlessly. "Not in front of me," he said, still chanting Yoongi's earlier words back and forth in his mind.

For fuck's sake. Would his heart stop pounding like that?

Yoongi started to say something but paused when the sudden sound of chattering drifted in from the living room. One of the voices was obviously Namjoon's but the other honeyed melody belonged to Jimin. Jeongguk sat up promptly, unsure of what to do in the given situation. Amidst their talking, he had forgotten about his reason for coming here. He glanced at the clock hanging on the wall across from him, it was nearing half six and he thought it was too late for Jimin to be coming back at this time.

He turned to Yoongi helplessly for guidance on whether to talk to Jimin right now. "Hyung."

"I don't know why you're looking at me," the older man responded, straight-faced.

"You told me to let Jimin hyung take his time," Jeongguk said, fraught with indecisiveness.
"But you've waited long enough?"

Jeongguk sighed, nodding feebly. "I've waited long enough," he replied. Patience had never been his forte, and when faced with a stubborn creature like Jimin, life was hard. How much more time did Jimin require? Besides, if he was so scared of confrontation it wasn't like time could change his perverse decision to avoid Jeongguk forever.

"Do what your heart tells you," Yoongi said.

"My heart tells me to—"

*Grab his face and kiss the living daylights out of him.*

"—talk to him."

Yoongi raised an eyebrow dubiously, like he had an inkling where the younger boy's thoughts had strayed. But before he could speak the bedroom room opened without a warning, the silver head of Jimin's poking in through the gap.

"Hi, Yoongi hyung," he said, starting to advance into the room but halting as soon as his eyes fell on Jeongguk's figure. The brunet could see the alarm on Jimin's blanched face, his jaw was hanging open and his eyes were travelling suspiciously between Yoongi and him. In mere two seconds, he steeled himself, hands curling into fists and looking ready to bolt.

"Stop," Jeongguk said peevishly. "How long will you run?"

Jimin's eyes widened uneasily, drifting to Yoongi who didn't look too pleased with him. He gave Jimin a pointed look, but the silver-haired boy pretended to be oblivious to it, trying to retreat with subtle footsteps as though nobody would catch his obvious disinclination. His gaze was locked on Jeongguk, and he seemed like he would flee if the younger boy as much as moved in his direction.

"Jimin-ah," Yoongi called, making him jolt in his flight. "Didn't we talk about this?"

"Hyung, that's not fair!" he cried.

The blond man wasn't swayed, he stared at him soberly. "I think Jeongguk deserves a proper explanation."

His words made Jimin purse his lips unhappily, but he still looked torn between listening to Yoongi or just leaving. In the end, he nodded morosely. The two friends shared a meaningful look, and Jeongguk believed Seokjin when he'd said that Jimin and Yoongi could talk telepathically.

There was a frightened aura to the silver-haired boy when Yoongi left the room, he peered at the brunet with panic-stricken eyes and bitten lips. Jeongguk's heart throbbed at the sheer unease with which Jimin looked at him. He wrenched his gaze away from him, scoffing bitterly.

Of all the things he wanted to offer Jimin, what he had solely managed was fear. Jeongguk thought it told him a lot about their relationship.

"Why are you back so late?"

He got no reply from Jimin, who only looked at him upsetly.

"Great, now you're making me feel like the bad guy," he muttered.

The older boy was still silent, reluctant to even grant him a word.
"Fine," Jeongguk relented when it looked like he wasn't going to budge. "I won't make you talk just yet. But please, at least see me once."

Jimin stared back in surprise.

"Can you do that for me?" Jeongguk implored, gazing at him with wide eyes which he hoped expressed his earnestness.

He nodded hesitantly, seemingly stuck in a startled daze.

With a pleased smile, Jeongguk clapped his hands together, satisfied for now. He felt like he would start to get withdrawal symptoms if he went without seeing Jimin for long enough. Unknowingly, Jeongguk had become acclimated to his presence, he missed him regardless of where he was and what he was doing.

"Why don't we meet at that cafe where you so disrespectfully ran out on me?" He cocked an eyebrow.

Jimin had the decency to look sheepish. "Mean Bean?"

"What?"

He ducked his head with a smile. "The cafe is called Mean Bean."

Jeongguk tilted his head slightly, staring at him in a newfound endearment. "Reminds me of a certain someone."

Jimin scrunched up his nose adorably and the brunet couldn't resist the urge to tap it. Damn him, by this rate, Jeongguk had more chances of becoming irrationally obsessed with the silver-haired boy than winning him over.

"Tomorrow, 6pm?" he asked.

"What about next week?"

Jeongguk clicked his tongue. "Do you really want to get on my bad side, Park Jimin?"

It was a rhetorical question but Jimin answered anyway, "No."

"That's what I like to hear." As he passed by him, Jeongguk didn't stall too long, only brushing his knuckles against the back of Jimin's hand which made him jump. He lingered there for a moment before glancing subtly at the older boy. "Don't stand me up, hyung. You know I'll chase you to the depths of hell if I have to."

Chapter End Notes

Honestly, I think we all need a Yoongi in our lives. And my bias is probably showing through in this chapter haha.

p.s. the name of the cafe is inspired by JJ Bean coffee roasters.
Mean Bean had an intimate and secluded atmosphere to it. In many ways, Jeongguk thought it was quite similar to Jimin's art studio, and maybe that was the reason behind the older boy's frequent visits to the place. People tended to incline towards places which complemented their nature. It gave a sense of solitude despite being a public place, which to all intents and purposes explained Jimin very well. Being able to know these parts of him made Jeongguk agree with Yoongi's words yesterday. For the most part, Jimin wasn't a hard person to figure out once you learnt the basics of his personality.

But it was his unpredictability that was the downfall of Jeongguk's confidence. One moment he thought he had the boy figured out and the next Jimin managed to throw him off by revealing a new side to him. It was tiring, to say the least, but the younger boy could handle that. He could handle everything Jimin threw at him for now. Maybe it was Jeongguk's hunger for him talking, maybe he was being too self-assured; yet everything dulled to his senses when Jimin was near. It was hard to see past his want.

He had a feeling that all this belief would come back to bite him in the end, it was never good to be complacent about the unknown. For the sake of classification, Jeongguk would be included in those lucky ones who had never experienced failure, but when it came to Jimin, he could be on the receiving end of it within the blink of an eye.

Even so, to not let his desire engulf him completely was hard. For one, it was mind-blowing the way Jimin affected him without even trying. Like how Jeongguk had been patiently tapping his foot under the table as he waited for Jimin, but at the first glance towards the older boy's figure as he entered the cafe, he violently smacked his knee against the ashwood. He didn't even register the hurt
because, goddammit, Park Jimin looked breathtaking.

If Jeongguk wasn't being delusional, he'd think Jimin actually put some effort into his appearance. His silver hair was gelled back with a few loose strands framing his temples, a rosy pink hue was adorning his lips, those pretty eyes of his were lined with kohl which was striking against his white cotton shirt, and Jeongguk thought he looked like the epitome of an angel.

A beautiful, broken angel if nothing else.

Because his familiar sad eyes were ever so present. His face bore a restless expression which Jeongguk wished he could erase. It didn't belong with the rest of his beauty. And the brunet couldn't look away; Jimin's tanned skin was gleaming under the pendant lights, the long column of his throat down to his chest was exposed through his v-neckline and his clavicles were enticingly on display. Jeongguk's heart started thudding against his chest as the notion that Jimin was dressed up for him crossed his mind. He couldn't recall many times where he had seen the older boy without dishevelled hair and massive eye bags.

Jimin's eyes swept across the cafe for a moment until they landed on Jeongguk who was sitting in a more concealed booth on the far end. When they made eye contact, Jeongguk felt a shudder run down his spine. God, he was so mesmerising. Jeongguk pretended to keep his cool as the silver-haired boy finally started to walk over, but the thing about Jimin was that he didn't just walk, he sauntered. There was a certain authority and also poise in his stance. It was like he knew how he could have Jeongguk eating out of the palm of his hand within seconds. So no matter how nonchalant the younger boy tried to be, Jimin probably saw through him anyway.

There was a suede jacket in his hand and a backpack casually hanging off his shoulder, both of which the older boy placed at his feet before taking a seat.

"Hello," he murmured.

Jeongguk tried to respond, but Jimin's magnetic presence along with his heady, orange blossom scent was making him light-headed. He blinked repeatedly, trying to snap out the induced daze before he made a complete fool out of himself.

But Jimin didn't seem to notice the delay in his greeting as he adjusted in his seat properly, so the brunet took a deep breath, and then decided that he liked the way Jimin said hello to him, because it felt like he was coming back to Jeongguk.

He smiled. "Hi, hyung."

"Jeongguk," Jimin said, almost like a sigh.

"Hmmm?"

But the older boy only stared at him. There didn't seem to be any apparent reason behind Jimin calling his name. It was like he'd just wanted to roll the word around his tongue and say it. His eyes were gazing searchingly at him, always on a lookout for something which Jeongguk didn't think he had. Because what could he give Jimin that other people couldn't?

When it came to stereotypes, Jeongguk was just a teenager trying to beat the odds and Jimin was that unreachable, high maintenance boy wonder who could have the world at his feet. He was just that captivating, and just that difficult. Jeongguk would know, he had been on both ends.

"Haven't you got anything?" he asked belatedly.
"Of course not," Jeongguk said. "I was waiting until you got here."

Jimin pressed his lips together. "Okay. Shall I order something for you?"

His heart skipped a beat, and that probably showed how pathetically love-starved Jeongguk was for him. Just the hint of a willing favour from Jimin had him walking on air. There was something about those words, the domesticity of them, like something Jimin would casually say to him if they were together: it made him happy.

Jeongguk tried to play it cool, though. "Well, I certainly won't say no if my hyung is so kindly offering to pay for me."

"So much for being all alpha male with me yesterday, huh?"

"You liked that?" he murmured, eyeing him with a pleased gleam.

"No comment," Jimin replied, but there was a small smile playing at his lips.

The younger boy grinned toothily at him.

Jimin left to place their order, and Jeongguk looked at the back of his silver head in longing, wanting to tag along because he'd already been away from Jimin for far too long. But he repressed his clingy nature, busying his feet again by tapping them onto the floor so that they wouldn't carry him across the cafe where the older boy was standing.

The man who was serving Jimin was smiling at him, seemingly having a casual conversation. Jeongguk bit his lower lip, torn between feeling impatient and jealous. He was already on borrowed time with Jimin, he didn't need somebody else stealing precious seconds of their time together. God knew how hard it'd been to get the silver-haired boy alone in the first place, and Jeongguk still wasn't convinced that he wouldn't leave in the middle of this.

The heavens must have heard Jeongguk's prayers, because after a couple of minutes Jimin finally finished paying, slipping the loose change in his pocket and taking the receipt from the server. He reluctantly walked back to their table, retrieving his cellphone from his pocket before he sat down. As he began tapping on it, Jeongguk moodily speculated if that was Jimin's tactic to avoid speaking to him or if really needed to text somebody that urgently. But he decided to give him the benefit of the doubt nonetheless.

Meanwhile, he thought about what his hyung had ordered for him. He wanted to know what he assumed his tastes to be like, whether he judged him to be a long black or a mocha type of person, and if he thought a baked good alongside it would be nice. In simple words, Jeongguk was a hoe for Jimin paying any sort of attention to him. Not that he was well acquainted with that particular side of him anyway.

It seemed as though Jimin liked to take charge of purchases when going out with somebody, and he probably always offered to pay at the end. But for the first time, Jeongguk wasn't deliberating over these thoughts for mooching reasons. He just wanted to know these simple, frivolous things about Jimin, for no other reason than to feel closer to him.

So this was what having a crush felt like. Jeongguk wanted to ask if this meeting meant anything to Jimin, if he considered it a date like the younger boy did, because how could he not? He was in a quiet cafe at dusk with drop lights and coffee aroma and lazy jazz music surrounding him, joined by an angelic-looking boy who was glowing even in the semi-darkness. Still fiddling with his phone, per se, but Jeongguk let him be. This was a date. He didn't care what anybody said.
Yet he wondered if the older boy went on little dates like this with Chungha; if he laced his fingers through hers while they chatted, if he fed her a bite of his own food to try, and if they kissed sweetly at the end. Because if Jeongguk had him, he would do that. He would want to kiss the remnants of the artificial sweetener off Jimin's lips. He'd want to nuzzle into his exposed neck and wrap his arms around him until his skin was infused with Jimin's orange blossom scent and his intoxicating touch.

But they were all fantasies. In the near future, Jeongguk couldn't see much of his daydreaming becoming a reality. He had barely managed to get Jimin to sit down with him, God knew how fast he'd run if the younger boy so much as suggested something intimate.

Jimin, at last, put his phone down. His fingers moved to comb through his hair but when the locks didn't move much due to the gel, he sighed frustratedly. "I'm sorry about all this," he said, gesturing in a circular motion towards his face. "Seulgi needed a picture for a quick reference so she made me her guinea pig."

There went his heart. Shattering so easily just like his feeble hopes. Of course, Jimin hadn't dressed up for him. Of course, this wasn't a date.

"You look nice," Jeongguk commented regardless. As Jimin's eyes widened imperceptibly, he realised that he'd never openly complimented him before, so he couldn't stop himself from expressing his admiration. "Beautiful, even ... And white really suits you."


The younger boy smiled back softly, he liked the bashfulness on his features, and how a tinge of pink had started to blossom in his cheeks. It was uncharted territory for them to comment on each other's appearance, but Jeongguk wanted Jimin to know just how captivated he felt by him. Though there was a gnawing ache in his chest as he recovered from the sting of Jimin's earlier words. He felt disappointed in himself for naively hoping that the older boy cared about this meeting enough to dress up.

After a while, a waitress placed their order before them, murmuring pleasantries and then left without much loitering. There were two cappuccinos, Jimin's regular pastry, and a slice of biscoff cheesecake, which Jeongguk assumed was for him. But he was more dazed at Jimin's selection of drinks, was it simply a coincidence that he had bought the younger boy his favourite drink?

"How did you know?" Jeongguk asked in surprise.

Jimin frowned at him. "Of course, I know," he said. "Mum buys espresso just for you because nobody else in my family drinks coffee. And when you come over, you either have a cappuccino or a hot chocolate."

Oh my God, he knows, Jeongguk childishly fawned to himself. There were sudden butterflies in his stomach that were making him giddy, he wanted to kick his legs back and forth. If a small thing like Jimin knowing his coffee preference made him this happy, then he really had no hopes for not ending up a love-struck fool. How could he ever have thought that Jimin ignored him? If anything, the younger boy was the one who paid no attention to him before.

"And the cheesecake?" he queried.

Jimin faltered. "Uh—I saw biscoff cookies in your bedroom once," he offered as an explanation.

Jeongguk bit his lip to stop a smile from spreading across his face. Why was he suddenly feeling so fuzzy inside? It was a stupid question, of course. That was the effect Park Jimin had on him. One
minute Jeongguk couldn't see past his despair and the next he found it difficult to contain his glee. He was better off instaling some humility inside him, because any second now Jimin would say something callous and Jeongguk would be back to sulking. It was nothing unusual for their exchanges anyway.

His thoughts made him want to sigh out loud. So Jeongguk lifted his cup to take a sip, anything to distract himself, wondering if the cappuccino would be good enough to make him a regular at Mean Bean. It completely escaped his mind that the drink must be scalding, with Jimin in his near vicinity and all, and he immediately spluttered out the liquid as soon as it touched his tongue.

An amused snort escaped Jimin at the sight, he tried to disguise it as a cough but Jeongguk could see the laughter leaking from his eyes and how the insides of his cheeks were sucked in. The younger boy frowned at him while reeling from his burning mouth and watery eyes, and when Jimin continued to onlook with that taunting amusement, Jeongguk grumbled in pique. "It's not even that funny," he muttered, grabbing a napkin to wipe at his mouth.

Jimin leaned back. "Never said it was."

"Your eyes say otherwise."

"My eyes?" he said lazily.

Jeongguk regarded him for a moment. "You know what I once thought about you?"

"Go on."

"You look like an angel but your eyes are of the devil."

"Shouldn't you be running for the hills, then?"

One side of his lips quirked up. "Everybody has that one bad boy fantasy, don't they?" When Jimin choked on his own spit, Jeongguk decided not to elaborate on each and every one of his devilish fantasies. "And besides, you do enough running for the both of us."

The older boy gave him the dirtiest look. "I've already had enough of you today."

"Liar." Jeongguk grinned cockily. "You'll never get enough of me."

Jimin rolled his eyes, huffing at the younger boy's never-ending retorts. But he didn't argue, so Jeongguk was appeased to know that he was right. And if that didn't answer whether Jimin missed him too, he didn't know what would.

He picked up his cup again, this time making sure to blow on the drink before taking a sip. It tasted heavenly, and the brunette almost moaned out loud. But for the sake of proper etiquette, he stopped himself from doing just that. It was way too early to reveal his wolfish appetite and manners bad enough to belong to a pig. So Jeongguk grabbed his fork as gracefully as possible, cutting off the slightest tip of the cheesecake. It looked as delicious as his cappuccino, a theory he soon proved correct when the bite melted onto his tongue almost immediately, the biscoff crust adding a distinctive flavour to the cream.

And he tried to resist it, he really did, but his limbs weren't coordinating with his dignified brain as Jeongguk supported almost half the slice onto his fork and shoved it inside his mouth. All that talk about good eating manners was long forgotten. He took another big gulp of his drink, and offhandedly thought that the combo was to die for.
But Jimin soon snapped him out of his deluded admission into heaven. "You're a public embarrassment, Jeonggukie."

The younger boy made an unintelligible sound, barely swallowing around the mouthful before narrowing his eyes. "I'm an avid appreciator of the good things in life," he said.

Jimin only sighed.

And Jeongguk went back to eating, intent on relishing each and every bite of the cake. Jimin, on the other hand, was only pecking at his pastry, and the sips he took of his cappuccino were so small that the liquid barely moved from its original line. His disinclination to be here was so obvious that Jeongguk could bet he was counting the seconds until he was allowed to leave. But little did he know, the brunet wasn't letting him go anytime soon.

After another long while of skitterish eyes that refused to meet Jeongguk's gaze, Jimin eventually set his elbows down onto the table, looking at the younger boy with a solid pucker of his lips, like he knew that he had no other option.

"Why did you call me here?" he asked.

"To look at you."

Jimin covered up a startled gasp by coughing. He probably wasn't expecting Jeongguk to be so direct. But the younger boy wasn't lying, he wanted to stare at him until he couldn't look away. Every little movement of Jimin's was hypnotising; like the way his lips reddened whenever he bit or rubbed them together, how any slight turning of his head shifted his neck vertebrae so seductively, and merely how his fingers circled around the coffee cup. Jeongguk was entranced by the essence of him.

"Can you please be serious for a second, Jeongguk?"

The younger boy wet his lips. "What makes you think I'm not?"

"Stop it."

"Fine. Let's get to know each other."

Jimin looked at him dubiously. "How?"

"Guess my favourite colour."

"That's ... not how it works," he said. "You're supposed to tell me what it is."

"Where's the fun in that?"

"You're getting on my nerves."

"As I aspire to." Jeongguk winked.

He sighed impatiently. "Are you gonna tell me?"

"Fine. It's red."

Jimin's eyes widened, and Jeongguk watched him with interest for a moment before smiling knowingly. But the discussion of red was a topic for another day. He needed to figure out what that colour meant to the older boy first before jumping to any conclusions. Because it might be all the
consent he needed from Jimin.

"I know what yours is," Jeongguk eventually said.

"Do you really?"

He smiled with a sparkle in his eyes. "Golden."

"What makes you think that?"

"Because I'm golden," he said simply.

The silver-haired boy paused, lifting his cup to take a sip but Jeongguk knew that he was only buying himself time to sort out his emotions. "A little too sure of yourself there, Jeonggukie?"

He laughed lightly, but it was more sardonic than anything. "A little too sure of your obsession with liking bright things, hyung."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"What do you think it means?"

Jimin scowled. "I knew nothing good would come out of you meeting Yoongi hyung."

"You know," Jeongguk drawled. "Hyung said something interesting to me."

"What?"

"He said you're scared because you don't know what I want from you."

Jimin waited.

He smiled. "If it was that, then you only needed to ask, hyung. I would have told you all the things I wanted to do to you."

Jeongguk sensed it in the faltering of his breath that Jimin's heart just skipped a beat. He tried to hide his laboured breathing, but his parted lips gave him away. Yet it only took him a moment to regain his composure. "Well, Yoongi hyung needs to keep his mouth shut."

"Maybe." Jeongguk shrugged, before fixing him with an intent look. "But don't pretend that your heart is not pounding right now."

"It's not."

"Oh, angel." He sighed. "You're such a fucking liar. What am I gonna do with you?"

Jimin blinked at the nickname, as though he couldn't comprehend it. "Don't call me that," he snapped.

Jeongguk tutted. "There you go again, pretending that you don't like it."

"You are way too full of yourself."

He sighed melodramatically. "If you had a face like mine—"

"Good thing I don't," the older boy scoffed.
"True," Jeongguk easily relented. "We'd make a too good looking couple then."

Jimin looked at him distastefully. "You're so full of shit."

The silver-haired boy wasn't taking the playful banter seriously, and he couldn't see the subtle honesty behind Jeongguk's words, but that was the purpose of it. He would let Jimin think what he wanted and let him interpret his feelings as he wanted, because the ambiguity of the situation was what made him stay. Jimin couldn't handle things when they got too real. Perhaps it made him feel like there was no way out. Or maybe Jimin felt like as long as he didn't directly confess something, he was safe from being anchored.

So Jeongguk would let him pretend to be in control, while he drove their relationship to wherever it must go. Jimin only needed a false perception of nirvana anyway, seeing how easily he got preoccupied with little distractions. Though, Jeongguk couldn't let himself forget how small reminders could push Jimin back behind his walls. God, he really was walking on eggshells when it came to Jimin. One wrong move and—Well, that was what he didn't know. He didn't know what was the worst that could happen.

"How is your project going, hyung?" Jeongguk asked casually.

Jimin looked suspicious at the sudden change of topic, making the younger boy laugh at his distrustful gaze.

"I'm just curious," he said. "Seeing how you destroyed that charcoal piece, I wonder if you've started its replacement. It was supposed to be a part of your development work, wasn't it?"

"Yeah," he said hesitantly.

The brunet hummed, taking an unnecessary swig of his cold cappuccino. "I went to your studio the other day. Jihyun wasn't back from his class yet so I thought I'd preoccupy my time. You have a lot of interesting portraits, I must admit. But tell me," he murmured. "Why haven't you thrown away that drawing of my hand?"

Jimin's eyes widened, but he didn't reply.

"You're quite attached to it, aren't you?" Jeongguk continued, before looking at him speculatively. "Or maybe you just wanted some part of me around you."

"That's not it," he said irritatedly.

"Is it not?" Jeongguk feigned disappointment, but there was a wicked glint in his eyes. "Did you not miss your golden boy, hyung?"

"You're not my anything."

"And you're changing the topic. I asked if you missed me."

"I don't have to answer you anything."

"But you want to, don't you?" Jeongguk rested his jaw in his hand, lightly tracing his forefinger over his bottom lip and watching with keen eyes as Jimin's gaze followed the movement. "You want to tell me just how much you wish I was there to hold your hand at night. When you're alone with only your thoughts, you wish I'd distract you and make you laugh. You wish you had me, hyung. You miss me. Admit it."
"I don't need you, Jeongguk."

"But you want me."

There was a subtle fury on Jimin's face, as though he disliked being made assumptions about. "Just because you have this delusional infatuation with me doesn't mean that I feel the same way about you."

Jeongguk tilted his head. "What's so delusional about it?"

"Like how you think you're mine."

"Can't I be?"

Jimin chuckled breathlessly but there was a dangerous look in his eye. "You would know if you were, Jeongguk. I wouldn't let you forget it."

"Tell me how," he insisted. "Are you territorial? Would you leave marks on my skin to let the world know? And are we talking nail scratches or love bites all over my neck? Or would you openly kiss me in a place like this? Maybe you'd do it in a more public place, like on the football pitch in front of half the student body. I want to know, hyung. Tell me what you would do to me."

The silver-haired boy's face bore a dark expression. He clenched his jaw before deftly looking away.

"Or maybe you're just too scared of what I'd do to you in return."

His eyes flashed at Jeongguk, looking so provoked that the younger boy could bet a little more nudge would break him.

"I'm leaving," Jimin said abruptly, gathering his jacket and backpack before standing up, effectively destroying any prospective plans of Jeongguk's in his wake.

"I knew you'd do that."

"Then did you have to be a jerk?"

"It's not my fault that you can't handle a bit of honesty."

"You think you know everything, don't you?" Jimin snarled. "Well, new flash, Jeongguk. Not everything is about you."

"How you feel towards me is not about me?" he mocked.

"I don't fucking feel anything towards you," the older boy said through gritted teeth.

"You say that like I'll actually believe you."

"Fuck you."

Jeongguk chuckled just to irk him. "I did say I liked that mouth of yours."

Jimin looked infuriated enough to be speechless. He growled, angrily pushing his chair back and stepping out from the booth without another glance back at the brunet.

"Stop."

"I'll walk you to your car."
"I can go by myself just fine—"

Jeongguk glared at him. "I said I'll walk you to your fucking car."

Jimin breathed deeply, and as if he knew that the younger boy wouldn't let go, he reluctantly yielded, but made sure to keep a frown of disapproval on his face. It was fully dark when they stepped outside and there was enough fog that the light from nearby street lamps was barely penetrating through. Jeongguk was contemplating driving Jimin to Namjoon's apartment himself but then he decided that the older boy wouldn't appreciate the thought in the slightest.

They walked to the university's parking lot where Jimin's Aston Martin was stationed, neither of them uttering a word to the other. The area was mostly empty, with a few students loitering probably due to late classes or workshops. Jimin fumbled with his jacket's pocket to find his car key, and Jeongguk dutifully stood by and waited.

"I miss you driving me to my football practices," he mumbled offhandedly.

Jimin didn't say anything in response, probably still recovering from his prior anger.

"It wouldn't kill you to say that you miss me too."

"Doesn't work if I don't, does it?" he retorted.

But Jeongguk had been too patient with him today. He grabbed Jimin's wrist, twisting it behind his back and slamming him against the car door. The older boy's breath hitched in his throat and his belongings tumbled out of his hands, falling noisily on the ground but his attention was solely focused on Jeongguk. He looked like he could barely breathe as the brunet's forearm came to rest against his windpipe, effectively stifling him.

"Stop fucking lying to me," Jeongguk said in a low, relentless voice.

"Maybe you just can't handle somebody not wanting you back," Jimin panted.

"Oh, you want me, alright." He chuckled. "Can't you feel your pulse?"

"That tends to happen when you're being manhandled, doesn't it? Fucking let go of me."

But the younger boy only pressed closer, until he could feel Jimin's rapid heartbeat against his chest. He examined his face for a moment, finding it difficult to not let himself be spellbound. How blind had Jeongguk been to him? How had he spent nineteen years of his life not wanting to devour Jimin's mouth?

"You really do look beautiful tonight, angel," he whispered.

"Jeongguk, this is inappropriate."

"Says who?"

"You're making me uncomfortable."

Jeongguk relaxed his hold on him. "Are you lying?"

"Why would I lie?"

"Why wouldn't you lie?"
Jimin glared at him. "Let go of me."

He laughed bitterly, shoving him away by his shoulder. He then crouched down to pick up Jimin's jacket and backpack, retrieving the key which had fallen down too. He dumped it all into the older boy's arms, watching him scurry to open the car's door and settle inside. But Jeongguk kept a hold on the door handle.

When Jimin looked back snappily, he fixed him with a scornful look. "Go home and pretend you don't miss me, hyung." And he shut the door with a slam.

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Chapter End Notes

GUYS IM SO FUCKING EMBARRASSED I JUST REALISED THIS FIC IS AT 70K WORDS AND THEY STILL HAVENT KISSED YET WTFF I FEEL LIKE A PRUDE

Also, there was going to be that holiday which jikook & fam were going to go on and I had so many ideas for it too. But with other things coming up, I might have to cancel it because there will be too much going on. I'll have to go back to that chapter to rewrite some things. Hope you're not disappointed xx
"Jimin has been sulking for two days straight," Yoongi's voice boomed from where Jeongguk's phone was barely perched on top of the fridge. "What did you do?"

Considering how badly Jeongguk was failing at his attempts to make pancakes, he didn't have enough patience to deal with anything related to Jimin. So he growled, both at the abstractly shaped batter burning on the pan and at Yoongi's accusing tone. "I didn't do anything," he muttered. "And how did you get my number?"

"I have my sources," Yoongi easily dismissed him. "And if you didn't do anything, why hasn't he stopped scowling ever since meeting you?"

Jeongguk scraped the inedible mess off the pan, cursing under his breath and lamenting over not being blessed with good cooking skills. "I don't recall ever seeing him with an agreeable expression," he countered pettily. "I'd say Jimin hyung probably likes scowling."

"Do you want to die, Jeongguk?" Yoongi said darkly.

"Why? Can't hear anything against your precious Jiminie?" he taunted.

The blond man made a derisive sound. "Ah, looks like you're going through a lot. Wanna talk about it?"

"I'm not going through anything," Jeongguk snapped. "Why don't you go and cradle him instead? He'll probably appreciate being consoled by anyone but me."
"You sound jealous."

He laughed manically, preparing to deny that with his whole heart but then the directness of Yoongi’s words made him falter. "I'm jealous of anybody who can look at him without hanging on to stolen time."

Yoongi was silent for a moment, seemingly pondering over something so Jeongguk returned to his pancakes. He decided that the batter was too runny, so he scooped up some more flour and stirred it into the mixture. Maybe that would fix its consistency. Though, for the first time, Jeongguk wasn't getting too infuriated at being unsuccessful with a task. Normally, he would be verging on throwing a tantrum until he got it right. But not today. For now, the competitive part of him had mostly been subdued.

Perhaps it had something to do with the overwhelming bitterness he felt inside his heart. Or perhaps it was the concealed anguish that was making him numb. The younger boy felt like a fool for believing that Jimin gave two fucks about him. Of course, Jeongguk wasn’t special. Thinking about it, Jimin probably convinced all his conquests that they were the most precious things to exist, only to leave them to flounder when he neglected them later.

"Do you feel disregarded by him, Jeongguk-ah?" Yoongi said quietly.

He shut his eyes tightly. "It's not his fault."

"That's not what I asked."

"What do you want me to say, Yoongi hyung?" Jeongguk exhaled defeatedly. "That he makes me feel like an incompetent fool for constantly trying even though I know I won't win? Or that he makes me question myself for every word I speak when I'm with him?"

"But you still don't blame him?"

"I don't like playing the blame game."

"Of course, you don't," Yoongi said softly.

Jeongguk grunted, tossing the whisk he was holding into the sink and starting to have another attempt at making a pancake. He loaded some batter onto the spatula, pouring it on the pan's surface and then tilting the utensil just like he'd seen on the tv. It didn't spread circularly by any means but the layer was even, so Jeongguk classed it as a win. Nobody could take away his golden boy title any time soon.

"You know, you're different from the others," the blond man murmured.

"You mean Jimin hyung's exes?"

"Not necessarily. Just anyone who's been acquainted with him."

Jeongguk chuckled ruefully. "Why? They realise the hopelessness of the situation sooner?"

"No, that's not why." Yoongi sighed, a sense of melancholia in his breath. "It's because people don't usually tolerate someone who makes them feel insecure. They would rather hurt them to have the upper hand."

"What makes you think that I haven't hurt Jimin hyung?"
"I know you have. But Jimin is too sensitive, he's bound to get hurt."

The younger boy gasped. "Sometimes you are way too blunt with your words, Yoongi hyung."

"Maybe I am." Jeongguk could imagine the blond man shrugging impassively. "But nobody is doused with holy water. If anything, the apparent victim may not be so faultless."

Jeongguk paused in his movements, suddenly it seemed like the wavering nature of this conversation was too deep-seated to be casually discussed like that. Certainly not over the phone while the brunet obliviously wrestled with culinary arts. Was Yoongi essentially saying that Jimin was to blame for his own ‘sulking’?

"Aren't you being too harsh?" Jeongguk said.

There was a small, calculating silence before Yoongi spoke, "Looks like you can't hear anything against Jimin either, Jeongguk-ah."

He scoffed, cheeks heating up involuntarily. "Was that a test?"

"It wasn't. But I know all that act of indifference earlier was a lie. You still care."

Of course, he cared. It was a given when talking about Jimin. But the question was whether simply caring was enough to make Jeongguk reach Jimin's heart. "But I don't want to anymore, hyung. Some days I think I should just listen to Jimin hyung's warnings and leave."

"Don't give up on him, sweetheart."

Jeongguk let out a strenuous sigh, taking the spatula to guide a perfectly cooked pancake onto a plate. He had chosen to bear with the trying mixture, switching between adding some milk and then more flour to get the consistency just right. The fruitful result was in front of him. But decisions like that were easy. It was only a matter of persistence because, in the end, Jeongguk knew that he could do it.

But when the outcome was unknown, it was hard to know when to give up. How could he know that all his efforts weren't in vain? Just how much would he have to struggle until he realised that Jimin and he wouldn't work out? And just how much would he chase and Jimin run until an end became inevitable?

Yet the worst thing was that Jeongguk couldn't figure out if it was the difficulty of the situation that was standing in the way or simply their incompatibility. Because he had now tried all the ways to be closer to Jimin. Jeongguk had molded himself to become just what Jimin needed: he had been understanding when Jimin was reluctant to talk, gentle when he needed an embrace, and forceful when he thought the silver-haired boy needed a push. He'd even promised to stay when Jimin's fear of abandonment became too strong. Yet nothing seemed to have broken Jimin out of his unyielding walls.

So maybe it was just Jeongguk. It wasn't about how hard he tried or what his methods were, maybe he just wasn't good enough for Jimin.

"It's not him I'm starting to give up on, Yoongi hyung," he mumbled. "I'm tired of my own helplessness. It's driving me to do things I don't want to."

"Why are you saying that?"

Jeongguk sighed again. The continuous onslaught of his desperate thoughts after being unsuccessful
at yet another attempt had left him feeling hollow. He cared about Jimin, he knew that, but Jeongguk couldn't bring himself to act upon his motives anymore. What was the point in trying when the silver-haired boy only drifted more away from him every day?

"Is this what you meant, hyung? You told me that I might have to let him go someday. I think it's time for me to give up before I start chasing Jimin hyung for the wrong reasons."

"Jeongguk. " Yoongi sounded alarmed. "What's got you talking like that?"

"It's just that—" He groaned at his inability to convey his feelings, to describe that raw urgency inside him to stop before he made things worse. "I've tried so hard. I wanted to be a safe place for Jimin hyung, somebody he could not only talk to but find comfort in as well. But the more I tried to know him, the harder he pulled away. I'm scared that if he keeps avoiding me, I'll lose sight of my original intentions. I'll want to have him simply because I can't. And he doesn't deserve that."

"As much as I appreciate your honesty, there's something you're not telling me. What exactly happened that day?"

"I screwed up, hyung."

"I gathered that. What did you do?"

Jeongguk chewed on his lower lip, not wanting to admit his mistakes. "You won't judge me, will you?"

"Depends on what it is," Yoongi said, but his voice was ever-so-kind.

"Jemin hyung never tells me anything, you know that, don't you?" Jeongguk started, and when the older man hummed in agreement, he continued, "Everything I know about him is either through other people or by chance. I only found out about the things he's going through after overhearing his phone call with you one day. No matter how much I urge him to let me in, he just won't open up. And I just—I just thought if I pushed him to want me physically, he'd give in and not be so in control of his guard anymore." He exhaled hesitantly, guilt eating up at him, before adding quietly, "So I said some things and did some things that I shouldn't have—"

"Like what?"

The younger boy bit harder on his lip, feeling his cheeks flush at the memory. "I didn't think about the consequences at that time, hyung. It was just in the heat of the moment. I held him, I-I mean ... restrained him a little?" He cringed at his own words, this was a bad idea.

"Ah," Yoongi drawled, quick to understand. "You might have to be careful with those sort of things, Jeongguk. Jimin is quite volatile when it comes to physical contact because his relationships are usually driven by intimacy. It's not a good reminder."

Jeongguk frowned in confusion, starting to probe Yoongi more on the matter but he stopped himself just in time. That was none of his concern anymore. "It doesn't matter," he mumbled. "Like I said, I don't want to impose on Jimin hyung when he's made it obvious that he doesn't want me around."

"How did he react to your behaviour that day?"

He thought back to the fury he saw on Jimin's face, and that uneasy expression which still haunted Jeongguk. "He was angry."

"I can confirm that anger is the last emotion on him right now."
"Whatever, hyung," Jeongguk said frustratedly. The same feeling of hysterical desperation was beginning to overcome him, why was he still talking about Jimin when the silver-haired boy couldn't be bothered to give him the time of day? Why did his world still revolve around those sad eyes that refused to meet his gaze? "I don't want to do this anymore," he whispered. "He doesn't want me like that. He doesn't even like me."

"Oh, sweetheart. Of course, he likes you."

"When you say these things, I feel like trying again but it's just not going to work out. He hates me, hyung. He said he was uncomfortable when I touched him," he whimpered. "And it hurts. I don't want to be the one causing him distress. Do you know what he used to say to me, hyung? He said that my touch made him feel at home. When did I become the bad guy? All I ever wanted was to make him feel better and to make him laugh. Why did it have to be so complicated?"

"Are you becoming upset?" Yoongi asked quietly.

"No," the younger boy choked. "I'm not."

The pause in his speech made it obvious that he didn't believe Jeongguk, but he reluctantly let him go. "We all make mistakes, Jeongguk-ah. You can't let that define you. Maybe it was just too much for Jimin at that time."

"But is it so bad that I want him, hyung?" Jeongguk wiped at his eyes, heaving in a shaky breath. "Is it so bad that I just want to kiss him?"

Yoongi sighed. "Damn that boy," he muttered under his breath.

"Hmm?"

"I'm gonna need to have a word with Park Jimin," he grunted.

"Why?"

"Because he's making you cry for all the wrong reasons."

"He's not making me cry," Jeongguk insisted in a croaky voice, hurriedly moving to rub at his eyes as if Yoongi could see him. "I'm fine. Don't tell him anything."

"Right," Yoongi said sarcastically. "Because communication in this day and age would be so detrimental to your health."

"I don't understand your swanky language, hyung," he said petulantly. "But I'm serious, I don't want to talk about this anymore. Maybe right now I can't handle losing, but I'll learn to live with it. It will be a lesson for me to simmer down my competitiveness."

"Surrendering so easily, Jeongguk?"

"What do you want me to do? Harass him again until he gives me what I want?"

"You're too mouthy," Yoongi tutted. "But I still like you. It would have taken me twice as long to get all this out of Jimin."

"Yeah, I bet he wouldn't have been too enthusiastic about the whole experience," Jeongguk said sullenly.

"Get over it. You didn't commit a crime. He'll move on, if he hasn't already."
The younger boy was surprised at that, he expected Jimin to be more troubled by it than Yoongi let on. "Is he really okay?" he asked uncertainly. He had been too preoccupied with his own guilt to think much about how Jimin must be feeling.

The blond man snorted. "He spends half the day screaming into his pillow, I don't know much else."

Jeongguk's brows rose to his hairline as he hesitantly mumbled, "Why does he scream into a pillow?"

"I don't know," Yoongi repeated. "Sexual frustration, perhaps?"

A startled gasp escaped him. "Don't tease me!"

"I didn't even say anything about you."


"Relax," he said amusedly. "I'm just messing with you." There was a short pause. "Are you feeling better, Jeongguk-ah?"

"No," he admitted. It would take him a while to feel remotely better, and even longer to convince himself that he didn't want Jimin. Would his heart gradually begin to comply if he justified his reasons enough? A part of Jeongguk didn't know how he felt to just admit defeat without having unraveled Jimin like he wanted to. He hadn't even begun to know him yet. It was like being wrenched away from paradise after being shown the slightest glimpse of it. Jeongguk had yet to taste those lips of his, to mark up the column of his throat like he dreamed about every night.

But all he knew was that he didn't want to hurt Jimin anymore. He couldn't be the cause of anything that added to his pain. Though, as melodramatic as Jeongguk was about the decision, he still needed to stop his heart from throbbing at the thought of letting Jimin go.

He sighed loudly. "Are you not going to hang up, Yoongi hyung?" Jeongguk asked, begrudgingly starting to resume making his pancakes after another wipe at his damp eyes.

"In a minute," the older man said distractedly.

Jeongguk let the phone stay on speaker, scooping up another helping of the batter and pouring it onto the pan. Never before had he had such a heartfelt conversation while attempting to cook, but there was a first time for everything. He grabbed the pan's handle, twisting his wrist to spread the mixture in what turned out to be a nearly circular pancake. If Jeongguk practised long enough, he could easily become an expert at this. But then he told himself to deflate his ego before it threatened to snatch away his modesty.

As he moved to flip the pancake over, Yoongi's sudden voice nearly made him lose his grip on the spatula.

"There's something about you, Jeongguk," he said pensively. "It's making Jimin so wary that I've never seen him more on edge."

Jeongguk scoffed. "Maybe it's the fact that he's scared I'll molest him again. Tell him to stop worrying, though. I won't go looking for him anymore."

"Drop that now," Yoongi snapped.

"You don't see his face when he's around me—"
There was a fervent sincerity in the older man's voice as he said, "But I see him when he's not around you, Jeongguk, and he doesn't look any happier. You mean something to him."

He inhaled sharply. "Please don't lie to me, hyung. I'm sick of being lied to. Stop giving me this false hope only to have it crushed when Jimin hyung pulls away again. I don't even know what's real anymore."

"You have every reason to feel like that," Yoongi said gently. "But I wouldn't lie to you."

"Then why is he so far away from me?" Jeongguk cried wretchedly. "Why am I still running after him?" He felt like his heart would burst from the sea of emotions inside him. He didn't know what to do or who to believe. Whatever he thought turned out to be false every time he saw Jimin, whatever he consoled his heart with only turned out to be a desperate lie.

"Do you feel like you're alone in this, Jeongguk?"

"How can I not?"

"Jimin is not as immovable as he looks, you affect him more than he does you."

"But he doesn't even care, hyung."

"Of course, you think that," Yoongi said woefully.

Jeongguk knotted his fingers into his hair, wanting to scream in agitation. He felt so helpless that it was starting to drive him insane. "Say something to make feel better, hyung," he echoed his words from their last conversation.

"You have more power over him than you think, sweetheart. Don't be blinded by the act he puts up."

"What if that act ends up being real?" Jeongguk murmured.

The blond man let out a bitter chuckle. "Then you'll only feel the burn, Jeongguk, but it would break him."

It had been several days since that phone call with Yoongi, but Jeongguk was still tiptoeing around the Park mansion, apprehensive of running into Jimin. He was just being paranoid, he knew that, there were more chances of hell freezing over than Park Jimin returning to his home. But Jeongguk couldn't help the fearfulness that had settled inside him. He felt like the silver-haired boy would jump at him from behind closed doors and through windows, demanding an explanation for his lousy behaviour that day.

Yet quite simply, Jeongguk didn't have an answer for him. He wanted to be rid of Jimin's presence for as long as he could, it would only aid him in getting over the boy. Because no matter how much Jeongguk had tried to distract himself with the workload from school and his football practices, Yoongi's words were still fresh in his mind. They gnawed at him every day, urging him to go up to Jimin and try to find some way to talk again. And if not that, to at least apologise and find some closure before cutting him off completely.

But it required too much strength from the fragile state of his heart right now. Jeongguk couldn't
afford to wear himself down any further. He wondered if this was how Jimin felt when he avoided the younger boy, because Jeongguk couldn't stop his heart from thudding against his chest with every step he took inside the Parks' house. He should have been more understanding with Jimin, confrontation was more terrifying that you could imagine.

Damn Jihyun and his friends for not letting him be miserable alone for a little while. Before they'd pestered him to come play Overwatch with them, Jeongguk had been shamelessly binging on the Iron Man movies, lolling around in his ancient sweatpants and a ratty shirt while stuffing himself with cookies and marshmallows and whatever class of junk he could find in his bedroom. He would like to say it was his guilty pleasure to spend the weekends like that, but that was simply his lifestyle.

As Jeongguk tried to sneak into Jihyun's bedroom undetected, a hand clamped down onto his shoulder, making him almost shriek in surprise.

"Who are you hiding from?" Mingyu said through an obnoxious mouthful of crisps that were nearly spilling out of his lips.

The brunet stared at him in disgust, which was bold of him since it wasn't like his manners were any less hideous, but he didn't loiter much in the doorway in case a certain somebody caught him there. "I'm not hiding," he lied as he briskly walked inside.

It was safe to say that his best friend's room looked like a cross between an animal farm and a garbage can, as indicated by the raucous noise and utter trash lingering in every corner of the space. It seemed like the full house was present, everybody must have gotten here while Jeongguk had moaned and groaned about having to leave his house. As he moved to grab the nearest chocolate bar, Mingyu elbowed him.

"Is it Jimin hyung?" he whispered conspiratorially.

Jeongguk froze on the spot. "What?"

"Are you hiding from him?"

"Of course not," he muttered.

"Oh." Mingyu looked disappointed. "Even if you're not, be careful today."

"Why?" Jeongguk asked in alarm. "Is he here?" Suddenly the unlikelihood of Jimin not returning home was mocking him. Obviously he'd be here the day Jeongguk decided to come.

"I saw him in the kitchen a few minutes ago and he seems to be in a bad mood. You know how pissy he gets."

Jeongguk's heart panged at the sheer distaste dripping from his friend's voice. He wished he could defend Jimin, say that they didn't know the silver-haired boy like he did, but then, did Jeongguk really know him at all? "Yeah, I know," he replied, sliding past Mingyu to greet the rest of the boys.

They saw each other twice weekly due to their football practices but they never had the time to catch up with each other. Jihyun was mainly the person who insisted on these get-togethers, bribing them with an endless food supply which no teenager could say no to.

He had two consoles and an Xbox set up so that three people could play at the same time, but Jeongguk knew he'd be sitting these matches out because he was more into the snacks bucket awaiting him in the middle of the room. After grabbing a BBQ Pringles can, he settled down next to his best friend.
"Alright, boys," Jihyun said. "We're in the same teams as last time. Let's get started."

Being Jeongguk's friends, Yugyeom and Mingyu didn't seem to have much different intentions to the brunet, taking that as a sign to reach for more snacks while Mingyu barely managed to finish off his earlier crisp packet.

"Have some manners, you pigs," Jaehyun, ever so sensible, growled at them. "The food's not gonna run away if you actually swallow a bite before shoving more inside your gobs."

"Like you haven't been eyeing those gummy bears since you came in," Yugyeom said.

He scowled. "I was waiting in case one of you losers wanted it."

"Aw, Jaehyunie, you're so cute," Seokmin said in a sickly-sweet voice.

"Come on, Seokmin. You too?" Jaehyun grunted, sighing out loud as though he couldn't bear to be there any longer.

The four of them bickered continuously, despite Jaehyun and Seokmin playing at the same time, but there was silence from Jeongguk's left. He was in the middle of chewing on his crisps when he glanced at his best friend, who watched him with a concerned look on his face.

"What's up, JK?" Jihyun murmured. "You're so quiet today."

He shrugged noncommittally. "Just tired, Jihyun."

But Jeongguk's own response made him halt. He thought he finally understood what Jimin meant when he said that he was tired, it was a such a vague phrase but it summed up everything you couldn't say. Jeongguk was tired, not physically in the least, but of himself and of having been chasing Jimin for so long now. He was tired of wanting him so much and not receiving anything in return. But if this was how he was feeling, what must Jimin be going through?

Jeongguk could barely repress the urge to run to Jimin's studio, where he most likely was, and just ask him if he was alright. But he had promised himself that he wouldn't care anymore, so it was best to stay put.

"You'll tell me if something is wrong, won't you?" Jihyun said quietly.

"Yeah," he lied.

*Nothing is right, Jihyunie.* He averted his eyes, fixing his gaze onto the game screens where Jaehyun was on the verge of being beaten by Seokmin because Mingyu wouldn't stop throwing gummy bears at him. Jeongguk wished he could get rid of the overwhelming gloom inside his chest and join the boys in their leisure. He knew he was being a killjoy, he should at least put up a good pretence, but everything seemed so pointless right now.

Jihyun's eyes were still lingering on him, barely concentrating on the game despite his fingers moving on the console. Jeongguk and he had been best friends since he could remember and they shared everything, certainly relationship problems, but something about Jimin made Jeongguk reluctant to discuss anything with his friends. He just didn't want to look like a sucker for being so vulnerable to Jimin while the older boy couldn't care less.

Especially when everybody, including Jihyun, had let him know how difficult Jimin could be.

"She sucked you off in the toilets?" Mingyu shrieked.
And just like that, Jihyun's attention was snapped away. "Wait, what the fuck? What did I miss?" he urged frenetically to Jaehyun who was the sole focus of five pair of eyes.

"Soojin and Jaehyun had some fun in the training centre's toilets," Yugyeom explained. "She came to watch our practice last week with Yuqi and she hasn't left Jaehyun alone since that."

"Really?" Jihyun said in surprise. "She doesn't seem like the clingy type."

"She's not," Jaehyun defended her, but there was a blush rising to his cheeks. "She just knows how to get what she wants."

"Oh, he has a minx on his hands," Mingyu teased.

The poor lover boy flushed even more, throwing the empty wrappers on the floor at his friends. As he grumbled under his breath, the rest of the boys took it upon themselves to badger him more for the details. "But you have to tell us how it was!" Jihyun cried.

"It was good," he mumbled.

"Just good?"

"Fine," Jaehyun snapped. "She was pretty fucking special, okay? It's like she knew exactly which buttons to press. That girl knows what she's doing, trust me. I wasn't even that serious about it but she's something else."

Mingyu whistled, lips curving into a sly smirk. "That good, huh?"

"Shut up now."

"Stop acting like you don't love talking about it," Yugyeom said with a snicker.

"Wait, hold up. If she is a friend of Yuqi's, then she must know Lucas," Jihyun suddenly interrupted, fixing Jaehyun with a serious look. "I swear to God if I have to see that guy's face outside of football, I'm gonna lose the plot."

Jaehyun waved him off. "We're not dating or anything."

"Sure you're not. She's 'pretty fucking special'," Mingyu mocked. "You're half in love with her."

"I'm not in love with her," he growled.

His friends tormented him some more, but that was a given when divulging any part of your sex life to them. Soon Mingyu was boasting about how he would have hit a home run at a party if the host's parents hadn't come back so soon. Yugyeom threw an empty coke can at him, telling him to get over himself while Jaehyun looked happy to be liberated from speaking about Soojin.

"Why are you not talking, JK?" Yugyeom asked, not looking too suspicious, though.

Jeongguk jumped at suddenly being wrenched into their conversation, tearing his gaze away from the darkening window and smiling halfheartedly at the boys. "Just tired." He shrugged.

Jihyun gave him a disbelieving look again, but for the sake of their friends he didn't call him out on it. "I think Jeongguk is going through a dry spell right now. He probably doesn't appreciate us rubbing our busy lives in his face."

Mingyu laughed. "Somebody's jealous."
As Jeongguk started to deny their assumptions, Yugyeom interrupted him by calling Jihyun out. "Since when do you have a busy life?" he exclaimed. "The last time you got a girl was three months ago. And Nayoung still brushes you off every time you go up to her."

Jihyun bristled, starting to explain that she was just playing hard to get but Jeongguk couldn't be bothered with their trivial matters anymore. Once upon a time, he would be the first one to want all the details but now he was too busy drowning in his own woes. Mingyu was right, he was jealous. He envied all his friends whose affairs seemed to be so uncomplicated, so natural when compared to his.

Jeongguk thought back to the time when all his cares involved finishing off his schoolwork, securing good meals for the day, and nothing else. Relationships were the last thing on his mind; so when did Jimin change his life like that? When did every move of his become so important to Jeongguk? He wanted to go back to that time and rejoice in his effortless days a little more.

But regardless of his commitment to let Jimin go, Jeongguk couldn't say that he didn't wish he would catch a glimpse of the silver-haired boy. And despite his earlier dread of coming across him today, he wished the noise his friends were making would coerce Jimin to come to Jihyun's room and give them all an earful. Just so that Jeongguk would be able to see his face once.

God, he was so weak when it came to Jimin. Hadn't he spent nearly an hour trying to convince Yoongi that he would leave the silver-haired boy alone? So why did Jeongguk's heart still long for him?

Jihyun noticed his disinclination towards the gathering, nudging him from time to time so Jeongguk wouldn't zone out for too long. But the brunette's eyes kept drifting to the door, wishing and futilely hoping to see Jimin. He knew his best friend would ask him about it later, but Jeongguk reassured himself by deciding that he'd just fabricate another lie.

After all, how hard could it be?

So for the rest of the time, he watched the game screens some more, ate junk food just for the sake of it, and tried hard to not roll his eyes too much at his friends lest they fell out of his sockets. And whenever there was an occasional creak in the floorboards outside, Jeongguk sat up pathetically. But of course, Jimin never came.

A week later, Jeongguk was still in the same state of mind. Too scared to admit that he needed Jimin and too proud to approach him. Maybe this was how it ended, with no closure and no explanations. He tried telling himself that he was okay. But it was almost sad how pitiful he'd gotten, wearing the same dirty hoodie for four days straight and almost on the verge of poisoning himself with the amount of ramen he ate. But in Jeongguk's defence, his Jimin withdrawal symptoms were pretty severe right now.

Every day he felt like he wouldn't be able to go another minute without seeing the boy, yet somehow he always managed to survive. And that was his motivation to avoid Jimin for longer, perhaps one day Jeongguk would finally become immune to him.

So in his sudden spur half an hour ago, Jeongguk had given himself a pep talk on becoming a responsible adult, changed into a fresh pair of clothes, and was now gathering the ingredients to
make some jjajangmyeon. The recipe had seemed simple enough when he'd watched the chef on TV make it, so hopefully, his golden boy title wouldn't fail him when he got round to it.

As he looked for some cabbage in the fridge, his phone rang and Jeongguk cursed under his breath for always being interrupted when he was in the kitchen. He reluctantly received the call, a pout dominant on his lips.

"Why did Yoongi ask me for your number the other day?" Seokjin demanded.

The younger boy frowned at him. "Why does everyone start with a question when they call me?" he retorted. "Do I look like an oracle?"

"Well?"

"He just wanted to talk to me."

There was a short pause. "Look here, Jeongguk," Seokjin started. "I knew you had something fishy going on ever since you asked me for Namjoon's address. But I didn't press then because I thought you needed time. Which I was obviously wrong about because it still doesn't look like you have any intention of telling me."

"It's nothing, hyung. You're looking too deep into it."

"Since when did you think you could get away with lying to me? Tell me what you're hiding."

"What would I be hiding?" Jeongguk exclaimed.

"Are you involved in some shady shit?" Seokjin said suspiciously.

The brunet choked out a laugh. "What? It's nothing like that, hyung. Don't worry, I'm not doing drugs or whatever."

Kind of a lie, he thought. Jimin is a drug.

"What was I supposed to think, then?" he said. "You know how Yoongi talks, I thought he was going to sell you off to some human trafficking organisation."

Jeongguk smiled in endearment, his hyung could make any situation light-hearted. "Nope, no selling me off to foreign countries any time soon."

"What is it, then?" he persisted. "You've been off for weeks now. It's been so long since you came to Epiphany as well, and you're never the one to miss out on free food."

"Only you know how to be caring and insulting at the same time."

Seokjin ignored him. "So?" he prompted.

"I've been struggling with school work," Jeongguk lied. "You know how busy you get at this time of year."

It wasn't that he didn't want to confide in his hyung, Seokjin had always given him all the reasons to trust him. But at that moment, it was hard to divulge his heart to Seokjin. Jeongguk just didn't want to hear about how stupid he was for going after Jimin from one more person. And most importantly, he'd decided to stop chasing Jimin now, so nothing regarding him mattered anymore.

"You know I don't believe you, right?"
"Hyung, don't worry about it. Whatever it was, it's over now."

"What's over?"

"Are you really not going to let this go?"

"Fine," Seokjin relented. "Be like that, then."

"Are you mad?"

He let out a heavy breath. "I'm not mad, Jeongguk-ah. It's just that you don't sound good. I'm concerned about you."

"I'll be fine," he promised.

Seokjin didn't nag anymore, asking him about his plans for the Christmas break and then raving on about his pet sugar gliders. Jeongguk put the phone on speaker, continuing with his hunt for the ingredients while the older man didn't take a break from his chattering.

"Aren't you supposed to be at work?" Jeongguk complained once he checked that it'd been twenty minutes since Seokjin had called.

"Completing hours isn't a thing when you're the boss of your own business," he said haughtily.

"Whatever." As he moved to retrieve a knife from the cutlery drawer, he accidentally knocked the cutting board into the microwave oven.

"What's that sound? Are you in the kitchen?"

"I'm making jjajangmyeon."

Seokjin snorted. "Yeah? Good luck with that."

"You're mean."

"Whatever, come over to Epiphany when it doesn't work out."

"It will work out," Jeongguk snapped.

But his hyung only snickered. "I'll talk to you later, then. Don't want you to blame me for distracting you when it all goes wrong. Bye, bunny boy."

The brunet growled, but Seokjin's goading only urged him to try harder. He started off by cutting up some pork belly that he'd found in the freezer along with the vegetables. According to the chef he'd watched, the chopping was supposed to take ten minutes at most but here Jeongguk was half an hour later, barely having managed to get through a section of the meat.

It only occurred to him later that since the pork belly was frozen he'd have to soak it in some water. He sighed out loud, this was already turning out to be harder than he thought. Maybe it was his success with pancakes that day had him so smug, but then jjajangmyeon hadn't looked too hard on the TV.

Sometime later, Jeongguk had finally reached the stage where he could cook the meat. He happily poured all of the diced pork belly into the wok, stirring with a visible giddiness in his movements. He would prove all his doubters wrong when this was done. But he should have known that his overconfidence would be his downfall, because it wasn't too long before the smell of burning started
to invade his nostrils.

Jeongguk wanted to weep because how could one day be filled with such misery? He emptied out the pan onto a plate and turned off the gas, slumping down onto the kitchen floor in despair. When he heard a ping from his phone, he angrily thought it was Seokjin trying to gloat, so he ignored it. But after a while, he gave in but not without a long string of curses under his breath.

**Unknown 7:12**

*What are you doing?*

He scowled in annoyance. Who was this and how did they manage to get their hands on Jeongguk's number? As peeved as he was, he still bothered with niceties.

**Jeongguk 7:15**

*Who's this?*

**Unknown 7:16**

*Do you put your name as 'Gguk' into everyone's phone?*

Jeongguk stilled.

It was Jimin. Jimin was texting him. He didn't know how to accustom to the concept of the older boy texting anybody, let alone him. And especially not after everything that had happened.

What this actually him or was somebody playing a cruel joke on Jeongguk?

He tried to be reasonable about it, though. Of course, it was Jimin. He distantly recalled giving the silver-haired boy his number back when he used to drive him to practice. But it seemed so long ago that it wasn't hard to imagine Jeongguk's surprise. He would have never thought Jimin would reach out to him, not right now, not after all the sleepless nights he'd spent wondering if Jimin hated him.

**Jeongguk 7:19**

*What if I do?*

**Jimin 7:19**

*It's only mine to say.*

Jeongguk's heartbeat sped up. At once, there was blood pounding in his ears and he no longer had a grip on reality. It was all too sudden. He parted his lips, desperately trying to get some oxygen into his deprived lungs. Fuck, did Jimin even know what he was saying?

**Jimin 7:20**

*You didn't answer me.*

**Jeongguk 7:21**

*I'm 'trying' to cook dinner.*

**Jimin 7:21**
I can make it for you.

Jeongguk 7:21

What?

Jimin 7:22

Are you alone?

Jeongguk 7:23

Yes?

Jimin 7:23

I'm coming over.

Jeongguk 7:23

What the fcuk

Chapter End Notes

PLEASE READ: From the last chapter's comments, I gathered that most of you were totally for bold Jungkook but some were sceptical/displeased with his forcefulness. I think that since this story tackles issues like mental health, Jungkook's behaviour towards Jimin would be a sensitive topic. But as you may have already noticed, Jungkook makes very rash decisions which are sudden and surprising. He only reflects on them later on, just like he did in this chapter, whereas Jimin has until now thought carefully before acting on his impulses.

You'll later see that this contrast in their personalities is an essential part of their relationship, because Jungkook needs to be grounded and Jimin needs to be pushed. He is too caged up behind his walls and he won't come out if nobody urges him. On that note, things that Jungkook does won't always be sensible and sometimes he might go too far. But this story as about him as much as it about Jimin. He's only human and he will make mistakes, I want to show both these characters' growth.

Also, I feel like some of you think this story is being rushed (due to the last chapter) but that's not it. It mostly feels like that because of Jeongguk’s hasty decisions, and again that's just a part of his personality that he needs to work on. I hope that this explains some things. Please let me know your thoughts ❤️
Jeongguk was hyperventilating. Yes, that was the correct term to describe his state right now. As breathless as he'd been during the time Jimin texted him, the aftermath was much worse. He was finding it hard to wrap his head around the concept of Jimin reaching out to him first, of him coming over to Jeongguk's house, like the past week hadn't even happened. He could be fooled into thinking that all those agonising thoughts eating up at him for days now were just a hallucination. That was just how casual Jimin's texts had been.

In Jeongguk's wretched opinion, at least.

But it was bold of Jimin to assume that he was still willing to go through all that again. What if Jeongguk just wasn't strong enough? What if he didn't want all the difficulties that came with knowing Jimin anymore? After all, he had been ready to forget about the older boy; he'd already planned all the distractions he would use when thoughts of Jimin wouldn't leave him, and he had thought through the awkward conversations that would take place at the Park mansion when the silver-haired boy was around.

Though, considering his state right now, it was pretty clear just how trivial his efforts and the idea of getting over Jimin had been. Of course, he would run like a starved man after a hint of amity from Jimin. It was like the older boy knew that. It was like he knew just how much power he held over Jeongguk. And it was infuriating.

How could somebody make him lose control of himself so easily? Jeongguk was hurrying to sort out the state of the kitchen but his limbs flailed uselessly with every movement. His hands were full-on trembling and he could feel his heart hammering in his throat. Just from the goddamn anticipation. And fear. It wouldn't be a surprise if Jimin came in to find an immobile Jeongguk passed out on the floor.
Serious question. Could a person die from nerves?

He couldn't help the erratic sense of apprehension which had settled deep in his bones. The uncertainty was shaking him to the core. He felt like he could barely breathe.

Jeongguk had only managed to wipe down the counter-tops before there was a brief knock on the front door. But he could testify that his heartbeat was louder than the sound. It took him a long second to snap out the mere agitation.

Get a fucking grip, Jeongguk, he told himself. With every footstep towards the door, he wanted to take two back. He wasn't ready to talk to Jimin yet, not now when his mind was so clouded with doubts and insecurities, which weren't necessarily unfounded. He needed to think through their entire conversation priorly because what if he messed up again? What if he said something which drove Jimin away again? After all, it was almost a given for Jeongguk to dampen the older boy's already low spirits. But he tried to compose himself, at least externally, before pulling open the door.

And there Jimin was. Looking so effortlessly collected.

His face was placid, but at least none of the contempt from their last meeting stained his features. There was a different look in Jimin's bottomless eyes, a sort of longing which subdued the usual sadness that spilt from them. And he looked beautiful: with a mellow smile adorning the softness of his pillowy lips and the washed out rapture painting his face. How could Jeongguk ever look away? Suddenly, there was nothing but Jimin. His damn eyes were luring Jeongguk in.

"Hyung," he breathed.

"Hello, Jeongguk."

And, oh, heavens. He liked it. He really liked the way Jimin said hello to him, because this time it felt like the silver-haired boy had never left at all.

But that was a deceptive thought. Of course, he'd left. He had left Jeongguk on his own with nothing to console himself, not even a sliver of hope which could accustom him to the idea of Jimin coming back. How could Jeongguk know that he wasn't starting to see things out of his delirium? Maybe he was just standing on his own again, on his unfrequented doorstep with a wishful heart that had started to lose awareness of what was too much to fantasise.

Jeongguk should probably pinch himself. It wouldn't be too strange, and neither too theatrical. But, wouldn't it? Wasn't Jeongguk being too self-pitying? Too overemotional? It wasn't all Jimin's fault how familiar he'd become with insecurity. But, wasn't it? Yet Jeongguk couldn't blame the older boy either way, Jimin had warned him, he'd told him to stay away. So whatever happened next would be something that Jeongguk had to deal with by himself.

"Are you gonna leave me standing here?" Jimin said.

But you always leave me hanging.

"N-No. Come in."

The older boy stepped inside, shrugging off that same suede jacket he'd been wearing at the cafe. It didn't foreshadow nice things for Jeongguk, but then, by now he should've been able to realise that nothing could end well for him when it came to Jimin. He locked the door behind his hyung, and then the tension rose by a couple of notches.

Jeongguk's heart hadn't stopped thrashing against his ribcage yet, and being alone with Jimin didn't
ease his restlessness. God, he couldn't breathe. He took in a lungful of air, grabbing at his chest as if to clutch his heart and will it to stop racing. But it just wouldn't.

"Where's Miri?" Jimin asked as soon as he witnessed the empty living room.

"I wasn't taking care of her properly so mum took her to her boyfriend's house."

The older boy shot him an inquisitive look before glancing away. "What were you trying to cook anyway?"

The younger boy frowned at Jimin's blatant choice to not address what had happened on that fateful day, but at that moment, he let it go. It probably wasn't best to try to have a serious conversation when his mind felt hazy.

"Jjajangmyeon," he replied.

"Didn't have much luck with it, did you?" Jimin smirked, turning around to face him. "I can smell the burning from here."

But Jeongguk clenched his jaw. There was a certain stinging in his heart at how easily Jimin was pretending that nothing was wrong. How could he tease him so easily? How could he smirk so easily? Couldn't he see how difficult the past week had been for Jeongguk?

He couldn't enjoy the things he normally relished in. While his friends raved about the holiday season, Jeongguk stayed holed up in his house, barely surviving on instant ramen. While they rushed to finish off their school work just in time for the Christmas break, he could barely free his mind from Jimin, nevermind study. There was only a short time left until Christmas, but this year Jeongguk couldn't even feel the merry spirit of it. If that had everything to do with Jimin, he would never say it, but it wasn't subtle enough to ignore.

"No," Jeongguk briefly said.

And if Jimin sensed his clipped tone, he didn't say anything either.

He merely walked into the kitchen, rolling up his sleeves leisurely and examining the available supplies while Jeongguk tried hard to not stare at his veiny forearms. "Do you want me to fix this or start again?"

_I just want you to look at me._

"Jeongguk?"

His attention snapped to Jimin again. There was way too much going on in his head. Thoughts ranging from how he wanted to lick at Jimin's exposed skin and how the bitterness in his heart was starting to make him contemplate leaving his own house.

"Anything, hyung," he mumbled.

Anything that will make you stay just a little longer.

Because despite all the distress, the way Jimin inexorably pulled him in couldn't be helped. Jeongguk didn't think he would ever stop wanting him.

Want. Such a feeble, superficial little construct. Yet at that certain moment, there was nothing it couldn't drive a person to do.
He took a seat at the kitchen island, overcome with a sense of deja vu as he placed his jaw on a closed fist. The last time Jimin cooked for him had been heartening and hopeful. They had joked around then, Jeongguk had naively been fawning over the notion of Jimin having tattoos, and Jimin had indulged his teasing remarks over his height. It was like reminiscing the good old days. But there was a nagging, ominous thought that Jeongguk would think back to this moment and deem it to be a better time.

By the stove, Jimin was working probably four times as efficient as Jeongguk had been, his hands moving with such expertise that one would think he was a professional chef. It wasn't a gladdening sight, though; Jeongguk knew that all this wasn't real. This idea of Jimin coming over to cook for him, something so small yet so meaningful, none of it was real. As quickly as the older boy had come, he could leave too. And did it even mean anything for them to be alone in such a domestic environment? No, when it came to them, it didn't mean much.

But Jeongguk watched with rapt, yearning eyes anyway.

Jimin's silver hair was a mess today, tousled and tangled atop his head, becoming more disarrayed every time his fingers combed through the strands. And as nimble as his hands were in their movements, there was a certain shakiness to them. It was these little observations that told Jeongguk that maybe Jimin wasn't as nonchalant as he appeared.

He was avoiding Jeongguk. Endeavouring and pretending that there was nothing to address until he couldn't. Typical Jimin.

A quarter of an hour passed, with no words exchanged between them, and Jeongguk was getting tired. Jimin seemed utterly focused on making the food while the brunet couldn't care less for whatever the hell was brewing in the pan, his own mind was raging to be heard. Jeongguk wouldn't pressurise Jimin to speak again, though. He had learnt from his mistakes.

So he sighed out loud, tapping his fingernails on the marble out of frustrated weariness, but also to piss Jimin off. Jeongguk hoped he would glare at him and tell him to stop, but he didn't. And Jeongguk couldn't be bothered anymore, he couldn't immerse himself in this tormenting wait any longer. He shoved his stool back, which scraped against the floor with a harsh screech, before he got up and made to leave the kitchen.

"Stay," Jimin said, but he didn't turn around.

"What are we doing, hyung?" he asked exasperatedly.

Jimin tilted his head to the side, yet still not looking at Jeongguk. "I'm making you dinner."

"Hyung." He sighed again.

"Sit down, Jeongguk."

Jeongguk huffed, watching the older boy's back with a scowl but conclusively taking a seat again. Jimin paid no more attention to him than he'd done before so Jeongguk busied himself on his phone, doing jackshit but he wanted to pretend to be occupied so Jimin would think of him as a busy adult. It was another ten minutes before there was the sound of cutlery and plates being removed from the cabinets.

Jeongguk's gaze finally snapped up, starting to rise so he could help out Jimin with the tableware but the older boy gestured at him to stay seated, placing the smoking hot dish of jjajangmyeon before him on the island instead of taking it to the dining table. Jeongguk's mouth instantly watered at the
sight of his dinner. He consoled himself by thinking that whatever the outcome of today, at least he'd be eating good tonight.

Jimin sat down opposite him, there was almost a metre gap between them, but somehow it felt closer. Jeongguk could smell his body wash over the aroma of the food. It raised goosebumps over his arms. And as Jimin continued to watch him like a hawk, Jeongguk asked, "Will you not eat?"

"I already ate before I came."

"Okay," he mumbled, not waiting one more second before diving into the meal.

His first bite had him restraining himself from moaning out loud. Just why wasn't Jimin his personal cook? But then Jeongguk glumly thought that the idea of having any authority over Jimin was laughable. He shoved in a bigger mouthful, licking his chopsticks clean afterwards, only starting to feel the slightest bit self-conscious from the older boy's unwavering eyes.

When the brunet meekly glanced up, Jimin was still looking at him quietly, but intently enough that it seemed like he wanted to penetrate Jeongguk's skin with his gaze alone.

There was a wistful note in his words as he said, "How have you been, golden boy?"

Jeongguk swallowed a bite. "Am I still golden if you're running from me?"

Jimin rested his jaw in his palm, continuing to stare like he would never look away. "You're so golden," he said in a hushed voice.

Jeongguk was too overcome by the affection in his tone to respond. His fingers which held the chopsticks faltered with a sudden exhilaration. And just like that, there was nothing worthy of being given attention to except for Jimin.

"Are you even real, Gguk?" he continued, voice barely above a muted murmur.

"I like it when you call me that," Jeongguk replied in the same hushed tone.

"Gguk," Jimin whispered, lips curving into a soft smile.

His pretty eyes were fond, a sparkle of happiness in them as though saying that little word meant as much to him as it did to Jeongguk. He looked obliquely happy for a moment. And Jeongguk thought it was enough for him to see Jimin like that. It was all he ever wanted. The warmth coating the silver-haired boy's cheeks paired with his dulcet smile was so appeasing.

As always, everything about Jimin had captivated him. And Jeongguk realised that there was nowhere to escape from him. Even if he wanted to, he couldn't stay away. He was just a satellite in Jimin's orbit, revolving round and round, running in the same circles over and over again, only to fall just short of the older boy. He could never reach him, and even when he did it wouldn't end well, because a satellite only left its orbit to fall.

But Jimin owned a part of him, through his sad eyes and honeyed smiles and rare openness. He completely pervaded him at times. Jeongguk could try to tell him that but he would never believe him. The younger boy didn't know if that was because Jimin doubted Jeongguk's feelings or simply his own ability to be liked and wanted.

"Finish your food, Jeongguk."

Jeongguk blinked dazedly, having lost a sense of his surroundings. He nodded concedingly, picking
up his chopsticks and lacing them through the noodles. For a moment, he just wanted to capture this soft moment and not taint it by talking about that day. So he finished his dinner in silence, all the while being onlooked by tender brown eyes that just wouldn't get tired of watching him.

There was a fuzzy little feeling growing inside Jeongguk's chest that he needed to quell before it blinded him to the real issue at hand. He now understood why Jimin was so keen on avoiding things until he couldn't, sometimes you just wanted to bask in the warmth of what you knew was temporary.

Jeongguk wasn't naive enough to believe this day would end pleasantly unconflicted. Jimin and he just didn't work like that. So after consuming one more helping of the jjajangmyeon, he placed the dishes in the sink, mentally telling himself to clean up the kitchen later, for now he had one beautiful boy to provoke until he gave him some answers.

"Hyung," he said tentatively when they'd sat in the living room with some old tv show running in the background. Jeongguk was curled up on one side of the couch while Jimin sat unusually straight on the other end.

"Yeah?"

Jeongguk met his eyes lazily. "You said that only you can call me Gguk."

"That's right."

"Why?"

"Because I say so," Jimin quipped, shrugging his shoulders as if it was that simple.

"So," Jeongguk started, and to some extent, he knew what he was getting himself into. "Does that mean I'm yours?"

The response was immediate. "You're not mine," he said sharply.

"What does it take to belong to Park Jimin?"

Jimin's eyes hardened, any last traces of his affable expression vanished as his jaw clenched dolefully. "Losing yourself."

"What if I say that I'd never found myself before you?"

"Then you're fucking delusional."

Despite the sudden flare of pique Jeongguk felt at his words, he chose to ignore the statement. Could he really blame Jimin for thinking whatever about him after the way Jeongguk had forced himself on him? He really needed to be realistic with all the spikes of indignance he felt.

Though, he wouldn't stop just there.

"But I think I'm yours."

After a moment of irately grinding his teeth, Jimin indulged him. "And why do you think that?"

"Because after all the self-doubt and uncertainty I felt this past week, I still want you." Jeongguk turned with fervent, molten eyes to him, wanting to convey the sincerity in his words. He needed the older boy to believe his irrevocable feelings of affection and yearning for him. So in the end, he could only voice his newfound realisation, "I think you own me, Jimin hyung."

"And it terrifies me, you know?" He pushed his legs up to his chest, wrapping his arms around them and almost cowering in restlessness. "Why do you mean so much to me when it seems like my absence doesn't affect you at all?"

"That's not true," Jimin vehemently denied. "You shouldn't think things like that."

"How can I not?" Jeongguk said miserably. "On that day, you said you didn't feel anything towards me. You said I made you uncomfortable. You said—"

Jimin hastily moved across the couch towards him, concern lining his features as he pressed his fingertips against Jeongguk's mouth before he could finish the sentence. He shook his head consolingly, tracing the younger boy's lower lip with a gentle touch.

Jeongguk removed his hand away, but still held onto his wrist as he murmured in barely concealed anguish, "Did you mean those things, hyung?"

"I didn't say that in response to you, Jeongguk," he said quietly. "It was because of what I was feeling. Don't blame yourself for my reluctance."

"But it wasn't a lie?" the younger boy asked, hurt.

Jimin looked away. "It wasn't a lie."

With a pained sigh, Jeongguk released Jimin's wrist. There was a deep ache in his heart that he didn't know how to soothe. God, it hurt so much. Who knew mere words could cause such agony?

He stood up from the couch, unconsciously wanting to distance himself from the source of his torment, even if he knew this was his own fault. Confrontation was painful. Sometimes the truth was too difficult to bear, and even more so if it was at the expense of your ease.

From a safe distance away, because Jeongguk still couldn't control his urge to hold Jimin, he met the older boy's eyes. "Why did you even come here, hyung?"

Jimin winced at his depreciating words, but didn't break eye contact with him. He moved towards Jeongguk, clear incertitude in his stance like he was giving the brunet an option to back away. When he stopped in front of Jeongguk, he bit his lip, eyes flickering like it was difficult for him to hold the younger boy's gaze. And then, as though defeated, Jimin's eyes finally fell.

He blinked several times, practically mauling his lower lip now.

Jeongguk’s heart ached at the sight. He gently placed two fingers under the silver-haired boy's chin, coaxing him to look up. "Jimin-ah?"

Jimin breathed out loud, his cold fingers reaching up to clasp Jeongguk's hand. He caressed the younger boy's warm skin, tracing along his knuckles and interlocking their digits together. "Because I can't pretend that I don't miss you anymore, Jeonggukie," he whispered.

And Jeongguk couldn't hold himself back any longer. He pulled Jimin into his arms, burying his face into the curve of his neck and roping his arms around his waist. Jeongguk pressed him closer to himself until he was sure the older boy couldn't breathe. "I missed you more, hyung. I felt like I'd die without you."

"Jeongguk, you can't say things like that," Jimin said shakily, his hands curling into the brunet's shirt
in a tight grip. "You scare me sometimes."

He chuckled woefully. "At least I make you feel something."

As expected, Jimin didn't respond, choosing to enfold himself deeper into Jeongguk's arms, enough so that the younger boy almost blushed from how every slope and contour of his body was lined against his. There was a certain pliability to Jimin physique despite being packed with muscle, Jeongguk felt like in every which way his arms moved, the boy would bend accordingly.

It was an ironic thing to notice, because the silver-haired boy's personality, in contrast, was the last thing that could be influenced. As of that moment though, Jeongguk was getting drunk on their proximity. Jimin's faltering breaths had yet to recover, brushing softly against Jeongguk's collarbones, a wispy essence to them which was strangely endearing.

Just as the thought of holding him forever prevailed, Jeongguk suddenly stilled. "What does this mean, hyung?"

"Hmm?"

He pulled away slightly to look at the boy. "What do you expect out of this?" he clarified.

"Oh." Jimin's gaze wavered nervously. "I want to be your friend, Jeongguk."

Jeongguk stared at him ludicrously for a moment, before letting out a breathless laugh. After all that they'd been through, Jimin was still hellbent on denying the idea of a more intimate relationship between them, but Jeongguk was still lenient with the older boy's hesitance. "Sure, hyung. Let's be friends."

Because he had yet to try methods such as seduction and cajolery.
One thing that became palpable after becoming friends with Jimin was his inability to be subtle. Today was a fine example of it.

From across his art studio, the silver-haired boy would glance over at Jeongguk every few seconds, his eyes lingering for far too long to be discreet, before reluctantly looking away. It was very unlike Jimin to be staring, not many things caught his interest for long enough so his behaviour seemed too strange. And not oblivious to his ogling, Jeongguk was sitting idly on a work table, one leg folded underneath him and the other hanging off as he scanned through some digital prints.

He could sense Jimin's prolonged stares from his periphery, but the older boy's attempts to be inconspicuous were almost laughable. Each time Jeongguk shifted in a certain way, Jimin would jerk his head in the other direction—as if he weren't being so blatantly obvious in the first place—and resume with painting mindless strokes across his canvas. Still, Jeongguk didn't call him out on it, testing how long Jimin would continue with his naive belief that he hadn't been caught yet.

And one irrelevant bit of information was that Jeongguk may or may not have been wearing his tightest half-sleeved shirt in the middle of December, along with the most ass-hugging pair of jeans he owned.

But it was worth the goosebumps on his skin to see how Jimin kept gaping at his arms. His gaze wouldn't stray too long; after the whole pretence of working diligently on an abstract portrait, Jimin's eyes would eventually drift back to Jeongguk. The younger boy offhandedly wondered if Jimin had a thing for muscles. If he thought back to it, the older boy had occasionally given Jeongguk once-overs after his football practices, but briefly enough that the brunet had never taken much notice of it. It couldn't be ignored now, though. Not with Jimin practically eyeing him like a damn meal.

Jeongguk knew he looked good. His body was practically a wet dream. He could feel his biceps
protruding against the sheathlike sleeves of his shirt, flexing with every little movement of rearranging the prints in front of him and when he—casually—scratched the back of his neck. With the way Jeongguk's pecs were defined, he'd like to say that the top was snug in a flattering way, but it was essentially cocooning him to death. Goddammit, the things you had to do in order to seem appealing. He should have thrown this shirt away when he was sixteen.

But at least his thighs looked good. Jimin had undoubtedly peeked at them not less than six times now.

Jeongguk told himself that it was all worth the effort, because as pretty as Jimin's eyes were, there was now a smouldering intensity in them which Jeongguk could feel even without directly looking at him. It made his skin tingle and his heart race from anticipation. For a moment, he truthfully wondered how long Jimin could deny that he didn't feel anything towards him.

Because God help him but Jimin wasn't looking at him like his little brother's best friend anymore.

For a little while longer, Jeongguk pretended to be oblivious, basking in the little ego boost unashamedly, and all the while Jimin ceaselessly kept peeking at him. Being on the receiving end of the silver-haired boy's attention, especially it being non-platonic, was thrilling. Jeongguk felt validated for having a stature worth being gawked at by Park Jimin. And he felt powerful. *Oh*, how he felt powerful to have Jimin wrapped around his fingers. Even if it was only for a while.

And then Jeongguk couldn't resist teasing him any longer. He glanced up roguishly from his work, brown strands of hair falling into his eyes which were met with a startled, stupefied Jimin. His orbs widened at being caught as his throat worked fearfully to swallow in a sudden panic.

One side of Jeongguk's lips quirked up cockily. "Hyung," he drawled. "You gotta try harder than that if you wanna pretend to be just friends."

Jimin scrambled furiously. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Uh-huh," he sang, eyes unable to lose that mischievous glint which was practically prancing at the surface in a goading manner.

And Jimin looked goaded alright. Especially when Jeongguk casually imitated the older boy by running his fingers through his hair, giving him a front view of his taut muscles which Jimin couldn't seem to tear his eyes away from.

His gaze only snapped up when Jeongguk jumped down from the table with a thump. He watched the perpetual smirk on the younger boy's lips guardedly, almost retreating into his easel as Jeongguk advanced towards him. Jimin looked helpless of sort, biting his lower lip to the point of turning it scarlet. But Jeongguk liked that. He liked watching the silver-haired boy lose his composure. And he especially enjoyed watching him squirm.

He walked towards him slowly, his stride bold and a little haughty, definitely enough to indicate his intentions. At approaching Jimin, Jeongguk stood in front of him for a moment, staring into his bottomless eyes that were so captivating, risking his own poise if not his sanity. But Jimin only looked back warily, and to make him drop the last bit of his composure, Jeongguk tilted his head with a coy smile. His hand rose to place two fingers on the side of Jimin's neck, right above his pulse where it was throbbing in all its endeavour.

"Your heart doesn't lie, angel," he purred.
Jimin slapped his wrist away. "You're so annoying."

Jeongguk grinned. "I can imagine why that would sting."

"Fuck off, why don't you?"

With a feigned gasp, Jeongguk asked in melodramatic concern, "But who will you stare at, then?"

Jimin didn't hesitate in backhanding him hard in the stomach. He didn't seem to take much joy in being teased by Jeongguk, although the scowl on his face was more affronted than angry. But the younger boy pretended to double over in pain nonetheless, distancing himself from Jimin with a displeased look.

"Hyung," he said, straight-faced. "I'm not into pain play."

Jimin's ears, as opposed to his cheeks, turned red. He swiftly spun away from Jeongguk, more so to avoid being onlooked by the younger boy than out of annoyance. Though the portrait he resumed to work on had to be his worst piece since he was barely paying it any mind. Jeongguk knew Jimin's body and senses were subconsciously attuned to him, for when he moved to grab a nearby stool, the older boy froze.

But Jeongguk merely took a seat behind him, watching him from close enough that if Jimin so much as shifted, his legs would brush against Jeongguk's knees.

When he didn't speak for a while, Jimin sighed out loud and begrudgingly faced him again. Jeongguk saw him hide a gasp and fumble for a moment at seeing the brunet's thighs spread leisurely and his arms crossed, expectant in the way he stared up at Jimin.

"What are you doing?" Jimin said, exasperated.

The nonchalant flare in Jeongguk's eyes was downright devilish.

"Let's play a game."

Jimin eyed him suspiciously. "Why?"

"We're friends. I should get to know you more."

"I've learnt not to trust those words out of your mouth."

"Why not?" Jeongguk said, scandalised.

"You're a nuisance."

"Why?"

"You get on people's nerves."

"That's not true. I'm delightful to be around."

Instead of replying, Jimin just peered at Jeongguk with surprisingly gentle features. They were both aware of how the older boy's legs were pressing against Jeongguk's but neither of them said a word or moved away. A strange air of tense familiarity was settling between them and Jeongguk feared being swept away into a trance. As Jimin continued to watch him with inscrutable intentions, he gazed up at him through honest eyes, letting him see everything he sought. "That you are," Jimin finally mumbled.
Jeongguk beamed at him. "I know."

The older boy only chuckled in return.

"We're still playing the game, though."

Jimin sighed, leaning back against the frame of his easel. "Enlighten me."

"You know how word association works, right?" Jeongguk said. "I'll say a word and you have to say the first thing that pops up in your head. And I'll obviously do the same."

"Okay."

He clapped his hands together. "Let's start with us. Friends."

"You and I."

Jeongguk almost facepalmed. "Hyung. It has to be one word."

"Oh."

"And you can't just rephrase what I said."

"Oh," Jimin repeated and the younger boy internally cooed at his childish ignorance.

"Let's start again." He looked behind him at the unfinished canvas where black and white strokes of paint were merging to form the barely distinguishable features of a face. "Portrait."

"Muse."

Jeongguk wanted to ask Jimin who his muse was, but for the sake of not ruining the game when it had just started, he kept quiet. "Calliope."

"Poetry."

"Romance."

Jimin hesitated, furrowing his brows and starting to chew on his lip as though in turmoil. Jeongguk had to practically wrench his gaze from Jimin's mouth to stop himself from losing control of the suave image he'd adopted.

"You can't think about it," Jeongguk said. "Just say the first word you thought of."

"I can't think of anything."

The younger boy observed him raptly. "Why not?" he asked. "You must have experienced it before, romantic attraction if not love."

"It's complicated."

"No word could sum it up?" Jeongguk insisted.

Jimin still didn't seem entirely comfortable with the direction their conversation was heading in, but with a note of defeat, he said, "Lover."

_Huh_, Jeongguk thought. _Lover._
A word most people would deem to have predominantly sexual connotations. As he had suspected, Jimin really was naive when it came to love.

"Touch."

"Distraction," Jimin said.

*Is intimacy a distraction?*

The younger boy was hesitant as he said, "Me."

"Golden."

He smiled. "Red."

Jimin paused.

And Jeongguk raised an eyebrow.

*I have you where I want you now, hyung.*

"Extremities."

Jeongguk fixed him with an intent gaze, inclining forward until his thighs were bracketing the older boy's hips. He watched Jimin's breathing turn shallower the longer he stared and he wanted nothing more than to steal the last of his breaths away. "Just how extreme is what you feel for me, hyung?" he mused.

Jimin stilled. "What?"

"I saw your diary."

"My diary?"

"Your sketchbook," Jeongguk explained, "that you use as a diary. Third of December, the day I told you I wanted you, was covered with red."

He could tell how hard Jimin was trying to school his features to stay unaffected. "So?"

"Doesn't it describe everything you feel for me?"

"What do I feel for you?" Jimin challenged.

Jeongguk poked his tongue into his cheek, scoffing in genuine incredulity at the older boy's attempt to play dumb. With a slight shake of his head, he rose from his seat, crowding Jimin between his body and the easel until there was barely any room to breathe.

"Extremities, hyung. Everything you feel for me is extreme." He curled two fingers into the neckline of Jimin's top, eyes solely focused on the action, and an airy stance to his movements even as he let the back of his fingernail trace the silver-haired boy's skin. "Sometimes anger. Mostly confusion. A little excitement," Jeongguk counted lazily. The pads of his fingers began to drift down Jimin's shirt, raising goosebumps in their wake to which the younger boy smirked. "So much caution." With another caress to his heated flesh, his eyes finally met Jimin's. "And desire."

But Jimin didn't take the bait. "Yeah?" he murmured. "Then what do you feel for me besides desire, Jeongguk?"
Jeongguk chuckled softly, and almost cynically, for being so far gone for the older boy that, even for himself, it was a hard pill to swallow. He let a small, rueful smile grace his lips, leaning closer to Jimin until his mouth was right by his ear.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you, hyung," he whispered.

Jimin's heartbeat picked up right under his fingertips. "Jeongguk," he rasped. "No."

The younger boy merely clicked his tongue. "I wonder how you convince yourself that you don't want me," he chided. "Doesn't it get tiring?"

He shook his head resolutely, almost sarcastically. "Not at all."

Jeongguk hummed. "You won't last long, then." He splayed his palm on Jimin's chest, feeling the blood pounding underneath, but the older boy's resulting wince made him jerk back.

"I recently got a tattoo there," he explained gently.

The spell broke.

Jeongguk froze for a solid minute, then blinked rapidly for another, eyes looming out his skull and his jaw dropping open before he groaned. "God fucking dammit, hyung!" he wailed. "I did not need another reminder! Fuck this. Fuck you."

He wanted to bang his head on a wall at the flurry of images sweeping through his mind, and his imagination didn't hold back, springing upon him every provocative idea of how Jimin's bare chest would look like with the ink. Jeongguk could barely get through the day fantasising about Jimin's mouth, he didn't need the older boy's tattooed body starring in his dreams too.

"Do you know how hard this is for me?" he hissed.

Jimin was stuck in an alarmed stupor. "Are you okay, Jeongguk?" he asked slowly.

But the younger boy only shoved his fingers into his hair, yanking at the strands helplessly. He really didn't need this. He did not need to know about Jimin's growing collection of tattoos when he had barely forgotten about that one bird he'd halfway seen on his lower back.

 Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Inhaling deeply, Jeongguk tried to force himself to stop freaking out. He had time to do that at home. "I'm fine," he managed to bite out, turning around so his mind wouldn't get more inspiration from seeing the real life Park Jimin. After taking a few more calming breaths, he willed his heart to simmer down. The idea of today was to make Jimin lose his composure, not work himself up. But as always, the plan had backfired.

Jeongguk sighed defeatedly, facing Jimin and glancing at where his new tattoo supposedly was. "Is it tender?" he said quietly. "Does it hurt if you touch it?"

The older boy seemed to be reeling from Jeongguk's outburst, giving him a dubious look as though he wasn't sure the brunet had completely calmed down. "It's just a bit sore," he replied. "But it won't take long to heal, it's quite small."

"Oh?" Jeongguk lilted, curiosity seeping into his veins. "What is it?"

Jimin fidgeted with his hands. "I don't know."
"You don't know what your tattoo is?" he deadpanned.

"I know what it is, but—" He exhaled "—I don't know what it means."

Jeongguk looked at him poker-faced. "Hyung, don't tell me you got some Chinese characters you don't know the meaning of."

"Obviously not." Jimin looked indignant. "It's just—Forget about it. It's nothing."

He was being weird about the whole thing, but Jeongguk let it go. He of all people knew just how tight-lipped Jimin was.

"So," he started, once the aftershocks of thinking about the silver-haired boy's tattoos had worn off. "I wonder what colour the page for when you met Chungha noona is."

Jinim scowled at him. "If you were gonna snoop, why didn't you just look through all of it?"

Jeongguk grinned toothily. "I value your privacy."

"Like hell you do," Jimin grumbled, and when the younger boy's smile didn't falter, he only sighed out loud. "You're lucky you're cute."

"That's not what was going through your head when you were ogling me."

He gave him a look. "Don't push it, Jeon."

Jeongguk was going to start his dramatic monologue on last name basics when he spotted Jihyun's car pulling up in the driveway. He grimaced, Jimin would probably kick him out now considering his refusal to let the Parks' know about Jeongguk and his friendship. The younger boy had to be careful whenever he visited Jimin's art studio in case anyone got suspicious of him spending time there.

It annoyed him to no end but Jimin wouldn't tell him the reason behind his secrecy. And hell would probably freeze over the day Jeongguk himself began to understand the silver-haired boy's motives.

He sighed. "Do I have go to now?"

Jinim looked at him pointedly. "Of course, you do," he said as if Jeongguk was being ridiculous. "And you better have a good excuse as to why you're already here."

Jeongguk was going to argue but the sound of the front door opening had him rushing to pack up his things. And once done, he hurried to pretend he'd been in Jihyun's room all this time.

Christmas break had officially started and Jihyun was back to taunting Jeongguk about being so miserly that he hadn't even started buying presents for others. 'You get lousier day by day, JK.' Jeongguk would beg to differ, though. He had a shopping list ready of all the things he would purchase for people, but it was just that his heart physically ached at the thought of spending money on others.

So maybe he did deserve to be berated every day at the dinner table. Today, Mrs. Park was solemnly trying to lecture Jeongguk on the importance of gifts during Christmas and how they strengthened
relationships while Mr. Park was nodding sagely with her every word.

This was all Jihyun's fault. If it weren't for the food, Jeongguk would have ended their friendship years ago.

And Jimin, being the epitome of indifference, was casually picking at his food, paying no mind to his family as they badgered Jeongguk. Every time the younger boy looked to him for help, he pointedly ignored his pleading eyes. Jeongguk told himself that it wasn't because Jimin didn't care, he probably just didn't want to push his social interaction capacity.

The brunet's neck was starting to hurt with the amount of involuntary nods he'd given, it seemed like the pestering Parks wouldn't let him go until he verbally confirmed that, yes, he would be buying people presents this Christmas. Seokjin's condescending voice was also prattling in his head, telling him to be a decent human being, when Jeongguk muttered, "I'll go on the weekend. I'm busy with other things right now."

"You're on break," Seohyun called him out impassively. "I'm sure you have no imminent work. And there's only a week left until Christmas Eve anyway, you'll benefit by going tomorrow."

"Yeah," he grunted half-heartedly, shoving more bacon down his throat.

"And Jimin-ah can join you," she said. "It's been a while since he's done Christmas shopping as well, so you'll be in the same boat."

At that, Jeongguk perked up in his seat, looking eagerly between Jimin and Seohyun. The silver-haired boy must have seen the literal stars in his eyes because one side of his lips tugged up affectionately, but otherwise, he merely nodded in acquiesce.

And so, the quest to empty out Jeongguk's wallet began the next day. He was waiting outside the Park mansion in his Range Rover, having previously suggested to Jimin that they take his car since it had more room for storage. He was adorned in all black: skinny jeans, combat boots, and a leather jacket—dressed to kill, if anything. He just hoped Jimin reacted to him the same way he did yesterday.

A part of Jeongguk was nervous about being alone with the older boy in such a closed space; things had considerably changed since the last time they had been in a car together so Jeongguk didn't know what to expect, and also because he still hadn't gotten over the revelation of Jimin's new tattoo. It was so tantalising to imagine the silver-haired boy with tattoos—

But Jeongguk stopped his thought process then and there, it would be best if he didn't think about it right now.

He agitatedly drummed his fingers on the steering wheel as he waited for Jimin to emerge. But that boy took his sweet time, and when he finally did appear, he walked towards the car with all the saunter of a runway model. Jeongguk huffed in exasperation, but didn't stop himself from eyeing Jimin's attire. He looked handsome in a speckled red sweater and a lapelled coat, quite sophisticated compared to Jeongguk's edgy look.

Yet Jeongguk resentfully thought that it was obvious Jimin wasn't trying to impress anyone, he just wanted to be comfortable in the cold weather, unlike Jeongguk who had gone all out in his efforts to look irresistible.

Although that he did.

Jimin did a double take when he climbed in, eyes noticeably lingering on Jeongguk's thighs before
he briskly whipped his gaze in the other direction. The younger boy pressed his lips together in amusement, barely managing to not smirk conceitedly. And in his hurry to look away, Jimin hadn't even greeted him like he usually did.

"Hello to you too, hyung," Jeongguk said with laughter clear in his voice.

"Yeah," he mumbled back.

"How are you?"

"You saw me yesterday," Jimin retorted, almost under his breath. His gaze was still locked on the side window pointedly.

"Didn't see you at night, though," he countered. "Did you sleep well?"

"Well enough."

"Did you miss me?"

The older boy looked at him snappily. "What is this? Twenty questions? Just get on with what we have to do."

Jeongguk pouted. "You're mean."

"Are you gonna start the car or not?"

He grudgingly put the car into gear, a little miffed at how cranky Jimin was being. "Fine, then. Which mall do you wanna go to?"

"Nearest one."

"Nope, that one doesn't have shit. Let's go to Times Square."

"That's an hour away!"

"That's more time that you'll get to spend with me," the brunet corrected sweetly.

Jimin glared at him.

Jeongguk nudged his elbow as he began to pull out of the driveway, checking the side mirrors in precaution. "You're so grumpy today. Did you wake up on the wrong side of the bed?"

"I'm fine."

"Of course, you are," he murmured.

It was quiet for a while. The temperature in the car was starting to get too high since Jeongguk had had the heater on for an hour at least. As he moved to turn it off, he felt Jimin's eyes fixed on the sleeve of his leather jacket, probably recalling his arms when they weren't covered and it made Jeongguk smile to himself. "Unfortunately for you," he started. "I had to wear a jacket today because it's freezing outside. But don't worry, I'll give you a show some other time."

Jimin punched his shoulder grudgingly. "Brat."

"You love it."
"I do," he said softly.

Jeongguk's head snapped in his direction, totally not expecting Jimin to respond never mind confirm his words. But the silver-haired boy didn't seem bothered, merely glancing out of the windshield like his words hadn't started heart palpitations inside Jeongguk's chest.

But before he could deliberate over it, Jimin's phone screen lit up, signifying an incoming call. Jeongguk wallowed in the fact that Jimin had turned his phone on silent before coming, he must have remembered that the younger boy disliked his blaring ringtone. However, then he saw Chungha's name on the caller's ID and the small burst of happiness died right there.

"Hi," Jimin greeted.

"Can we talk?" Chungha's voice seemed muffled, barely discernible despite the silence in the car.

"Not right now, Chungha, I'm busy."

"This is the second time you've said that. I know you're avoiding me."

"You know that's not the reason," Jimin said in a quiet voice. He seemed averse to speaking to Chungha in front of Jeongguk, if the chary glances in the younger boy's direction were any indication, but the tone of her voice had been too persistent. "Didn't we agree that this would be for the best?"

"But I didn't mean it like that! You're completely cutting me off like that's gonna help either one of us. Just talk to me, please. Hear me out."

"What more is there to say?"

"Don't be so cold, Jimin-ah," she pleaded. "It wasn't supposed to be like this. Let me—"

Jimin sighed. "Baby, please."

There was an audible sniffle. "I miss you."

Jeongguk suddenly felt like he was intruding on a private moment. Despite his unbidden jealousy, and the way his heart burned at hearing Jimin call her baby, he wanted to give the two of them space. He had no idea what was going on between them, sometimes he got the idea that they'd broken up and other times, well, conversations like this happened.

But the brunet decided that their relationship was tethering on the brink of an end, one slip away from breaking.

There was a long moment before Jimin replied, "I miss you too."

"You would talk to me if you did," Chungha mumbled.

The silver-haired boy seemed to be contemplating speaking again, and after much hesitance, he said, "I'll come over later."

"Thank you," she said, with a breath of relief.

"Are you alone right now?"

"Yeah."
"Don't isolate yourself. You should go hang out with Seulgi noona, she was asking for you the other day." Jimin paused. "And you should talk to her too. She'll ease your mind."

"I'm not the one you should be worrying about, oppa."

"I know," he admitted, looking out of the window wistfully. "It just distracts me from other things."

"Anything for a distraction, huh?" Chungha said, like it was a private joke, but her tone was sad.

"Anything for a distraction," he mumbled back.

In hindsight, Jeongguk should have asked Jimin what that little phrase meant, probed him about what it said about his place in the silver-haired boy's life, or at least what exactly counted as a distraction to Jimin. In hindsight, Jeongguk should have questioned everything Jimin and he were to each other. He should have learnt to not be so impulsive.

But the younger boy felt a searing jealousy deep in his bones. It turned his heart inside out every time the echo of Jimin's voice calling Chungha 'baby' reverberated around his mind. So as soon as the call ended, Jeongguk jumped to clear his doubts, "Are you two still dating?"

"Not that it's any of your business but we're friends."

But his answer only poured salt over Jeongguk's wounds. "Why do you call her baby, then?" he snapped.

Jemin eyed him carefully. "Is that a problem, Jeongguk?"

"Of course, it's a problem! How am I supposed to be okay with you calling your ex-girlfriend baby?"

"We never dated."

"So you're calling random people baby now?" Jeongguk said incredulously.

"She's not a random person."

"That is not the point."

"What's your point?"

"You're really gonna pretend I don't feel anything for you until you can't, right?"

But the older boy wasn't fazed. "More or less."

Jeongguk growled in aggravation, his fingers pressing around the steering wheel so tightly that his knuckles turned white. There were too many thoughts were racing through his mind and he couldn't trust himself to drive at the same time. He pulled up on the side of the road with a jolt, startling Jimin who turned to him in puzzlement.

But the brunet was focused on evening out his breathing in the pin drop silence of the car. The rush of vehicles darting past them was only a distant sound compared to the rhythm of his heart.

"Are you still interested in her?" Jeongguk asked calmly.

Jemin didn't seem eager to respond, but he must have known that Jeongguk wouldn't let the matter go as he sighed. "She's not the same person she used to be."
"The person you liked?"

He nodded.

"With you or with everyone?"

"Both," Jimin said.

"And you obviously blame yourself for that."

He looked away.

"I'm guessing you also think you're going to change me?" Jeongguk pressed.

Jimin's eyes were pained as he glanced at the younger boy. "You heard her, didn't you, Jeongguk-ah? Couldn't you sense her helplessness? Her need to please me even though she's done nothing wrong? She feels like she's failed me, like it was her duty to make me better. It's hard to forgive yourself when you start to feel responsible for somebody else's happiness. And even though I never meant to make her feel that way, could you honestly say that I haven't changed her for the worse?"

He ignored his self depreciation. "When will you forgive yourself then, hyung?"

"That's not what this is about—"

"It's exactly what this is about," Jeongguk remarked. For a while now, he'd been mulling over Yoongi's words about him being Jimin's type. Disregarding appearances, Jeongguk could see the similarity in the people the silver-haired boy had dated. He could see the reason behind Jimin's inclination towards them. "I was right before, you do have an obsession with bright things, hyung," he said. "You always go for the same people. Who you believe are better than you, who can shove you deeper into that self-hatred because you'll constantly compare yourself to them, and you'll always try to be someone you're not. It's almost as if you like it."

Jimin was frozen in his seat, but his hands had started to tremble. There was fear in his eyes.

"You're a bit of a masochist, aren't you?" Jeongguk continued. "You want your lovers to be saints, so even when they hurt you, you can convince yourself that it was your fault. But I'm confused about one thing, hyung. Why are you always the one who pushes away first?"

"What?" he breathed.

"If you're the bad one, then they must entertain the thought of leaving before you do. And if they are so good, you should want to keep them." He tilted his head. "What changes? Why are they not enough anymore?"

Jeongguk didn't mean to upset him, but Jimin looked visibly shaken. He was biting down on his lower lip brutally, ravaging the flesh between his teeth like he was punishing himself. "I don't want to talk about this," he finally said.

"With me or with anyone?"

"Anyone."

"Why not?"

"I don't want to start this again."
The younger boy bristled. "What else did you fucking think we were gonna do?"

"Don't shout at me, Jeongguk," he said faintly.

Jeongguk immediately cowered in guilt. "I'm sorry."

Had he gone too far?

Jimin took a few shaky breaths, bringing his feet up on the seat so he could rest his head on his knees. Jeongguk was drowning in remorse as he saw the distress he'd put Jimin in. He always managed to push him too far. God, why couldn't he just control his tongue?

"Hyung," he called.

The only response he received was a slight tilt of Jimin's head.

"Jimin hyung," he tried again.

The older boy looked at him tiredly.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be so harsh. I shouldn't have done that."

He nodded.

"I'm just—" Jeongguk let out a deep breath, not knowing how to explain himself without making himself sound like a bigger jerk. "I'll do better, hyung. I'll learn to be more understanding."

"It's okay, Gguk," Jimin murmured. "I know you mean well."

He sighed, gingerly reaching out for Jimin's hand and enclosing it in his. He tried to pour as much love and apology as he could into the soft caresses across the silver-haired boy's knuckles, wanting to bring his cold skin to his lips for a kiss but Jeongguk knew it would be too much for them at that moment. As much as he wanted to pull Jimin into an embrace, he had to resist himself.

"Are you feeling better?" Jeongguk asked tentatively.

Jimin nodded. "I'm okay."

"You don't have to hide all the time, hyung. You can hurt sometimes too."

"I know."

"I'm not like Chungha noona. I don't want to fix you," he said gently. "I just want you to stop running and face yourself, because you're the only one who can make you better. And I wish you'd let yourself be free sometimes. That much control over your emotions couldn't possibly be good for you, right?"

Jimin chuckled dolefully. "You won't believe me but I have no control over my emotions, Jeongguk."

"Why do you think that?"

"I'm here with you, for one, despite my best efforts to stay away."

"You would run at any given chance, though."
The silver-haired boy hummed. "But you wouldn't let me."

Jeongguk frowned. "Is that a good or a bad thing?"

"That's what I can't seem to decide," he said softly.
*crawls out from a corner. Um, so hi everybody. I kinda wanna fling myself off the earth but hey, we don't always get what we want. I didn't wanna say this in another author's note because it'd sound like I was making excuses and yall have dealt with enough of my bullshit anyway.

So here's the explanation for updating a decade later: on the 11th of Sep, I was going to literally *press* the button for posting this chapter but I decided I should delete that A/N first. So (you can see where this is going..) I deleted a perfectly finished chapter instead 😒. I swear I've never wanted to punch myself that bad. My memory is shit as it is, but even when I tried to recall everything I just couldn't phrase the sentences like I'd done so before. I've been writing this chapter everyday for the past week now, and sometimes I got such a bad writer's block I literally gave up. This has been the hardest chapter to write, I've never struggled with anything so bad honestly.

And this is something I have to address lol, when I replied to you guys saying that I would update 'today' or 'a few hours later' I wasn't trying to lead you guys on. This week's been so fucking hectic, I would plan on posting every single night but something would come up and I wouldn't be able to finish the chapter. Just thinking back to how crazy it was blows my mind.

I've been writing this for six days straight now and I can't bear to look at it once more. So here it is, the dreaded chapter 23. Hope you enjoy it 😊 (you better enjoy it! 😝)

p.s. if Jimin starts giving you a whiplash with the things he says, just go with it...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
"Hyung," Jeongguk said quietly. "Do you think our mistakes define us more than they are defined by us?"

Jimin's hand stilled on the rack of clothes he was sifting through. He paused for a considerable moment, eyes darting around as he deliberated over something. Then with a certain wariness, he faced Jeongguk who sat on a stool nearby. "Why do you ask?"

He shrugged, teeth latching onto his lower lip as he peered up at the silver-haired boy, but he didn't answer.

After a long moment, Jimin spoke, "What would you want the answer to be?"

"Neither."

"That's wishful," he said mildly. "But it sounds like a question of who is more to blame, us or our mistakes. Could you really answer that?"

"Why not?" Jeongguk insisted.

"Because we can never separate our faults from who we are. It's like running from yourself." Jimin sighed. "I don't mean to start a monologue, but I've dwelled on this thought many times. When I did something wrong, I thought that if I could admit my fault, then I must not be a bad person. But being capable of feeling guilt doesn't automatically make you a good person. Unless you learn from your mistakes, you're still the same. So wanting to run from your weaknesses is normal. But they're a part of you, and you can't neglect them just as you can't leave yourself."

Jeongguk stared at him in a stunned silence.

The older boy bit his lip. "I know I'm the last person you'd want to be hearing this from."
"No, hyung," he voiced softly. "I like listening to you. And I—I like knowing what you think about."

"Oh."

"It's just that these thoughts have been plaguing me for a while. It's hard to stop thinking about it sometimes."

Jimin crouched down in front of him, tilting his head to stare up into those candid, doe eyes. He grazed his fingers through the younger's boy hair gently, a tender look on his face. "But you don't need to worry about these things, Jeonggukie. You're golden. Even when you're wrong, you're right."

"That's not true."

"It is," he lilted, toying with the strands of his hair. He wrapped the brown locks around his fingers and then untangled them. Ever so often, his fingertips brushed against Jeongguk's cheekbones and the brunet's breath stopped every time. Jimin seemed awed. "I always wonder how you have such a good heart."

That stolen breath had yet to return to Jeongguk. "I don't," he said uncertainly.

"Of course, you do. Why don't you know how special you are?"

"Uh."

The way Jimin was looking at him was inexplicable, there was a distant look in his eye like he wasn't even aware of what he was saying. Scratch that, Jeongguk was certain he didn't know what he saying. Why else would Jimin stare at him like he could do no wrong?

"Hyung?"

"Yes?"

"You put me on a pedestal. Don't do that."

"But I have to remind you just how faultless you are," he said. "I can't have you doubting yourself over the trivial things that happen between us. I can't have you changing, Jeongguk."

"Hyung—" Jeongguk huffed. "No. They're not trivial things. I hurt you all the time, and I wish I could stop. You said yourself that we should learn from our mistakes. Why should I not do that?"

"It's not your fault, though. You have good intentions with everything you do, and a person like that can never be blamed."

"What if I do blame myself?"

"You shouldn't."

"I don't want to hurt you," he said feebly.

Jimin sighed, his eyes tormented. "Why do you let me affect you so much?"

A sad smile spread over Jeongguk's lips. "You think I can help it?"

There was a helplessness in the way Jimin gazed at him; like he wished to do so much but his hands
were tied, like he wanted to ease the younger boy's heart but he didn't know at whose expense. "If only you could see yourself through my eyes, Gguk."

"What do I look like through your eyes?"

"Like a dream."

Jeongguk's heart fluttered. "Really?"

He nodded.

"That's why you don't want me to change?"

"I've had too many fleeting dreams," he whispered.

"This one will last."

The silver-haired boy looked like he wanted to argue. His expression was conflicted, his lips pursed in the lingering melancholy. But then he heaved in a deep breath, eyes softening in a docile manner. "Okay," he said.

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They had been going from one department store to another for at least three hours now. Jeongguk had grievously managed to purchase two presents—pitifully cheap, but nobody needed to know that—while Jimin's hands were filled with shopping bags. There was nothing on his features to indicate that he was getting distressed about splurging like that. If anything, Jeongguk would say that the silver-haired boy enjoyed spending his money on others.

Every time he picked up an item, Jeongguk, not too subtly, gave him judgemental looks as his eyes fell on the price tag. But Jimin didn't pay him much mind apart from smiling fondly when he caught the younger boy's scrunched up nose. He even ruffled Jeongguk's hair once with a sweet laugh and the brunet could safely say that was the exact moment his soul had transcended to heaven.

Jinmin just didn't understand how much of an impact those casual, impromptu actions had on him.

Jeongguk had been struggling to breathe since then, but he hid it well because he couldn't let Jimin know how his heart was seconds from bursting due to the shit ton of feelings across his chest. So for the past fifteen minutes, Jeongguk was glad that his growling stomach had, to some extent, been distracting him from thinking too much about the older boy.

"When can we eat?" he asked.

"In a while. Let me just find something for Seulgi noona," Jimin murmured, resuming to sift through the shelves of perfumes and despite his best efforts to resist, Jeongguk returned to staring at him. Jimin's fingers were gentle on the glass bottles, his eyes completely attuned to their names and when something evoked his interest, he picked it up to nose at the scent.

Watching him was like witnessing the natural glide of water, his movements were so graceful, enriched with a poise that could hypnotise the onlooker. And the biggest prey to Jimin's charm was Jeongguk himself. He was bewitched by the silver-haired boy. From the fluency of his walk to the effortlessness in how he carried himself, it was hard to look away.
So he decided that he could watch Jimin for hours on end. There was something so seductive about the essence of him. It had Jeongguk falling headfirst into the unknown.

*Lord help him.*

"Are you looking for something in particular?" he asked when his thoughts threatened to pull him under for the hundredth time that day.

Jimin only hummed in response, starting to walk further down the aisle. He picked out a ridiculously expensive perfume, spraying some onto his wrist and raising it to his nose to smell it.

When Jeongguk caught the lettering of 'orange blossom' on the bottle, he frowned. "Why are you getting Seulgi noona the same perfume as your own?"

"It's not the same perfume. Only the top notes are identical."

He shrugged. "Same thing. Why are you getting her the orange blossom scent?"

"Because it reminds me of her," Jimin said, then he faltered, his grip on the perfume bottle wavering before he sighed softly. "And she doesn't remind of anything."

Jeongguk stared at him. "What does that mean?"

"You wouldn't understand."

The younger boy grabbed his wrist, nosing at the skin to inhale the scent before his eyes slowly rose to Jimin's. He watched him through his lashes, a challenging air to his gaze. "Make me understand."

Jimin's pulse quickened beneath his fingertips, a fluttering tenor to it, as if it had replaced the essence of his wispy breaths. With a weak force, he tugged his hand back and stepped away from Jeongguk. Even though he'd already selected a perfume, he began to browse through the aisle again, and Jeongguk had a suspicion it was because he didn't want to meet his eyes.

"She's like liquid," he started. "Always flowing from one place to another and never settling for long enough to belong somewhere, anywhere. Nobody owns any part of her, she's her own person. You rarely meet people like that, who are not tied to anybody but themselves. So when I think of her, all I see is nothing. I think about nothing. She's all there is to know."

"Isn't it lonely to never settle anywhere?"

"Seulgi takes a constant with her wherever she goes," he replied. "Love."

Jeongguk was enamoured of the way he talked about people—the genuineness in his words, the utter reverence on his face, and simply the emotion he spoke with. "What do you admire her more as, a free spirit or a good person?"

"You can't ask me that, Jeongguk. That would be like picking her apart."

"Who is she, then?"

He spoke with a smile in his voice, "Her. Just her."

"She sounds beautiful."

Jimin made a sound of agreement. "A little like you."
He stilled.

It took him a long moment to fully make sense of the words, to understand what was implied.

"Do you think I'm beautiful, hyung?" Jeongguk said slowly.

The silver-haired boy glanced at him, his eyes a chasmic mystery of the worlds he hid inside himself, betraying nothing and seeing everything. "Yes," he murmured. "I do."

"Oh."

He kept staring at Jeongguk, his expression unreadable but that look had now become familiar. It was how Jimin often looked at him. So he tried to find security in that thought.

"Hyung?"

"Hmm?"

"You like me, don't you?"

Jimin chuckled. "Not at all."

"Why's that?"

"You're annoying."

For once, Jeongguk didn't mind the change of topic. His heart was still on a high from hearing Jimin's earlier words. "The beautiful kind of annoying, though," he quipped.

"This is exactly what I meant." He frowned. "All of a sudden, you get these bursts of overconfidence and you become impossible to tolerate."

"Yet you're still here."

"I don't have a car with me, Jeongguk," he deadpanned.

"Touché." The younger boy grinned.

While Jimin left to pay for the perfume, Jeongguk tried to decide where to eat. His stomach had begun to hurt from the lack of food. But Jimin, having the appetite—or resilience—of a lungfish, didn't even seem like he would remember there was a thing called lunch if Jeongguk hadn't reminded him.

He tapped his foot on the ground impatiently. Only in that moment, his yearning for the silver-haired boy was second to his need for food. Jeongguk couldn't mollify his hunger anymore. He was exhausted from three hours of brooding over how much money he had yet to spend on presents. He kind of wanted to fight the person who invented Christmas.

Whether that was God or Jesus, he didn't know, but the hostility was equally applicable.

"You're treating me for lunch, right?" he said when the older boy returned.

Jimin side-eyed him. "I must say, I have heard of your mooching tendencies."

"Hyung," Jeongguk spluttered, not expecting his miserly habits, albeit notorious, to make an appearance. He gaped like a fish out of water for a moment, defensive words forming on his tongue
but dying right there. It wasn't like he could say much to justify himself when it was the truth, yet he indignantly wondered which fucker brought this subject up around Jimin anyway.

Still, the older boy only smiled softly in return. "I'm joking. Of course, I will."

Jeongguk's face lit up. "Really?"

Jimin hummed. "What do you want to eat?"

"You can choose," he said, not wanting to come off as too greedy although steamed dumplings had been floating in front of his eyes for days now. He told himself that he could have them some other day.

But maybe Jimin knew him better than that. He gave him a knowing look, lips quirking up at the corners. "You sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure," he grunted.

"Alright. Let's go."

The abundance of bags in Jimin's hands were thumping against each other as the two started to walk, Jeongguk glanced at them briefly, feeling the compulsion to take a hold of some to ease his load. "You want to me carry some of those?"

Jimin looked taken aback at the offer, eyes travelling from his own hands to Jeongguk's and then back up at his face. "Oh," he said. "Yes, thank you."

The younger boy furrowed his brows in confusion, not understanding his surprise at a simple gesture. He transferred most of the bags into his own hands while Jimin still stared after him in a daze.

"What?" he said.

"I'm just—" He let out a breath. "Nothing."

"You're being weird," Jeongguk chirped.

Jimin only scowled back.

But despite their quips and retorts, as they continued to walk to the elevators, Jeongguk secretly admitted to himself that he liked spending any sort of time with Jimin. It no longer mattered what it consisted of. He liked all their tedious conversations and also the petty back and forth, he wallowed in those flimsy moments of honesty even if it always felt like they were treading on eggshells, and he especially appreciated the little glimpses inside Jimin's head because they were his only lifeline.

To this day, Jeongguk didn't know what it was, but there was something about the silver-haired boy. It had him hanging by threads with no fear of falling. He didn't care if he got lost in Jimin's maze of a mind. He was just terrified of losing him to his weaknesses.

He wondered why he indulged the older boy like this. Doing these same things with somebody else would exasperate him, he would never be able to find the motivation to run after them like he did with Jimin. God, he just couldn't imagine being engulfed by another soul so completely.

It was wondrous how yielding he'd become.

"Would you do this with Chungha noona?" Jeongguk asked nonchalantly as they stepped inside the
With a clenched jaw, Jimin glanced at him. "Why do you always bring her up?"

"Because I'm jealous of her," he said simply.

The older boy didn't look like he expected that admission from him, he seemed startled. "Why?"

Jeongguk was incredulous. "What do you think?"

Jinm shut up.

"So?" he prompted.

"What?"

"You didn't answer my question. Would you do this with her?"

"Do what?"

"This." Jeongguk vaguely gestured around him. "Going out with someone like it's a date."

"We're not on a date."

"What if I want it to be one?"

Jinm looked aggravated. "Then you should try your luck with somebody else."

"I don't want anybody else," he retorted. "I want you. So tell me, if it were Chungha noona with you, would you count it as a date?"

"Probably."

"Why's that?"

"Because I had a romantic interest in her, for one, and I obviously don't in you."

Jeongguk let out a humourless laugh. "You sure about that?" he drawled, running his tongue along the rim of his lower teeth and watching with interest as Jimin's eyes zeroed in on the action. He leaned into his ear. "I see the way you look at me, hyung. You're attracted to me. Don't try to lie to yourself—"

Jimin stepped back coolly. "I'm bisexual, Jeongguk," he said as an explanation.

The brunet fumbled a little at hearing him say that out loud. It was too sudden. He had expected to find out one day, of course, just not in an empty elevator of a shopping mall. Jeongguk paused for a second to gather his wits, God knew he couldn't be caught slipping one more time.

But he soon regained his composure as they stepped out of the elevator. "So what?" he said. "I don't stare that way at every girl I see."

"Why would you?" he countered. "Are you straight?"

"I don't like to label myself."

"Exactly. I'd rather you not experiment your sexuality with someone like me."
"You and I both know I'm not experimenting my sexuality, hyung," he said in a level tone.

Jimin regarded him for a moment before looking away. "Whatever, Jeongguk."

"What does that mean?"

"It means I've had enough of you and can deal with no more of your bullshit. Maybe getting some food into your stomach might help your severe case of stupidity."

Jeongguk blanched. "Hyung," he spluttered the second time that day. "You're so mean."

He raised an eyebrow. "And?"

"What's gotten into you?"

"You're rubbing off on me."

"I'm not that rude."

"I am neither. Your smugness provokes me."

"That's not the only thing about me that provokes you," Jeongguk said dryly.

Jimin glared at him, and with no further comment he left to walk around the food court, probably in search for a restaurant to eat at. The younger boy followed him obediently, even though his mind was still reeling from discovering Jimin's sexuality. Not because he didn't already have a good judgement of it, but due the casual way in which Jimin had said the words. If he was that indifferent about it, why hadn't this topic come up before?

He distantly recalled Yoongi's words, when he'd told Jeongguk that Jimin was very open about his sexuality. Then why, despite all the times Jeongguk divulged his attraction to him, did he never imply that he was interested in boys too? Did he think the younger boy would become more persistent in his approach? Or was he just tentative breaching a subject like this with him?

Jeongguk wouldn't blame him, though. He couldn't deny that there was a tangible unfamiliarity between them, an awkward tension which made it even more spine-tingling to talk about such things. For the most part, they were still strangers, and delving into things of sensual nature was as intoxicating as it was petrifying.

It didn't help that just looking at Jimin roused all sorts of foreign feelings inside him. He was so easy on the eyes. Jeongguk couldn't imagine being that stunning.

The older boy had long taken off his hat, now his delicate fingers were tracing tracks through the silver strands. His eyes were dutifully observing every eatery, but despite being engrossed in such an ordinary task, they still managed to look so pretty. The liquidy brown of his irises exuded warmth in a way which it had Jeongguk fixed in a trance. How could anybody not find him absolutely angelic?

Regardless of his dull complexion, which reflected his awful eating habits, Jimin's skin was blemish-free. There was a hint of a stubble along his jaw, which made his profile even more tantalising. Jeongguk wanted to trace his fingertips across his sharp cheekbones, and then maybe venture close to his mouth. Because his lips were so full, so tempting that it was impossible for a man of Jeongguk's resolve to resist them.

And he realised he couldn't. One day his self control would collapse and he wouldn't be sated until
he got a piece of Jimin. But for now, Jeongguk just wanted to reach out and touch him, even for a second. Feel his bare skin on his own.

He watched Jimin as he stopped at the entrance of a place to examine the menu, shifting his shopping bags into one hand as he looked through the pages. Jeongguk's eyes drifted down to his unoccupied hand, feeling a deep-rooted desire urge him to lace his fingers through Jimin's. So for once in his life, he decided to act on it.

In the most unassuming manner, Jeongguk took a hold of his wrist, his fingers sliding down Jimin's palm until he had intertwined their digits together. The older boy jumped at the contact, a panic settling over his features as he realised what was going on. He immediately tried to wrench away but Jeongguk didn't let go.

Jimin looked like he was going to kick him. "What are you doing?"

"I'm holding your hand."

"Why?"

"Because I want to."

"Jeongguk."

"What? I didn't think you'd be so opposed to this. I mean, you used to hold my hand every night."

The tips of Jimin's ears turned red, but he didn't say anything else. After a moment of silence, he furiously struggled against Jeongguk's grip once more before giving up. "You're so fucking annoying."

"Beautifully," he added, poker-faced.

Jimin didn't look amused at all.

The younger boy sighed internally, thinking it was the little victories that counted anyway. And what was a greater win than being able to hold Jimin's hand in public? It didn't matter how sullen he looked, not when Jeongguk could feel his cold skin getting warmer the longer he held on.

So he tightened his grip around Jimin's fingers, tugging the reluctant boy behind himself. "Since you can't make up your mind," he said. "I'll choose a restaurant myself."

Jimin scoffed. "You just needed an excuse."

He scrunched up his nose. "You can think whatever you want."

"Where do you wanna go, then?"

The relief on Jeongguk's face was almost laughable. "Okay, listen. I've been dying to try something from that Taiwanese place. Everyone talks about it. Jaehyun took his girlfriend on a date there and I'm pretty sure he won her over because of the food and not his face. But he insists it was his looks that did it for him—"

Jimin watched him ramble in a wide-eyed startlement but he didn't interrupt. The younger boy continued for a minute straight, his tone so fervent as if somebody had done him wrong.

"You're talking about Din Tai Fung, right?" Jimin confirmed when he'd finished.
Hell if Jeongguk knew, he just wanted to try their renowned steamed dumplings. "Yeah, that."

And so, after a short walk through the passageway, they stepped inside the Taiwanese heaven. The mouth-watering aroma could be smelled from all four corners of the place and Jeongguk felt his hunger intensify, making his stomach rumble on cue. It was relatively quiet considering the noise and rush Christmas holidays brought along, maybe people hadn't been as petty as Jeongguk and had finished gift shopping beforehand.

The host—a balding man, of course—greeted the two amicably, directing them to a table without much delay which Jeongguk's stomach thanked him for. After a string of some more pleasantries, he told them that their server would be with them shortly, to which Jimin nodded and the younger boy let out a grunt. So much for being thankful.

It was a good ten minutes, during which Jeongguk moaned and groaned on the inside, before a woman started to make her way towards their table to take their order. The brunet sat up immediately, ready to prattle everything that had been swimming in his vision.

"We're having steamed dumplings," he announced loudly as soon as she approached them.

Jimin hid his face behind his hand, looking in any direction except at Jeongguk, but he didn't understand what there was to be embarrassed about. After all, food was food and he was hungry.

He listed some more things off the menu the stunned woman had given him, her pen was moving briskly across the paper as he carried on. When he was certain his order would fill his stomach, he finally turned to Jimin. "What do you want, hyung?"

Jimin, who had now taken to a menu card to conceal himself, peered from behind it bemusedly.

"That was all for yourself?" he asked, straight-faced.

"Of course."

He gave him a disbelieving look. "I'll have some vegetable soup," he said, still not meeting the server's eyes.

The woman uttered some more polite remarks before taking her leave, though that stupefied expression never left her face. But it was okay, Jeongguk had long learnt to make peace with his mortifying eating habits.

He started to tap his feet on the ground as he waited, earning a pointed look from Jimin.

"What?" Jeongguk said. "I'm hungry."

"I can see that. But use your manners when you come to a public place at least."

He looked at him impishly. "I don't have any. Why don't you teach me some?"

Jimin's eyes flashed at the younger boy, his jaw working in a barely controlled temper. "Watch your mouth, Jeongguk."

"If I don't?"

"Aren't you getting too bold?" he said sharply.

*Oh, shit. Abort mission.*
Jeongguk couldn't be getting on his bad side right now, not when they'd had a relatively stable day. He wanted to make the peace last for as long as he possibly could. So he sat in utter silence until their food was served, which wasn't that long after.

It consisted of a range of appetisers, a platter of steamed pork dumplings, two bowls of chicken and vegetable soup along with a large plate of fried rice. Jimin seemed to be reeling over the amount of food flooding the table but Jeongguk immediately dug in. God knew he wouldn't last another moment without getting some form of nutrition inside him.

As soon as he'd taken the first bite, he rushed to clear any remaining doubts. "Yeah," he said. "Jaehyun definitely didn't score her on his own."

"You're still on about that?" Jimin said, taking a spoonful of his soup with all the grace imaginable of a human.

"Obviously," he muttered through a stuffed mouth of rice. "I love proving people wrong."

"Of course, you do."

Jeongguk didn't care to find out what he meant by that, he was too busy eyeing everything on the table. The food was so delectable that he couldn't get enough. He decided to try the soup next, now that it wasn't as searing hot as when it had arrived. But for the sake of mix and match, the first spoonful had barely passed Jeongguk's throat before he started to cram a dumpling into his mouth too.

"Jesus Christ," the older boy exclaimed. "Have one thing at a time. It's not gonna run away."

"My appetite might."

Jimin snorted. "As if it could ever."

With a frown in his direction, Jeongguk decided to ignore him. He wasn't going to be berated on his eating choices, especially since he couldn't help them. After all, he was a growing, teenage boy. Good for Jimin if he could survive on two morsels a day, but Jeongguk couldn't imagine limiting his diet that much.

And it was quite obvious by his way of living—how he'd spent more than half his life eating at his best friend's house and quite simply the nature of his friendship with Seokjin—that Jeongguk was a sucker for food.

So he continued to devour the meal like it was his last. He could feel Jimin's judging eyes on him every time he took a mouthful of something, and the subtle shake of his head too, but it didn't matter to Jeongguk. Loading some more soup into his bowl, he brought the overflowing spoon to his lips, gulping it down in one go.

"Don't choke on it," came a reprimand from across him.

"You not into that?"

Jimin choked on his own bite, thumping his chest furiously. "For God's sake, Jeongguk. Warn a guy."

"Right. Park Jimin, I'm going to now ask you on your liking for choking—"

He looked so unimpressed it wasn't even funny.
Okay, maybe that was enough goading for a day. The older boy looked like he would snap if Jeonggguk said one more teasing word. So he decided to change the subject in case Jimin got too riled up. "You're done with your shopping, aren't you?"

"More or less."

He glanced at the amount of bags dumped next to their chairs and blinked at Jimin. "How many people are you buying for?" he said incredulously.

"I can't just give one gift to each person."

"Well, how many are you gonna give?" Jeonggguk cried.

"A few," he said quietly. "I've missed out on too many Christmases."

Oh. The younger boy hung his face sheepishly, it had slipped his mind that this was Jimin's first Christmas with his family and friends after a very long time. He longed to ask him about where he'd been for the past several years, if he'd been okay, and what had driven him away from home every winter.

But Jeonggguk kept it under wraps. He knew it was a sensitive topic.

Jimin finished eating before him, how could he not when all he'd ordered was some soup, and started to look around the restaurant. The younger boy was starting to fall back into a trance of staring but he suppressed himself by initiating another conversation. "Have you been here before?" he asked.

Jimin nodded.

"With who?"

"Alone."

"And the time before that?"

He didn't reply.

Jeonggguk tilted his head with interest, leaning forward to place his chin on a closed fist. He was intrigued by the things Jimin avoided talking about. "Was it a girl or a guy?"

There was an obvious disinclination on his face as he reached forward to pick up a salt shaker from the middle of the table, starting to twirl it around with his fingers, as though just to have something to do. Or perhaps, to direct the attention on him to something else. "A girl," he said.

"Were you dating?"

"It's complicated."

The younger boy rolled his eyes. "Hyung, it's either a yes or a no."

"Then we'd both have different answers," Jimin said in an empty voice.

"What would your answer be?"

There was no response again.

"Do I know her?" Jeonggguk prodded.
The fidgety movement of Jimin's hand stilled at the question, he wet his lips in an uneasy manner while his eyes refused to look up. It was obvious by his response that Jeongguk definitely knew the person they were discussing. But the silver-haired boy tried to evade him nonetheless, saying slowly, "We're no longer in contact."

"On whose accord?"

"Hers."

Jeongguk connected the dots in his head, feeling like a fragment of this story had been implied to him from another perspective. "You're talking about Joohyun noona, right?"

Jimin's expression tightened. "How did you—" He sighed. "Has she ever mentioned me to you?"

"No," he lied.

The older boy nodded like it was expected of her. "She doesn't like to talk about it."

"What happened between you two?"

He started to twiddle with the salt shaker again. "Nothing good."

It was obvious that Jeongguk wasn't getting anywhere with this, Jimin was being more tight-lipped than usual, and it was consequently inciting his curiosity even more. "How long ago was this?"

"It doesn't matter. She's dating Taehyung now."

"What does he have to do with this?"

"I don't want to talk about it, Jeongguk. So please, don't prod." Jimin looked as defeated as he always did when inquired too much about something, his features were so delicate, but so burnt out. It made Jeongguk back off immediately, not wanting this to be another repetition of what had happened in the car earlier that day. "And Taehyung doesn't know," he continued. "So ... um, don't bring it up in front of him."

"Of course."

They were both quiet then. The silence was stifling, yes, but there wasn't much that could be said in that moment. At least not without wounding some emotions. People came and went by in Jimin's life. And Jeongguk wondered how much say he had in it.

He knew the older boy would argue that he pulled away first, but then, it wasn't like it was in his control when the people gave him a reason to. He was helpless, in every sense of the word. It made the younger boy's heart ache to even think about how much Jimin had to endure. He wished he could make it better, make it easier.

"Hyung," he started, thinking back to their conversation about Seulgi. "Do you want a constant in your life? Is that it?"

Jimin looked at him with wide eyes. Then after a short while, he nodded imperceptibly.

"Can I be your constant?"

He froze. "You don't know what you're talking about, Jeongguk."

"I do. I want to be that thing you take everywhere with you."
"You're not a thing."

"And you're missing the point."

"I know what your point is and I don't agree," Jimin said gently. The vehemence that normally laced his words when talking on a subject matter like this was missing. His voice was faint, but sober. "You can never be my constant, Jeongguk, because that will belong to me. And I can never own you. You just don't understand how immense you are, trying to contain you would be the most destructive thing I could do. For the both of us. So don't let me make the mistake of believing I could have you."

"You can have me," he implored. "I'm just a normal person, hyung. Stop treating me like a porcelain doll."

The older boy looked disappointed at his words, and a little foreboding. "You still don't get it."

"What don't I get?"

He chuckled sadly. "I've run out of ways to make you understand, Jeongguk."

"Then, don't."

"Okay," he relented.

But Jeongguk did understand. Of course, he did. He had seen the dawn and demise of Jimin and Chungha's relationship firsthand, how they began by throwing themselves into an idyllic oblivion, a sort of nirvana, until the reality started to seep in and fear clouded their minds into blowing out the candle before it had even fully dissipated. He had heard the urgency in Joohyun's voice, telling him to protect his heart as though she could see herself in Jeongguk, see the web of delusions which lured you into wanting to heal Jimin's soul.

He understood that he would get hurt. And he would ache, for himself and for Jimin. But that was all he understood. He had much more to understand. Like how much his feelings for the silver-haired boy could grow, and to what extent he could make Jeongguk feel like the most precious thing on earth. And he had much more to experience. Like how Jimin would sound when he gasped Jeongguk's name and how pretty he would look tangled up in their sheets the next morning.

In order to let his fantasies come to life, he had to accept that pain was only one of the multitude things he would undergo. And did a person truly live if they never knew what it was like to jump into a fire, willingly and foolishly, all for the sake of feeling something?

So Jeongguk let the older boy think he was ignorant of their fate, because it was the only way they could move forward.

He returned to his cold food then, thinking Jimin was wrong in assuming that Jeongguk's appetite couldn't disappear. Because it had. He prodded at the meal some more, merely toying with it since he had no intentions of eating any more.

Opposite him, Jimin's attention was caught by the bustling restaurant. So he copied his actions, wanting to see what the silver-haired boy saw when he looked at everything with those penetrating eyes. At the tables, there were people from all walks of life. Families, couples, groups of friends, and also those who didn't seem to merge with each other as effortlessly as everybody else.

There was a barrier between them, either of unfamiliarity, one sided love, or simply clashing personalities.
Jeongguk wondered what Jimin and he looked like to an outsider. If people glanced at them and immediately thought they belonged together, or if they seemed like a piece of driftwood and some kerosene trying to make peace with one another through closeness. He had an inkling it would be the latter, but he kept going because he convinced himself that they couldn't just burn out like that. With no flame whatsoever.

Their gazes met for a second, a disparity between what both of them saw. Jimin's eyes were filled with emptiness, and Jeongguk's were drowning in fire. It was only a matter of time before one of them engulfed the other and became smoke.

"What are you thinking about?" Jimin said in a silken voice.

"You," he replied.

"What about me?"

_How you're gonna be the end of me._

"Just you."

He wasn't stupid. He knew what Jeongguk was thinking about. But he kept quiet.

You don't get caught if nobody tells.

"Liar," Jimin smiled. "You're probably thinking of getting me alone."

The younger boy laughed. "That, too."

And that was where the beginning of the end began.

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Chapter End Notes

Here we go jikookers ...

( Also, just a little message. I know I haven't been the most promising about the updates and overall schedule, but can y'all not make assumptions about things. You know who you are. Like it /really/ gets on my nerves. Jesus Christ. I swear my blood boils. So please, don't. )

On a happy note, rest of you guys are literal angels and idk what I did to deserve you but just know that I love you so much.

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