by some act of Mother Nature, all these people around Jeongguk are soulmates who achieved their happy ending without a single spot of trouble. if Jeongguk ever comes face to face with Mother Nature, he's certain that he's going to punch her in the face. because Jeongguk -- well, Jeongguk doesn't have a soulmate. and it's killing him.
before you begin, here's some information. skip if you'd like, all of this is revealed eventually, it'd just make the first read a little bit easier.

The Basics:

~once you turn 18, you can find your soulmate by locking eyes with them. this will cause color to flood the previously black and white world that was seen. this is a normal bond, the one with the fairy tale ending.

~there's four types of irregular bonds.

~you can contract soulmate sickness from long term separation from your soulmate. symptoms include dizziness, headaches, stomachaches, and in severe cases, heart attacks. in the case of an irregular bond, there is a small chance of contracting the hanahaki disease.

~hanahaki is a fictional disease in which one coughs up flower petals until they die. this is a symptom of soulmate sickness and sometimes a side effect of an irregular bond.

~falling for someone other than your soulmate is uncommon but possible. if the non-soulmate couple refuses to separate, they have a high chance of killing themselves and their actual soulmates before turning twenty-five.

The 4 Irregular Bonds:

~Twisted Bond - there is a buffer between one person seeing color and the other person seeing it. the typical buffer lasts about a week, but the longest recorded case spanned four years.

~Broken Bond - usually brought upon by the death of one of the soulmates or cheating. death results in the living half losing their colors again, never to regain them. cheating renders both parties colorless and unable to love again.

~Incomplete Bond - only one party sees colors upon eye contact. the other half never gains their colors, or gains their colors upon seeing someone else. the one who gains the colors upon eye contact usually dies early from soulmate sickness, or in extreme cases, the hanahaki. there is no known cure for an incomplete bond.

~Bondless - the rarest of all irregular bonds. those who have no soulmate gain their colors at midnight on their eighteenth birthday, contract the hanahaki disease by nineteen, and die between twenty and twenty-one. as there are so few people who are bondless, there is no research on it and no cure.
Chapter 1

Jeongguk is well aware that he is the type of person that most parents hate. The quote unquote bad kid who wore leather jackets and pierced his lips, eyebrows, and ears. The kid who had a tattoo sleeve by nineteen and knew every trick to appearing older than he actually is, the kid with the fake identification and the kid that reeks of alcohol.

The kid that they prayed wasn’t their own child’s soulmate.

Jeongguk always scoffs when those parents divert their attention and old ladies wrinkle their noses at him, when younger teens skirt around him nervously and people his age eye him warily and walk on, often holding their valuables closer to them. And always, always avoiding eye contact with him.

Jeongguk has never looked someone dead in the eyes since the day he turned eighteen. The moment he set foot on his college campus, murmurs about him being an early high school graduate surrounded him as he walked the streets for the first time. But the whispers of admiration and awe soon turned into whispers of disgust and bitter rumors as he reached his reputation of being the rebellious, reckless, bad boy type who disregarded all and any rules and was more often than not found smoking behind one of the buildings, more or less dead to the world with his earbuds in.

Jeongguk can’t help but laugh as everyone avoids him; he greatly preferred it that way. The only people he can’t shake for the life of him are his two roommates, the pair of which happen to be soulmates. And by extension, he can’t shake their four friends, all of which are soulmates by some cruel act of Mother Nature. If Jeongguk ever meets her, he will not hesitate upon punching her straight in the face, celestial being or not. Because Jeongguk - Jeongguk doesn’t have a soulmate.

He knows for a fact that there’s no flaw in the system. The last nineteen years of his life have been dedicated to learning everything and anything he can about soulmates, his college major even being Soulmate Studies. And he knows, he knows that there is no flaw because the system - well, the system was already broken.

Broken beyond repair, in all honesty, no matter what the media tries to push. Stories of those without soulmates and those whose soulmates did not have them as soulmates and soulmates whose bond is broken or incomplete or twisted and oh, oh how could he forget the tales of the hanahaki disease he’d come across as a sixteen year old and encountered in real life when he turned seventeen.

He’ll never forget watching one of his close friends die slowly before his very eyes, helpless as they suffocated on pure white lily petals, their soulmate a million miles away and mostly unaffected by their death. Jeongguk will never forget how furious he was when said soulmate returned, and how
his fist collided with his nose hard enough to break it. The fine handed to him by the policeman was well worth it; he would have punched that man a hundred times over.

Yes, the system has always been broken. That didn’t mean that Jeongguk has to be happy about it, jump for joy that he’s one of the few that doesn’t have a soulmate and smile his way through the rest of his short life. He isn’t going to do that, not at all, because he’s dying. He’s dying, he’s dying fast, and he’s certain that there isn’t a cure for it. And if there’s no cure - well, why bother with living in the first place?

Jeongguk flicks the cigarette in his hand, watching the ash drift to the pavement. His eyes move upwards, and his lip curls as a pair of people stop moving in the middle of the sidewalk and burst into tears, flinging themselves at each other, screaming about soulmates and color. God, what Jeongguk would give to not have to watch that happen over and over as he goes around campus.

Yes, color is beautiful. Seeing it for the first time is wonderful - jarring, but wonderful. But if you see it without locking eyes with your soulmate, then color is also sickening, terrifying, a promise of death.

And Jeongguk - he isn’t sure about death. He isn’t scared of it, not at all. Neither does he necessarily want it. But if he’s going to die - he doesn’t want to die by choking on flower petals. He wants to die on his own terms - and if that means drinking until he blacks out, smoking until his lungs turn black, and taking shady drugs from all the wrong people at random parties, then hell, he’s going to do it.

Jeongguk tugs his jacket tighter around him, leaning back against the heavily graffitied wall as he watches the spectacle unfold across the street. Bystanders clap, videos are filmed to be posted online later, and the newly formed happy couple beam and wave and kiss and -

Jeongguk walks away, shoulders tensed, another burning cigarette between his lips. He doesn’t want to watch the show a moment longer. And so, he heads for his dorm building, making sure to ditch the cigarette before he draws close. The smell of smoke clings to him as he swipes his card and enters the building, drawing a nasty look from the lady at the desk that he ignores yet again. He could care less, at this point; his reputation had hit rock bottom barely a week after his eighteenth birthday, when everything he’d hoped for had gone to shit.

One of his roommates, Taehyung, gives him a look as he enters the dorm room, a look that he ignores with a little more difficulty than the look from the lady. The other roommate and Taehyung’s soulmate, Jimin, looks up from his desk and frowns as Jeongguk sheds his leather jacket, tossing it on the top bunk of his bunk bed. Jimin’s eyes follow the jacket, but he says nothing.

“Smoking kills, Gguk.” Taehyung says softly, and as always, Jeongguk doesn’t answer him, opting to pull his shirt over his head and ruffle his hair, exhaling as he pulls a different, clean shirt over his head. Soon after he sheds his torn jeans, he gets into bed and pulling the covers over his body and turns towards the wall, blatantly displaying his desire to be left alone. The room falls quiet, but soon pages turning and soft breathing fills the space.

“I’m worried about him,” Jimin murmurs, under the impression that Jeongguk is fast asleep. Taehyung hums, glancing over from his bunk.

“Me too. He’s been off ever since his birthday, his eighteenth,” Taehyung sighs, and Jimin purses his lips, his eyebrows furrowing as his eyes dart over the same paragraph of text for the seventh time, unseeing.

“He’d been here barely a month at that point. Maybe this is just… him?”
“No,” Taehyung says firmly, eyes drifting over to the supposedly sleeping figure. “The person we got to know before his eighteenth is not the person sleeping in that bunk. Something happened.”

“But what?” Jimin whispers, and the room is silent again. His question remains unanswered.

Jeongguk shifts in his bunk, open eyes piercing the wall before him. His roommates’ words echo in his mind, and after a moment of thinking, he scoffs and buries himself deeper into his blankets.

They’ll never figure out what caused him to change. He’s sure of that, because he’ll never let them find out.

The next morning, Jeongguk hasn’t gotten a wink of sleep. He waits until his roommates are out before getting up and getting dressed, throwing on skinny jeans and his usual jacket, the pockets still full with cigarettes and random notes of cash. Shouldering his bookbag, Jeongguk leaves the dorm, avoiding the eyes of the front desk lady as she once again glares daggers into his retreating back.

His first class is Soulmate History. It’s boring to him now, honestly, since he learned most of what they cover back when he was in high school on his own time. But occasionally, he’ll learn something new, so he still pays a bit of attention to the professor as he talks and talks and talks. He has a reluctant acquaintance in that class, a boy named Namjoon, friend of Taehyung and soulmate of another man named Yoongi.

Namjoon is intelligent - Jeongguk won’t lie. But still, the older man knows nothing about people without soulmates, a topic so rare that their professor hadn’t even touched upon it yet. Jeongguk had once mentioned the topic, and Namjoon asked if he’d made it up. Jeongguk hesitated, but said no, but he could have been mistaken in his information. But said information is himself, so it was quite impossible for it to be made up. Small details like that weren’t important.

And so Jeongguk continues suffering through his lectures with Namjoon and keeps making up excuses when the elder tries to get him to hang out. From made up plans to faked illness, Jeongguk has done it all, and he’s shocked the other hasn’t caught on yet. Then again, as smart as he is, Namjoon can be quite dense.

The ending of the day’s lecture on the medieval period and soulmates leads Jeongguk to outside his usual tattoo shop, talking idly with one of the workers while they both smoke cigarettes behind the shop.

“Still dying, Jeon?” The other man asks, flicking his hand to remove ash from his cigarette. Jeongguk barks out a laugh. Jackson is one of the only ones who knows of Jeongguk’s condition, and in return, Jeongguk knows of how Jackson’s soulmate bond is twisted.

“When am I not dying, Jackson? It isn’t long until petals clog my airways and I die a painful death,” he responds, running a hand through his hair.

“Hm. Fair enough,” Jackson replies, exhaling and watching as smoke curls into the air. “Want another tattoo? I can hook you up for cheap since you're my friend.”

Jeongguk considers for a moment before dropping his cigarette and putting it out with the heel of his shoe. “Sure. Still got space on me somewhere.”

“Another one?”
Jeongguk scoffs at Seokjin’s tone as he slides into the booth, trapped on either side by one of his roommates. He wears only a t-shirt, displaying a new tattoo on his left upper arm, wrapped in clear wrap and protected from the air. The others’ attention is drawn to the stark black lines, swirling together to form the image of a wilting rose.

“You’re not my mom, I do what I want,” Jeongguk replies, and Jimin elbows him hard in the side. He sends his roommate a dirty look, but the shorter male holds his ground, staring right back. Jeongguk refuses to look away, and eventually the silver haired man cracks and looks away, and Jeongguk allows his lips to tug into a smirk as he glances down at the menu before him.

The small restaurant is a regular spot for the odd group of six and Jeongguk. He refuses to include himself in the group, rarely speaking and simply drinking in silence, ignoring the disapproving stares directed at him by the others.

As usual, the others order a ton of food, and Jeongguk orders nothing but soju. He pretends not to notice the stares of his roommates and their friends, opting to take out his phone and fiddle with it, pretending that he actually has anyone to talk to. In reality, all he has is a slew of likes on Instagram and an empty messaging app.

The conversation picks up around him, and he tunes it all out, taking sips of soju every so often and pretending that he’s interested and engaged, because he knows there will be backlash if he doesn’t at least look interested. They’re talking about something or other, but he can’t help but start actually paying attention when Jackson’s name is said.

“Jackson has a weird bond,” Namjoon is saying, and Jeongguk’s grip on the bottle in his hand tightens. How does Namjoon know about Jackson’s twisted bond?

“I think his soulmate is that Mark kid, but Mark didn’t react when they locked eyes,” Namjoon continues, everyone’s attention on him. “It was a while ago. I’m not sure what’s going on - maybe it’s incomplete?”

“Jeongguk, you’re a soulmate studies major,” Seokjin says, drawing all eyes to Jeongguk. “What do you think?”

“It isn’t my place to say,” Jeongguk replies calmly, shrugging. “I know what’s happening, but only because Jackson trusts me. We smoke together, so he’s told me some shit. Sworn to secrecy.”

“Smoking kills,” Taehyung mumbles, almost a reflex, and Jeongguk’s eyes cut over to him. Silence falls over the seven men, and after a moment, Jeongguk sighs and leans back in his chair.

“So you’ve said. I’m well aware.”

“Then why don’t you stop?” Jimin asks, a slightly timid tone to his voice, and Jeongguk stares at him for a moment.

“Because it feels good,” Jeongguk responds after a few moments of silence. “And I’d rather not give that feeling up, thanks.”

“But you might die from it,” Hoseok says slowly, a frown on his face. “How can you keep going if you know you’re gonna die if you keep smoking?”

“Dunno,” Jeongguk drawls, rubbing his eyes. “But I have to get going. Jackson’s out at our usual spot tonight. Gonna check up on the tattoo.”

Jeongguk stands, tossing a couple bills onto the table before stuffing his hands in his pockets and
walking away. The six remaining men watch him as he goes, frowns on all their faces as the door of the restaurant swings shut, cutting off their view of the nineteen year old boy.

“Smoking kills.”

Jeongguk closes his eyes briefly, exhaling angrily. How Taehyung found him outside the shop with Jackson, he’ll never know, honestly, as he doesn’t recall telling him the address. But here he is, a frown on his face and vivid orange hair fitting right in, though his bare skin and lack of a cigarette pin him as different.

“Taehyung, I know, okay? Can you leave me alone?” Jeongguk grumbles, kicking a foot up against the graffitied brick wall behind him.

“You have to stop.” Taehyung says firmly, unfazed by the people around him sending him dirty looks. “You’re my friend, Gguk. I don’t want you to die because of cigarettes.”

“Since when does pretty boy call you Gguk?” Jackson asks, glancing curiously at Jeongguk, who grits his teeth and exhales smoke before dropping the cigarette and putting it out with his heel.

“Taehyung, leave,” Jeongguk says, but Taehyung stands his ground.

“Not without you.”

“You’re a fucking idiot,” Jeongguk grumbles, glaring at his roommate. “A real fucking idiot. Fine. Let’s go.”

He seizes Taehyung’s upper arm and drags him away from the tattoo shop, burning with anger. Jeongguk just raises his free hand as Jackson shouts something after him, too far gone in his head to care what he said. Taehyung says nothing, silently walking behind Jeongguk, who releases his arm and scowls at the ground before him as he walks.

“That’s a dangerous place,” Taehyung says after a moment, and Jeongguk doesn’t have to turn around to know that the elder is frowning.

“I’m aware,” Jeongguk says curtly, stuffing his hands in his pockets. “That’s why you shouldn’t be there. Jimin would never forgive me if you got hurt because of me. Hell, I wouldn’t forgive myself.”

“Sounds a lot to me like I’ve grown on you,” Taehyung mutters, and Jeongguk hesitates, frowning at his feet.

“No. I just hate when people get hurt because of me.”

Jeongguk glances up, and sees that they’re before their dormitory. He turns back to Taehyung.

“Go in. Jimin’s waiting. I’ll be up in a bit,” Jeongguk gestures to the building, and Taehyung goes, albeit reluctantly. Once the orange haired male has vanished from sight, Jeongguk turns around and walks right back to the tattoo shop. He’ll be damned if someone stops him from going to the only place where people understand.

Jackson raises an eyebrow when Jeongguk returns, but says nothing. Jeongguk lights another cigarette and leans back against the wall again, sighing.

“My bond is fixed,” Jackson says after a moment of silence. “He came around the other day and I
noticed the exact second he saw color when he looked into my eyes. Is this… is this what happiness feels like?”

“I don’t know,” Jeongguk replies, exhaling smoke and smiling bitterly at Jackson. “I’ve never felt it.”

The world is spinning, but Jeongguk could care less. He knows that he’s drunk more than what’s considered safe, but he could care less. It might kill him just a little bit faster, and to anyone else, it just looks like another college kid who drank too much during a party.

Jeongguk stumbles into someone, mutters something along the lines of an apology, and tries to keep going. But a hand catches his arm, and he’s forced to stop. He tries to fight it, but his movements are sluggish and he has no strength left to fight. So instead he falls back, the grip on his arm tightening. The party spins, and spins, colorful lights and clothes rushing around him and music and yelling white noise in his ears. Present melts into the past, and instead of people he sees memories, and oh, he must have blacked out because it’s been a couple years since he last saw his father so he can’t be standing before him.

Jeongguk moves away from the man looming over him, forcing his eyes open and shooting upright, panicked eyes taking in a clean bed and spotless bedroom, a place he doesn’t recognize. Looking down at himself he is certain that he didn’t go to the party in these clothes - loose sweatpants and a baggy blue shirt, tattoos exposed along with various scars that he usually did his best to hide. His jacket hangs on a chair nearby, and he reaches over and pulls it on, not batting an eye at the stench of alcohol that comes from it.

Standing is difficult. Jeongguk manages, somehow, clutching the bed and then the desk as he makes his way slowly towards the door. He pulls it open, frowning when he hears voices drifting through the house - familiar voices. Jeongguk groans and closes his eyes briefly, fighting away his rising headache before heading out into the living room, causing all conversation to cease.

“How much did you drink?” Seokjin asks, a stern tone to his voice. Jeongguk blinks once, twice, and then the question sinks in and he scoffs.

“I dunno. Lost track,” he replies, shrugging and pulling his jacket tighter around him, observing how everyone’s eyes follow his movements. “Not the first time I’ve drank a little too much. Probably not the last.”

“Why would you do something like that?” Jimin demands, crossing his arms and frowning at Jeongguk. “That’s dangerous. What if you got alcohol poisoning? You could have died.”

“Again, I’m aware,” Jeongguk sighs, rubbing his eyes. “Now, where are my clothes? I have someone to meet later today.”

“In the wash,” Hoseok says tightly. “You’ll be waiting here until they’re done.”

“Whatever,” Jeongguk mutters, rifling through his jacket pockets and pulling out a box of cigarettes and a lighter. “Mind if I wait outside?”

Not waiting for an answer, Jeongguk walks out of the house, sitting on the curb and lighting the end of the cigarette, inhaling the smoke that came from it. He exhales after a moment, watching the smoke swirl into the air, grey against blue. Jeongguk chuckles bitterly, his eyes sweeping over the colorful landscape.

Not for the first time, he wishes that he couldn’t see it. Everything would be so much easier if that
was the case. If he couldn’t see color then, well, maybe he wouldn’t be dying.
Most days, Jeongguk wishes that he lived alone. Jimin and Taehyung aren't the worst roommates he could have gotten, but on the days when he walks in on them or comes across them doing something sickeningly sweet and romantic, he wishes that their university would allow them single room dorms. Unfortunately, the lowest number of people a room could house is two, because everyone expects you to find your soulmate before or shortly after graduating college. In Jeongguk's case, he may not even be able to finish college.

Don't get him wrong, Jeongguk loves his major, Soulmate Studies, and his minor, music composition, but sometimes, well... he isn't going to live long enough to have a career, so what's the point? It's a bad mindset for him to have, and Jeongguk is aware of that, but if he doesn't have the motivation or inspiration to finish a paper or a song, he just won't. He'll scrap whatever it is and start over again, much to the distaste of his professors and his always nearing deadlines. The final projects loom over him, the paper for his major being on their opinions on the soulmate system and the concept for the song he has to compose for his minor being a song about something personal to them. In all fairness, the deadlines are several months away, but already it's giving Jeongguk a headache.

And then there's the issue of his roommates' friends. Namjoon, a senior as he reluctantly learned, is a Soulmate Studies major who happens to take the same soulmate history lecture that he does. Namjoon's soulmate, Yoongi, is a grad student working towards his masters in music composition and songwriting. This, unfortunately, gives Taehyung and Jimin a chance to try and force the two to communicate about music - by a stroke of luck, however, Yoongi isn't the most social of people and often declines the two of what they want. Jeongguk would never admit it aloud, but Young is his favorite out of all of them, simply because he actually leaves him alone.

Hoseok and Seokjin are the complete opposite of Yoongi. They're outgoing and friendly, often called the dads of the friend group, a fact Jeongguk was forced to remember by his roommates. It seems that every Saturday, Seokjin, who is apparently taking an internship at some restaurant since he graduated with a degree in something food related, invites the group over for dinner. And, due to the fact that he's roommates with Jimin and Taehyung, Jeongguk is more often than not forced to attend these dinners.

Despite that he obviously hates this with a burning passion, time and time again he's dragged along, and there is another dinner tomorrow that Jeongguk is likely going to be forced to attend. Leaning back against the wall behind his bed as he types away on his laptop, Jeongguk wonders how he ever managed to get himself into this situation. Before he turned eighteen, he would have been fine with
something like this - hell, he would have welcomed it. But ever since he opened his eyes and saw a multitude of colors staring back at him, he'd pushed everything and everyone away. If he's going to die, he doesn't want anyone to get hurt in the process. And by extension, that means that he can't allow anyone to get attached to him.

Putting the laptop aside, Jeongguk closes it and stands, tugging on his shoes and glancing at the empty bunk bed across the room. Jimin and Taehyung are out somewhere - they probably told Jeongguk where, but he always tuned them out, and he honestly didn't care either. As long as they didn't die, he didn't care. Jeongguk tugs the jacket closer around him before leaving the building, skirting around the front desk in an attempt to avoid the deathly gaze of the front desk lady. She hated the fact that he smoked, hated the fact that he had a tattoo sleeve on his right arm and an almost complete sleeve on the other as well as tattoos peeking from the collar of his shirt, hated the fact that he always reeked of alcohol and at least five different kinds of drugs.

Jeongguk doesn't care. She can hate him all she wants, because sooner or later, she'll be rid of him. Most likely sooner.

Jackson has a night shift this particular night, so Jeongguk doesn't go in the direction of the tattoo shop. Instead, he decides to wander the streets of Seoul, not caring where he's headed or what he's doing, a cigarette between his lips and his hands hidden in his pockets.

In the end, he decides to walk along one of the bridges in Seoul, the autumn chill ripping through his jacket and tearing away the smoke he exhales. Few travel the bridge by foot during the night, though many cars pass by, their headlights blinding as they race by. Street lights illuminate the path before Jeongguk, and he walks slowly, not in any particular rush, as he has nowhere to be and nothing to do. In the end, he leans against the railing of the bridge, gazing out at the water below.

Jeongguk isn't actively suicidal, if that is what you could call it. He hasn't opened an incognito tab and researched different ways to successfully die, doesn't know how tall the bridge he stands on in, doesn't know anything about how he would even go about taking his own life. No, he isn't actively suicidal, but the idea of death always tempts him from the shadows of his mind. Try as he might, the thought is hard to fight away.

So instead, he lights another cigarette. It may not kill him as fast as a fall into the waters below would, but for now, it would satisfy the demons inside his mind.

"Jeongguk! We leave in ten minutes, why aren't you dressed?"

Jeongguk looks up at Jimin from his bed, raising an eyebrow at his roommate's styled hair and the scent of cologne wafting off of him. A quick scan tells Jeongguk that Jimin is dressed nicer than usual, with a clean black t-shirt and light blue skinny jeans, silver rings adorning his fingers and a simple necklace around his neck. Taehyung bounds into the bedroom, dressed equally as nice as Jimin, though his jacket is quite obviously something Gucci. How he afforded it, Jeongguk will never know.

"And where are you going?" Jeongguk drawls tiredly, allowing his accent to thicken as he returns his gaze to the paper displayed on his laptop screen. He finally has some inspiration to finish an assignment, and he doesn't feel like moving from his position on his bed until he does so. Jimin's jaw drops, and he looks slightly scandalized as he replies.

"It's Saturday! We're going to Seokjin and Hoseok's apartment for dinner!"
"Have fun," Jeongguk says shortly, eyes still trained on the text on his screen, typing frantically as he tries to convert the idea in his head into writing before it leaves and renders him unable to finish the paper until long after the due date. Jimin huffs, and then Taehyung slams Jeongguk's laptop shut, causing him to shout in shock and anger, glaring up at his roommates.

"Get dressed," Taehyung says slowly, as if speaking to a toddler. "We're going to dinner in ten minutes."

Jeongguk scowls, but he knows that the two are not completely opposed to dragging him along in his pajamas, so he reluctantly drags himself out of bed and turns towards his wardrobe, pulling out his usual outfit of black ripped jeans, a white t-shirt, and his leather jacket. Just to appease his two roommates, he makes a small effort on his black hair and coordinates his piercings, making sure all of them are silver or black before hesitating.

Technically, he shouldn't be seeing colors by society's traditional ideas of soulmates. But after a moment, Jeongguk decides to fuck it and just head out and put on his shoes; different piercings wouldn't be high on anyone's suspicion radar. Especially not for people as dense as the ones he's so often forced to hang out with; but then again, Jeongguk wears nothing but black, white, and grey, so it's almost impossible for anyone to realize that he can see color.

Jimin and Taehyung seem satisfied when Jeongguk appears from the bedroom, and as soon as he's put on his shoes, he's dragged out of the dorm room, down the stairs, and out the door, passing by the lady who gives him yet another glare. He rolls his eyes, and she scowls, turning her gaze back to her computer as the door of the dormitory swings shut behind Jeongguk and his roommates. Jimin has a firm grip on Jeongguk's arm, determined not to let the younger boy slip away during the walk to Hoseok and Seokjin's apartment.

As the building approaches, Jeongguk has a string desire to rip himself out of Jimin's grip and run. He doesn't want to deal with the three happy soulmate couples tonight; he hates having to be exposed to something that he'll never have. The others also try to force him to engage in conversations, something that he hates with a burning passion. He has nothing to say, nothing of importance to add to the conversation.

It doesn't take long for them to arrive at the building and head up to the fourth floor, where Hoseok and Seokjin's apartment is located. Jimin knocks, and the door flies open, and they're faced with an excited Hoseok, who grabs Taehyung and Jimin in a hug then waves back to her computer as the door of the dormitory swings shut behind Jeongguk and his roommates. Jimin has a firm grip on Jeongguk's arm, determined not to let the younger boy slip away during the walk to Hoseok and Seokjin's apartment.

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Namjoon and Yoongi are already seated in the living room, and they smile when Hoseok, Jimin, and Taehyung enter the room. Jeongguk stands behind them awkwardly, fiddling with the zipper of his jacket and refusing to meet anyone's eyes. Jimin and Taehyung drag him to sit down next to them on the couch, and he pushes himself next to the arm, as far away from Jimin as he can manage. Hoseok flops down on one of the armchairs briefly before flashing a smile and getting up to help his soulmate in the kitchen. Jeongguk watches him go, a small frown crossing his face as he sees Hoseok wind his arms around Seokjin's waist for a moment before releasing him and asking how he can help.

Jeongguk's eyes travel to Yoongi and Namjoon, who are sitting shoulder to shoulder, small smiles on their faces and hands clasped between them as they talk with Taehyung and Jimin. The latter pair is as bright and cheerful as ever, all wide smiles and loud laughter. And Jeongguk... well, he's everything but. He rarely smiles, always wearing a frown or a neutral expression. He can't remember
the last time he laughed. His personality is everything except bright and bubbly, quiet and aloof and anything but friendly. He really doesn't fit in with the rest of the people in the apartment; he should have ran when he had the chance. His chest aches, and he looks down at his hands, picking at his nails in an attempt to pass time.

Time passes slowly as chatter fills the air around Jeongguk, which he tries to follow but fails. He rubs a hand against his chest, frowning at the ache that doesn't appear to want to go away. Taehyung says something which makes everyone laugh, and Jeongguk forces his lips into a smile that even the worst actor could beat, pretending not to notice how his roommates' eyes flicker over him and their lips turn down into frowns. Yoongi and Namjoom glance at him briefly as well, but appear not to care what expression he's wearing, as their attention quickly returns to Jimin and Taehyung. The scent of food wafts through the air, and Jeongguk sinks back into the cushions, trying to fight away his hunger. He hasn't eaten in a while, since this morning perhaps, but he hates having to accept food from these people.

It feels too much like he's their friend when he does. And Jeongguk doesn't really want to have any friends, though he'd never voice this around them, as he's a little bit afraid of the consequences of saying such things. He doesn't know any of the people around him very well, after all, and he isn't sure how they would react. So out of fear and worry, he stays quiet, not speaking unless spoken to, as he's learned that ignoring someone is rude and never ends well.

"Dinner's ready!" Seokjin calls, and everyone around Jeongguk rises to head into the dining room. As if sensing his reluctance, Jimin drags Jeongguk to his feet and forces him to join them, shoving him into one of the empty chairs around the table before taking a seat to his left, besides Taehyung. Jeongguk eyes the table, which is loaded from all sorts of food, from kimchijeon to dakgangjeong, a proper feast that Seokjin and Hoseok prepared for the people around the table. As soon as everyone is seated, they begin to eat, though Jeongguk hesitates before taking a small portion. He doesn't want to eat too much, but he figures that since he's here, he can eat a little.

"How's your song coming, Yoongi-hyung?" Jimin asks, looking curiously at Yoongi, who flashes a smile and clears his throat before answering.

"Good. I've got a title and everything, it's gonna be called The Last. It's about some stuff I've struggled with in the past, a lot of shit I haven't talked much about, so it fits the theme of something personal really well. I think I'll finish before it's due. It is our final project after all."

"Gguk, you minor in music composition right? Are you making a song too?" Seokjin turns the attention onto him, and Jeongguk stiffens, his chopsticks pausing in the air where he holds them. He chews on his bottom lip, unsure of what to say, before nodding.

"Yeah," he says quietly when he realizes that they're waiting for him to speak. When he doesn't elaborate, Namjoon frowns and leans forwards.

"What's it going too be about?"

Jeongguk tenses his shoulders, a frown slipping over his face. He hasn't begun work on his song yet, due to a lack of motivation and inspiration and he honestly doubts he'll survive to meet the deadline for it anyways. "I don't know yet."

"Fair enough, it's a long time from the due date," Yoongi mumbles, glancing briefly at Jeongguk before turning back to his food. Silence falls for a moment as everyone around Jeongguk continues eating, but he pauses, frowning at the bowl before him. After a little bit, conversation picks up again, and as always, the topic somehow drifts on to soulmates. Namjoon has taken over the conversation, spouting something about how Jackson's bond had been repaired because everyone is destined to
end up happily ever after with their soulmate, some just have a little struggle getting there. He's somewhere in the middle of explaining irregular bonds to the group whenJimin catches a glimpse of Jeongguk's expression.

"Jeongguk-ah? What's the matter?" Jimin asks, frowning when Jeongguk blinks before looking over at him with a confused expression. "You look like you have something to add."

"No, not really," Jeongguk replies quietly, diverting his eyes away from Jimin. "Just thinking. Soulmate Studies is my major."

"Have you met your soulmate yet?" Namjoon asks, scanning over Jeongguk curiously. "Yoongi and I met three years ago, when I was a sophomore and he was a junior. You're around the age most people find their soulmates."

"Jimin and I found each other freshman year," Taehyung pipes up, throwing an arm around his soulmate. "Hoeseok-hyung, Seokjin-hyung, you met around the same time as Namjoon-hyung and Yoongi-hyung, right?"

"That's a hell of a story," Hoseok laughs, smiling happily. "Seokjin was Yoongi's friend and I knew Namjoon, and the two wanted their best friends, me and Seokjin, to meet their soulmates, so the four of us decided to hang out, and bam! We discovered that we're soulmates."

As the pairs talked about their meetings, Jeongguk listens to them and watches everything unfold around him, his mood steadily worsening. He should be used to all of them acting romantic and telling stories like these at all times, but he still can't stand it, even after a year of knowing everyone around the table. All it does is rub in his face that he'll never have what they do.

"I haven't found my soulmate," Jeongguk says at last, causing everyone's attention to return to him. "I doubt I will find them anyways."

"You just have to keep trying!" Jimin exclaims, eyes bright with excitement. "I'm sure you have someone really nice as your soulmate, Jeongguk! I can't wait to meet them."

The others make sounds of agreement, and Jeongguk's heart hits his shoes. It's painfully obvious that he's never going to shake off anyone at this dinner table; he may as well accept the fact that he's essentially made friends with them, as much as he tried not to. But it's also given that they'll continuously ask about his soulmate, if he's met them, if he's trying to find them. But the colors around Jeongguk makes it clear that he has nobody to look for in the first place. The ache in his chest turns into a sharp pain, and he hisses, clutching at his chest through his shirt, hoping for the pain to die down, but it doesn't.

"Are you alright?" Seokjin asks, the question directed at Jeongguk. Everyone's eyes return to him, concern taking over their expressions when they see his grip on the front of his shirt. Jeongguk nods stiffly, dropping his hand into his lap, but nobody seems satisfied. Yet they leave him be, returning to eating and chatting away with each other about various topics that Jeongguk quickly loses track of, not even bothering to follow the flow of conversation.

Jeongguk suffers through the pain in his chest and pretends to be engaged with the conversation as long as he can bear to before he finally snaps. By that point, everyone has finished eating and they've migrated into the living room, spread out on various couches and chairs. Jeongguk stands, letting out a sigh as everyone's attention turns to him.

"I'm not feeling great," he explains before anyone can ask. "I'm going to head back to the dorm. Thank you for having me, Seokjin-hyung and Hoseok-hyung. I'll see you around, I suppose."
The others bid him farewell, and Jeongguk pulls on his shoes before leaving the apartment, feeling much better as he steps out into the brisk autumn air. Jeongguk walks down the sidewalk, watching cars go by in the street, pulling out a cigarette, lighting it, and placing it between his lips. The night is loud, music drifting from the doors of clubs and smashed college students and other people stumbling down the streets, yelling and laughing. Jeongguk pops in his earbuds in an attempt to drown out the noise, wrinkling his nose when a girl stumbles by, then walks past him again, trying to catch his eye. He keeps his head down and walks faster, not interested in anyone searching for their soulmate while hammered.

His chest hurts, worse than ever before, a stabbing pain that has only gotten worse since he left Hoseok and Seokjin's apartment. He clears his throat, but the pain doesn't seem to lessen, and after a moment, he stops in the middle of the street, a growing sense of horror overwhelming him as he recalls a piece of information he'd filed away.

*The symptoms of Hanahaki begin with an ache in one's chest that grows increasingly painful over a time span of two days to a week. After this period passes, one begins to cough up petals, a reaction that can be triggered by a various amount of things, but nearing the end of one's life, the petals come uncontrollably.*

Jeongguk stumbles when someone knocks into his shoulder, but he has no energy to start a fight as he usually would. This is really happening. He's really going to contract the Hanahaki disease.

Exhaling smoke, Jeongguk turns on the path back to the dorm room he shares with Taehyung and Jimin. He's exhausted, his chest hurts worse than ever before, and this is only the beginning. The looming future makes Jeongguk shudder before he squares his shoulder and takes a deep breath, hands clenching into fists in his pockets. He's known this was coming for a long time. There's no sense in fighting it.

Jeongguk is dying.

Chapter End Notes

I hope that you liked it!
okay so right now I'm doing daily updates but that will stop soon, as school is a thing and finals are approaching fast. I think my first one is next Friday?

I'm probably going to start doing weekly updates? most likely the update day will be Sunday, so just be aware of that~ I'm actually trying to make this one be consistent, unlike my other series....

anyways! hope you enjoy this chapter~ :)

The ache in Jeongguk's chest is constant now. It never dies down and it never goes away, a nagging sensation that Jeongguk can't get accustomed to no matter how hard he tries. It's been barely a week since the dinner at Seokjin's, and Jeongguk can't focus on anything for shit. He knows that something inside him is aching, longing for something that he will never have. He doesn't think that there's anything he can do about it; he knows that there is nothing to be done at this point. It's a miracle symptoms of Hanahaki haven't shown up earlier than now; Jeongguk has been nineteen for a couple months, and yet only now have the symptoms begun to show.

Ever since his silent acceptance that he's somehow become friends with his roommates and the crazy people they hang out with, he can't seem to find any time to be alone anymore. One or two of them are always there, be it in his classes or talking to him between classes or texting in some group chat he'd somehow been added to. When did they get his number? Jeongguk would question it, but at this point, he's pretty much given up on figuring out anything about these people he's somehow befriended. They're simply too strange and unlike him.

And yet, they really aren't. Jeongguk sees how much he resembles Yoongi, both of them being naturally quiet people who prefer silence to noise. Jeongguk has the same major as Namjoon, and somehow, he finds himself seated by the elder in every lecture they share. His roommates are a little bit crazy, but also very friendly and clingy, a fact Jeongguk despises. He's avoided physical contact for as long as he can remember, a fact that has not changed, as he always dodges their attempts at hugging him or touching him. But he sees echoes of who he used to be when they smile and laugh, and for brief moments, he misses the times when he was able to act the same so freely.

Jeongguk manages, going between lectures in a bit of a daze, unsure of how to react to the sudden attention he's been given. It's as if the others have some sort of Jeongguk radar built into them which allows them to figure out exactly where he is at all times and show up when he least expects it. It always scares him out of his mind when Yoongi sits down across from him in the library or when Hoseok appears behind him in line when he's out getting coffee. But nothing any one of them does can prevent him from walking down the streets to the small tattoo shop every night and lighting up a cigarette with Jackson or Mark or whoever happens to be behind the shop when he arrives. He frequents the spot and speaks with the workers so much that the girl who runs the place has offered him a job there, an offer he agreed to take into consideration when Jackson jumped him and refused to let go until he promised to do so. The smug look on the bastard's face when he let go put Jeongguk off, and he glares at the elder whenever they cross paths, but the man takes it all in stride.

Every minute is suspenseful for Jeongguk, as much as he tries not to think about what's happening to
him. Each spike of pain in his chest puts him on edge, and he's barely slept, too anxious to close his
eyes and relax. Every time he leaves the dorm room, he sees happy soulmate couples wandering the
streets, and whenever he's inside his dorm room, he's reminded of the happy soulmate couple that
he's forced to live with. He simply can't win, and he really doesn't want to risk sleeping on the streets
of Seoul. Winter is fast approaching, and soon it'll be too cold to leave a building without several
layers of clothing.

His lecture on soulmate history has grown tedious and annoying. He walks in, sits besides Namjoon,
listens to the professor spout bullshit about how the soulmate system works like a well oiled machine
and every piece fits perfectly and works just right, making sure that everyone has a soulmate and
correcting itself if it messes up. Occasionally, when Jeongguk is done with the professor's preaching,
he'll ask a question or two about irregular bonds, undermining the elderly man's view on soulmates
and causing everyone in the class to consider a side of the system they'd never thought of before. But
whenever he tries to bring up people without soulmates, the professor shuts him down before he can
talk more than two sentences, throwing glances around the classroom and pulling the lecture back on
track, sending glares Jeongguk's way.

Each time this happens, Namjoon will ask him about it after class, and Jeongguk will shrug it off and
keep walking. Each time, Namjoon will walk with him, leading them towards a cafe to meet up with
Yoongi and whoever else happens to be free that day to grab lunch. Jeongguk has yet order
anything, due to his lack of money, but he's sure that one day, someone will break and make him buy
something. It's only been a week so far, but he can tell that something like that isn't too far in the
future.

A week, and once again, he finds himself subjected to Taehyung and Jimin's wrath when he
expresses hesitance to go along with them to Seokjin and Hoseok's apartment for another dinner.

"You're going and that's final," Taehyung huffs, throwing a sock at Jeongguk's arm, causing the
younger boy to raise an eyebrow and glance towards where the sock fell, his unsaid really? not
putting Taehyung off in the slightest. Jimin agrees with his soulmate, arms crossed and expression
angry, and Jeongguk can't do anything but relent. Angering either of his roommates is probably a
deadly mistake; he'd seen their anger firsthand when an acquaintance of his acted like a dick to them
when they came to try and force Jeongguk to return to the dorm. The experience is one Jeongguk
doesn't care to remember, an incident he's filed away never to think about again.

So he reluctantly gets up and pulls on his jacket, checking the pockets to ensure that his cigarettes
and lighter are still safely there.

"Can't you go one day without that horrid habit?" Jimin asks, his eyes following Jeongguk's
movements as he heads to retrieve his shoes. Jeongguk shrugs, pulling on said shoes and turning
back to his roommates.

"Hasn't killed me yet, so. I'd say it's fine."

Jimin scowls, not satisfied with Jeongguk's response, but Taehyung places an arm on his bicep and
he exhales angrily before calming down. The two have a silent conversation before they move to
leave the dorm, Jeongguk trailing behind them reluctantly.

"Yoongi apparently spent a shit ton on alcohol because he sold a song for really good money lately,
some famous entertainment company bought it or something like that. Must've been desperate,"
Taehyung comments as they walk down the stairs of the dormitory to the main floor. "Tonight's
going to be a messy one once Seokjin starts the drinking games."

"Oh god, Yoongi bought that much? Didn't Namjoon stop him?" Jimin frets, and Taehyung laughs.
"Babe, we all know full well that Namjoon was the one suggesting various flavors of vodka. He wouldn't stop Yoongi from bringing enough alcohol for someone to start spilling about their sex life," Taehyung nudges Jimin's side, and the elder groans, rubbing his forehead.

"That was one time, and I doubt anyone remembers it," Jimin grumbles, shoving open the door and striding across the lobby of the dormitory with Taehyung and Jeongguk in tow, the latter avoiding the eyes of the front desk lady as per usual as he follows the couple.

"Darling, nobody would dare forget it," Taehyung says gleefully, and Jimin groans, slapping his soulmate's upper arm before wrapping his arms around himself to shield himself from the bite of the autumn air. Jeongguk stuffs his hands in his pockets, exhaling and watching how his breath curls through the air, visible to the human eye. The couple chatters away in front of him, and he listens somewhat, filing away random bits of information, like how the two bicker a lot over the most random of things. How had he not picked up on that before? They're always locked in some petty argument that wouldn't matter at all after five minutes.

As Seokjin and Hoseok's building draws closer, Jeongguk sighs, his lips tugging downwards as he's pulled into the building and up the stairs to the correct apartment. The door flies open before Jimin can finish knocking, and the three outside are dragged in, one notably more reluctant than the others. Jeongguk glances at the kitchen as he's pulled by, and almost does a double take at the amount of various bottles on the kitchen island. It's enough for a small party - without a doubt it's enough for seven people to get drunk.

How rich is Yoongi? Is his music really that good, to warrant a paycheck with the ability to spend that much on alcohol?

Jeongguk shakes his head as he sits on the corner of the couch, somewhat tuning in to the conversation around him. These people are crazy. Absolutely crazy.

"Which company was it, Yoongi-hyung?" Jimin asks eagerly, and Jeongguk looks curiously at the elder man, slightly invested in figuring out how good the man is at the whole music thing.

"Believe it or not, SM Entertainment," Yoongi replies with a smirk, leaning back with a pleased expression spanning his face. "I jacked up the price a bit, and they delivered since they're goddamn rich despite his shitty they pay their employees. Wanted that track I made pretty bad, didn't they? Cocky bastards."

Namjoon laughs and rolls his eyes, nudging his soulmate's side. "Yoon, don't let them hear you say that. They won't buy your tracks anymore."

"Right, cause SM's so rich they've got cameras in every fuckin' apartment in Seoul. I think not," Yoongi responds, and Namjoon sighs, admitting defeat to the elder. Yoongi smiles at him, and Namjoon visibly melts. Jeongguk looks away, feeling a little bit sick.

"Food!" Hoseok shoots, bursting into the living room from the kitchen, and everyone follows him to the table, chattering excitedly. Jeongguk stays relatively quiet, picking at his food once he's seated and everyone takes what they wants. Conversation picks up considerably around him when everyone starts eating, questions about college courses and jobs and family flying through the air, nobody really caring who answers as long as someone replies. This goes on for a bit, and then Seokjin swallows a bite of food and turns to Jeongguk.

"How are your classes going, Jeongguk?" He asks with a smile, and Jeongguk blinks a few times before looking down.
"Good, I guess," he mumbles, fiddling with the chopsticks in his hands. "Nothing interesting."

"Nothing interesting? Jeongguk-ah, you argue with our professor almost every lecture!" Namjoon exclaims, eyes wide. Jeongguk's back stiffens as the elder man keeps talking. "You should hear it! Jeongguk knows so much about soulmates, it's not even funny! He contributes the most outlandish ideas to the class, I swear. Jeongguk's always trying to convince the prof that some people don't actually have soulmates. Where'd that idea come from, by the way? I never asked."

All eyes turn to Jeongguk, and he tries to force himself to appear less tense and on guard. After a moment, he decides to do what he does best - lie.

"My cousin didn't have a soulmate," he says, stabbing at his food, a dark mood hanging over his head. "She got her colors at midnight on her eighteenth and died of the Hanahaki disease before she was twenty-one. It was... awful."

"Wait, really?" Hoseok asks in surprise, chopsticks freezing halfway to his mouth. "Some people really don't have soulmates?"

"Yes," Jeongguk replies shortly. "And it's deadly. It kills them. I've seen it happen right before my eyes."

Namjoon is frowning now, regarding Jeongguk with a strange expression. "But the system makes sure everyone has a soulmate, right?"

"Apparently not," Jeongguk snaps, a scowl overtaking his face. "Now, please change the subject."

The subject changes shakily, transitioning to talk about an upcoming test for something dance related that Jimin and Hoseok are both a part of, and Jeongguk tunes it out this time, setting aside his chopsticks. He's long ago lost his appetite. Around him, the others chatter away, and at once point, Taehyung vanishes into the kitchen and returns with a bottle of wine. Jeongguk eyes it suspiciously and refuses having any, but Taehyung simply shrugs and pours himself a glass before offering it to Namjoon.

Time passes slowly, and after dishes have been cleared, Jeongguk finds himself sitting on the couch in the living room, waiting for Yoongi and Namjoon to transfer the obscene amount of alcohol they bought into the living room. Seokjin, on the other hand, vanishes and returns with a stack of cups and a wicked grin, and Jeongguk immediately gets a bad feeling. He begins to lay cups out on a table, and Hoseok perks up, rushing over to help his soulmate. When they're done, two triangle formations have been made at opposite ends of the table, and a line of shot glasses sits near the edge of the table between the cup formations.

"Oh no," Jeongguk mumbles as Seokjin and Hoseok turn around, wearing matching smiles. Jimin and Taehyung look excited as Yoongi passes Seokjin a bottle of flavored vodka, which he takes happily and begins too explain the rules of what is apparently called *shot pong*.

"Same format as beer pong," Hoseok simplifies after Seokjin's wordy explanation. "Throw the ball, get it into the cup, that determines the amount of vodka you have to take. Three rows, three levels - a third, two thirds, and a full shot. You get three shots. Three shots into the first cup and you're looking at three shots. Get ready to get drunk, fuckers!"

Jeongguk is reluctant, but Taehyung drags him into the game, not giving him the choice to sit on the sidelines and watch. Jeongguk really, really doesn't want to get drunk around people who are still essentially strangers to him, but he supposed the death grip on his bicep means that he doesn't have much of a choice. And so he reluctantly consents to playing the game.
In the first five minutes, Jeongguk learns a few valuable things about the six men he's currently in a room with. First, Yoongi is an amazing shot and apparently got a scholarship for playing basketball, which he declined to pursue music in Seoul. Second, Hoseok is a decent shot but also gets drunk the quickest. Third, Namjoon can't shoot for shit and the others force him to take a shot anyways when all three of his attempts miss. Yeah, these guys are relentless.

When Jeongguk is pushed up to the table and handed the ping pong ball, he starts feeling a little nervous. He knows he has a pretty good shot, after all, he was really athletic as a kid and in his early teen years. He takes the three throws and ends up having to take an entire shot, having landed in the one third area three times. The others say something about his aim, but he doesn't reply, focusing on his feet and shuffling aside so someone else can take his place. He really doesn't want to be here. He really, really doesn't want to be doing this.

Jeongguk watches, feeling a bit nauseous, as the others make their throws and take shot after shot. At one point, Seokjin starts mixing the vodka with something else - lemonade, perhaps - to make it a little bit less strong, as Yoongi, after only two turns, has already downed six shots and is getting steadily closer to being drunk. Jeongguk should probably be concerned about the elder man and the amount of vodka running through his veins, but honestly, everyone in the room has taken a decent amount of shots.

And then it's his turn again. Jeongguk laughs shakily as he hits the full shot cup twice and then a cup in the one third area, taking the amount of alcohol given to him and moving aside again, allowing an overexcited Hoseok to take his place.

Before long, Jeongguk manages to weasel his way out of participating, as everyone else is extremely occupied with playing the game and beating each other's shots and drinking vodka mixed with something of other. Jeongguk isn't sure what it is, but it's Seokjin, so he knows it's nothing bad. Once the others are significantly drunk, drunk enough to not notice Jeongguk get away for a bit, Jeongguk slips away, heading towards the window that opened onto the fire escape that he'd noticed earlier. After a bit of struggle, he works the window open and climbs out onto the fire escape, taking out a cigarette and lighting it, placing it lazily between his lips and looking out at the view.

Seokjin and Hoseok live a decent way up, giving him a good view of campus from the fire escape. Jeongguk sighs, rubbing his eyes wearily and glancing back inside when he hears loud laughter from the group of six seated on the floor inside. And then he hears a shout.

"Where's Ggukie-ah?"

It's Taehyung's voice, and Jeongguk flinches. Nicknames have never been something that he's fond of, but unfortunately they're inevitable when one lives with and associates with Kim Taehyung. A few minutes later, Jimin appears at the window, a frown on his face, looking a lot more sober than he did just a few minutes ago.

"Why're you smoking?" He asks, leaning against the windowsill, and Jeongguk exhales before responding.

"Feels good," he says simply, and Jimin sighs.

"Come back in when you're done, okay? Tae-tae's a bit crazy with worry."

"Why's he worried about me?" Jeongguk asks bitterly, crossing his arms and leaning against the metal railing of the fire escape. "I'm just your really fucked up roommate."

"Who happens to be our friend," Jimin adds softly, a frown on his face as he observes Jeongguk, a
sad note to his voice. "Why wouldn't either of us be worried about you? You're incredibly dense, Jeonggukie."

Jimin walks away, leaving Jeongguk alone in his thoughts. His chest clenches uncomfortably, and Jeongguk sighs, watching smoke billow into the air.

"Goddammit."

The next morning finds Jeongguk dealing with six hungover men in an apartment that is not his. He's had experience with hangovers before, but not this many all at once; he has half a mind to leave them all to fend for themselves. They're most likely more than capable. But then again, Taehyung has been complaining about how he's dying for the last hour, Namjoon seeming to agree with him, and it's only another reminder of why Jeongguk has long ago refused to drink wine before liquor. The hangovers are rather intense.

He curses his long buried yet resurfacing soft side, which orders him to deliver Advil and water and start on making breakfast for the others. He's nowhere near Seokjin's level of cooking, but he can hold his own, and that's all that matters, he supposes. He settles for soup, which is surprisingly easy according to the internet, and gets to work. After a little while, he deems his creation satisfactory, and delivers it to the various hungover men sprawled around the apartment.

"You're a saint, Jeongguk," Taehyung proclaims, and Jimin makes a sound of agreement. Jeongguk says nothing, turning to leave, but a small smile tugs on his lips momentarily. Once he's satisfied that everyone's settled, he heads out for the tattoo shop. Luckily, the owner - Sunye - is in that day, and available for him to speak to.

"I'll take the job."

Sunye beams, patting him on the back. "Great! You don't have any tattoo or piercing experience, so it's just a receptionist job, but you'll fit in here real quick, kid. When can you start?"

"When do you need me to?" Jeongguk fires back, and Sunye cackles.

"You got some spunk. I like you. Start on Wednesday, it's a slow day and I can show ya the ropes. Nice to have you on the team, Jeongguk."

Jeongguk smiles. "It's nice to be on it."

Jeongguk walks home after sorting out a few more details - pay, hours, company rules and regulations, the usual sort of thing. But he walks home feeling lighter than he has in the last week, but as he's walking up the stairs to get to his dorm room, the pain in his chest returns with a vengeance, and he gasps, almost missing a step as he clutches the railing. After a few moments, he stumbles up the stairs again, fumbling with his keys when he gets to his dorm room.

He manages to get inside the dorm room, almost falling over, the pain blinding. And then the coughing fit hits him, and it hits him hard.

Jeongguk coughs harshly, bending over and gripping the edge of the counter to steady himself, holding a hand over his mouth. The fit lasts for a few minutes, and when it subsides, Jeongguk remains bent over for a moment, hand trembling over his mouth, pulling it away carefully. No petals greet him, and a wave of relief crashes over him, followed quickly by fear and confusion. Shouldn't he be choking on petals by now? What's happening to him? Something isn't lining up. His nineteenth birthday has long since passed, and yet here he is, showing only the beginning signs of what his life
is going to become in the foreseeable future. Jeongguk slowly straightens up, clearing his throat harshly and wincing at the pain that follows the action.

He stands there by himself in the kitchen area of the dorm room for a long time, one hand gripping the edge of the counter and the other a few inches from his mouth, should another coughing fit arise. When the door flies open behind him, indicating that his roommates' hangovers have subsided enough to allow them to travel home, he flinches and drops his hand to his side, letting go of the counter and turning around to greet his roommates - and friends - with the best smile he can conjure amidst his exhaustion.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

hey~ I'm back with another chapter for you all!
hope that you enjoy it~

(I'm so impatient, I think I'm making Saturday my update day.... or perhaps ill just
update every weekend depending on when I finish the next chapter)

Wednesday seems like an eternity away to Jeongguk, especially when the days drag by in a flurry of interactions with the people he supposed make up his friend group. It's a strange feeling, having a friend group, since he hasn't had any close friends since he was in elementary school, and even then, those friends weren't that close to Jeongguk. But he enjoys the feeling of having people to talk to once again; he hated to admit it, but being all by himself was starting to get lonely.

Jeongguk has, however, decided to get an apartment. Yes, he's fine with Taehyung and Jimin on a roommate basis, but seeing them act cute and try to be quiet all the time is starting to get aggravating, and with Jeongguk's new job, he's certain it won't be long until he can afford an apartment, so long as he chips some money out of the bank account set up for him by his mother ages ago, before she passed away. Most of the money has gone to his tuition, but obtaining a scholarship has lessened the blow and allowed him to spend a little more of the money more freely. But most of the cash he takes out goes to cigarettes, so having a job with an income would be nice.

He's started browsing through apartments in the few days after accepting the job, searching for cheap places close to campus. It can't be too far, as he doesn't have a car and doesn't want to take public transportation every day to and from lectures. He's found a couple candidates, one on the campus border, rather close to the place where his lectures are held and not terribly far from the tattoo shop.

When Wednesday finally rolls around, Jeongguk ducks away from his friends and heads towards the shop, hands in his pockets. He smokes while he walks, but puts it out before turning onto the street with the shop, pushing open the front door of the shop.

"Welcome to A Touch of Ink, how may I- oh, Jeongguk, you're here," Sunye breaks off from the traditional greeting to smile at Jeongguk and set down the pen in her hands. "Ready for a tour? C'mon in, kid, let's get you settled."

Jeongguk follows her around the shop's waiting area as she points out the designs, couches, and various other things. She then leads him into the back area, and Jackson glances up from where he's tattooing one of the customers, but quickly after returns his attention to the tattoo being traced on the client's forearm. The client looks over at Sunye and Jeongguk as well, brushing a strand of electric blue hair behind her ear before diverting her attention away from them in favor of studying the many tattoo designs pinned to the walls.

"You know Jackson, our resident tattoo professional," Sunye says, and Jeongguk nods, his gaze skittering back to the elder man before he looks back at Sunye. The elder woman leads him towards where two people are seated by a wall of photographs, each one of a different kind of piercing. The girl looks up as they approach, a smile breaking on her face when she sees Sunye and Jeongguk.
"Unnie! Who's the new boy?" She asks, causing the man to look up as well, brushing blond bangs away from his eyes and regarding Jeongguk with a curious expression.

"Joohyun, Yifan, meet Jeongguk, our newest employee," Sunye responds, clapping Jeongguk on the back and causing him to stumble a little. Joohyun stands and extends her hand, smiling when Jeongguk's eyes unintentionally catch on her half sleeve tattoo as he shakes her hand.

"Cute, isn't it?" Joohyun asks, gesturing to the lines of ink with a fond smile. "It's one of Sunye-unnie's best works. She made flowers look pretty badass, didn't she? Though the skull helps with that, yeah? It works well with my piercings, Yifan did the septum piercing when he was first starting to work alongside me, isn't it great?"

Jeongguk nods shyly, looking anxiously over at Yifan. The man smiles, shrugging.

"I did her septum piercing, she did my lip piercing. Fair trade, eh?"

Jeongguk smiles faintly, and the two look content with that, turning back to working on cleaning the piercing needles. Sunye leads Jeongguk away towards the back room, knocking a couple times before entering. A man stands alone at one of the tables, and he glances up, one eye peering through deep purple hair hanging over the left half of his face. He straightens up, brushing the hair behind his ear, smiling at Jeongguk and Sunye, silver lip ring glinting in the lights of the room.

"This the new kid, Sunye-noona?" The man asks, and Sunye nods.

"Jeongguk, meet Jeonghan. Jeonghan, Jeongguk here's going to be the new front desk person."

Jeonghan opens his mouth slightly, a small noise of realization leaving him. "He's replacing Eunha, then?"

"Yes," Sunye replies, stepping forwards to examine the tattoo machines that Jeonghan is cleaning. "We needed a replacement, and Jeongguk here is Jackson's smoking buddy, so I figured what the hell? He can't be that bad if Jackson likes him."

"Jackson likes everyone, noona," Jeonghan says absently, turning one of the machines over in his hand. "You need a better way of judging character. But."

Jeonghan's eyes skitter up to Jeongguk, and Jeongguk shifts nervously, his attention drawn to the eyebrow piercing in Jeonghan's right eyebrow as he tries desperately to avoid the elder man's eyes, nerves taking over once more.

"He seems like a good kid. A smoker, you say? How old are you, Jeongguk?"

"Nineteen," Jeongguk says after a moment, shifting his weight between his feet. "And if your next question is when I started smoking, it's last year around my eighteenth."

Jeonghan hums, a curious expression sliding over his face as he processes the information, but he says nothing more. After a few moments, he speaks again.

"Do you know what the flowers in Joohyun-noona's tattoos mean?"

Sunye makes a sound of disagreement, but Jeonghan shoots her a look, and she huffs. After a moment, she pats Jeongguk on the back, says something about manning the register, and vanishes into the front room. Jeongguk watches her go before returning his attention to Jeonghan.

"I don't," he says in answer to the elder man's question, and Jeonghan smiles a little.
"Didn't expect you to. While I was training to be a tattoo artist, I worked in a flower shop on the side. That was, of course, before I shaved half my head, dyed what was left of my hair purple, and got a few piercings. But anyways, I was there when Sunye was designing the tattoo, and as an ex-florist, the meanings of the flowers stood out to me." Jeonghan sets down the tattoo gun in his hands and leans against the table, folding his arms and looking at Jeongguk with a curious expression. "Anyways, she has blue and purple roses. The blue rose means immortality, and the purple one means enchantment. I guess together they mean a love for someone that lasts forever. She got them done some time after her brother died."

Jeongguk balks, not expecting the sudden change in pace of the story. Jeonghan notices his expression and a small smile tugs at his lips.

"It was a long time ago, seven or eight years now. What happened was, well... her brother didn't have a soulmate. He died coughing up green rose petals - talk about irony, those mean life," Jeonghan sighs and shakes his head, as if trying to rid himself of some thoughts. Jeongguk's stomach has hit his shoes - another person dying due to the hanahaki, not having a soulmate that could help them.

"Something noona doesn't talk about is exactly why it happened," Jeonghan says after a few moments of silence. "And I wouldn't ask if I were you. But from what I know, and this comes from inference of what Yifan and Sunye have said, I'd gamble that he's her half brother, and his parents weren't soulmates, but Joohyun’s were. I don't know how that happened, honestly, but well... it did."

Jeongguk's head is spinning. All the information being thrown at him is overwhelming, and Jeonghan seems to notice this, as he quickly changes the subject.

"Anyways, I see you have some tattoos and piercings of your own. Let's see..." Jeonghan leans over the table further to study Jeongguk, and the younger boy purses his lips but says nothing.

"Lip ring, three lobe piercings in each year, eyebrow piercing, a double helix in one ear and an industrial in the other... damn kid, that's a lot," Jeonghan laughs, and Jeongguk cracks a small smile at the man's disbelief. "And I spy a collarbone tattoo, I think I saw that you have sleeves on both arms, and I think I spy some tattoos on your legs as well. Shit kid, I can't say anything cause I've got a neck tattoo and some wings on my back, but that's a lot."

Jeongguk smiles, shrugging off his jacket to show Jeonghan his sleeves, which the elder man admires, asking permission before skating his fingers lightly over the ink. Jeongguk watches as he traces over the black lines crawling up his arms, vanishing into the sleeves of his white t-shirt.

"These are phenomenal," Jeonghan breathes, and Jeongguk cracks a small smile. The door slams open, and Jackson strides inside, a cocky smirk on his face.

"Thanks, angel, I did a bunch of those myself," Jackson brags, and Jeonghan scoffs.

"Fucker, don't call me that. I go blond once and you're still shitting on me for it, a year later?" Jeonghan's eyes narrow as Jackson lets out a loud laugh, looking rather pleased with himself. "And besides, don't you have a damn soulmate? Don't call me angel!"

"Yes, but that doesn't mean I can't tease the shit out of you," Jackson sings in response, tossing his gloves in a trashcan and walking to the sink in the back of the room to wash his hands. "I just finished a session with blue haired Thai girl, her sleeve's almost done. And it looks hella good, if I do say so myself."

"Always do," Jeonghan mumbles, annoyance lacing his tone, and Jackson pretends not to hear him,
turning to Jeongguk.

"Wanna smoke, man? I asked Sunye, you're in the clear for that. She wants you starting tomorrow, ask her for your hours and pay before you leave."

"Okay," Jeongguk agrees. He bows politely to Jeonghan before leaving with Jackson, glancing around the small back room as he and Jackson head for the back door of the shop.

He can get used to this.

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"Since when do you have a job?" Jimin asks as Jeongguk changes into the required uniform. Jeongguk looks back at Jimin and his soulmate, who are seated on the bottom bunk, Jimin curled into Taehyung's side and a laptop before them, earbuds connecting them.

"Since yesterday," Jeongguk replies, ruffling his hair and picking up his jacket, throwing it on over the black t-shirt he's wearing. "I work at the tattoo shop, with Jackson-hyung and Sunye-noona."

"But that shop is in a dangerous area," Taehyung voices, shifting in his seat, and Jeongguk shrugs and scoops up his keys and phone, stuffing them into the pockets of his jacket.

"I've been going down there for a long time, and nothing has ever happened to me," Jeongguk says, walking to the door of the bedroom. "Don't worry about me. Enjoy your night, I'll be back late."

He closes the door behind him, crossing the living space and leaving the dorm, beginning the walk to A Touch of Ink. Cars pass by in the street, flashes of blue and red and silver racing by, multicolored blinking lights from traffic lights and billboards barraging him from all sides. Jeongguk sighs, eyeing the colors wordlessly, before pulling out a cigarette and lighting it, trying to take his mind off of the whole soulmate situation.

Jeongguk arrives at the shop and extinguishes the cigarette, walking inside and clocking in. The lady behind the desk smiles and moves away so that Jeongguk can take her place behind the counter, and he flips through the appointment book before settling back to wait. Jeonghan appears from the back room, and he greets Jeongguk with a broad smile, and Jeongguk smiles back hesitantly. Jackson bounds out of the room a moment later, beaming when he sees Jeongguk and enveloping the younger male in a tight hug, which Jeongguk hesitates before returning.

The doorbell chimes, a man walks into the shop, and Jeongguk's first day begins, a smile on his face and the ever present tight feeling in his chest a constant reminder of what's to come.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

aaaaaa I'm so sorry for being late to update, finals suck ass
they prevented me from working on this too much :( but hey I left early some days so I
got shit done... but it's so short I apologize ;-;

I hope y'all are liking this story,,, I know I like writing it :)

anyways, ignore me and enjoy the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first petal comes while Jeongguk was at Seokjin and Hoseok's apartment, while he was helping Taehyung wash the dishes.

A couple days had passed since Jeongguk got the job, and despite their disagreeing with where the job was, Seokjin and Hoseok hosted a party to celebrate it. Jeongguk was reluctant at first, but eventually caved when he realized the party would happen whether he likes it or not. Dinner was spectacular, as always, due to Seokjin having a cooking major alongside his acting major. Taehyung and Jeongguk had been tasked to wash the dishes, well, Taehyung had been but he dragged Jeongguk into it. The younger male didn't protest, unsure about defying the other males, all older than him by at least two years.

Jeongguk's chest hurts constantly now, barely giving him any time to sleep or properly function. The pain was at first a minor annoyance, but now it's turned into a major struggle. The stabbing pain in his chest, originating from his lungs, has deterred him from being able to do anything like normal. He can barely focus in class, he can't move without a shock of pain shooting through him, and he's at a loss of what to do. Painkillers barely chip off any of the pain, despite the fact that Jeongguk constantly goes over what was considered a safe amount in pure desperation, and it's a miracle that the drugs haven't killed him yet.

Taehyung is washing the dishes while Jeongguk dries them off and sets them aside, the chatter of the other five men in the living room functioning as background noise, their bickering over what movie to watch growing a bit louder every few minutes. Jeongguk shifts his weight, feeling unbalanced even though he has both feet on the ground. Every movement he makes, no matter how small, is followed by pain in his chest, and if he wasn't so concerned about somebody figuring it out, he'd step aside and say something. But he is concerned, and he doesn't want to burden anyone more than he has already, so he stays quiet and pushes through the pain in his chest.

Jimin wanders into the room and winds an arm around Taehyung's waist, leaning his head against the taller man's shoulder, and Jeongguk's chest contracts. The pain is more intense than anything he'd ever experienced before - worse than breaking his arm back when he was a kid - and he drops the plate in his hands, sending it crashing to the floor, gripping the edge of the counter in an attempt to steady himself. The crash had drawn Jimin and Taehyung's attention, and the boys in the living room hurried into the kitchen.

"Jeongguk?" Seokjin asks, walking over to the young male and placing a hand on his shoulder. Jeongguk flinches harshly, and Seokjin pulls his hand away as if he'd been burned. Silence falls, and
then Jeongguk kneels down and starts cleaning up the shattered pieces of the plate, apologizing quietly. The others are frozen, unsure of what to do, and then Yoongi pipes up.

"Gguk, are you okay?"

Jeongguk pauses, unsure of what to say, but he looks up and flashes a wide smile. "I'm fine, hyung. Don't worry about me."

The others are visibly unsettled, but slowly everyone returns to their previous positions. Jeongguk excuses himself, heading into the bathroom and smashing cold water on his face, taking as deep of a breath as he can manage without harming his lungs. It isn't long before he's doubled over again, coughing harshly, a hand covering his mouth and the other clutching the edge of the sink. His throat feels like it's being ripped apart, and through hazy eyes Jeongguk wonders if someone with hanahaki can die before they cough up their first petal.

Slowly, the coughing fit subsides, and Jeongguk cautiously straightens up, removing his hand from his mouth. He looks down, and his blood freezes when he sees a single blue and white petal lying in the palm of his hand. His mind blanks out as he stuffs the petal in his pocket, and his movements turn robotic as he returns to the living space, sitting down as far from the others as possible - a relatively normal action, so nobody says anything about it.

Jeongguk's head is spinning, and he fiddles with the petal in his pocket absentmindedly, the light object feeling as if it weighed a thousand tons. The others continue talking around him, but he can't hear any of them, lost in his thoughts. A thousand and one possibilities run through his mind, but they all end the same.

Jeongguk stands slowly, apologizing and saying he has a shift - he doesn't - and slinking out of the apartment, hands stuffed in his pockets.

Chapter End Notes

aaaah thank you for reading~ I'll be back next week with a new chapter and a new school schedule with a lighter workload, so maybe I can work up to being consistent~ here's hoping!!

:(
I'm being inconsistent and I'm sorry ;-;
I *might* start another short series and I'm taking Broken Together off hiatus, so
updates all around will be kinda slow... forgive me
;--;

After the first petal, a day of nothing passed by. Jeongguk didn't cough, didn't find petals on his
pillow like he'd seen in bad romance movies, didn't notice the pain in his lungs and ribs anymore. He
stayed home out of fear, calling in sick to work, and when Sunye asked, he lied about having a bad
cough and not wanting too risk someone getting sick. She accepted it and told him to get better soon,
and Jeongguk proceeded ton spend the day in bed, waiting for the waves of petals.

But none ever came.

Jeongguk spends twenty-four hours in terror, only to fall asleep with a small sliver of hope. The hope
he'd developed is harshly ripped away the next morning, as he wakes up, doubled over coughing,
and pulls his hands away from his mouth to reveal four petals in his hands. Jeongguk stares at them
for a moment, before throwing them in the trash and lying back on his bed.

Eventually, he rises and gets ready for the day, taking note of the fact that Taehyung and Jimin are
absent. He hesitates before the door, unsure of whether or not he should give them a call or shoot
them a text. But in the end, he leaves the apartment with his bag on his back and earbuds plugged in,
ignoring the world around him as he walks down the streets of campus to get to his first lecture of the
day.

Lunch is a long and tedious affair. Jeongguk is dragged to the usual cafe by Namjoon, subjected to
the happy soulmate couples for a couple hours, and then he has to leave for the tattoo shop. Jackson
welcomes him warmly when he enters and takes his place behind the front desk, setting his bag
down at his feet. He chats idly with the artists in the front room - Yifan and Jackson - as he waits for
the usual stream of customers with appointments to come.

Halfway through his shift, a blue haired girl walks through the door, right arm exposed and left
hidden inside her jacket. An incomplete sleeve stretches up her visible arm, and she smiles when she
approaches Jeongguk.

"Lalisa Manobin, appointment with artist Jackson Wang," she says, and Jeongguk nods, checking
her off and turning to call Jackson. The elder man comes out and grins when he sees Lalisa, directing
her to one of the chairs and getting straight to work on the sleeve, various ink colors scattered on the
workspace besides him.

Jeongguk has always found it fascinating to watch Jackson - or any of the tattoo artists, really - work.
Their faces slip into one of complete concentration, ensuring that every little detail of the tattoo is
perfect. They're never deterred by the noise in the shop, or the scent of smoke drifting in from the
side door, or the loud ringing of the bell when a new customer enters. They're completely absorbed
in their passion, something they worked hard and studied hard to be able to do. Jeongguk always
watches them with a twinge of jealousy - he’d never be able to work for his passions the way they do. He won’t be around long enough to do so.

He turns away as Jeonghan calls for him, directing him into the back and asking for help sorting a new shipment of ink. Jeongguk complies, talking easily with the man as they shelve the inks and ensure that none are defective. Injecting customers with bad ink was a lawsuit waiting to happen.

As they talk, Jeonghan manages to turn the conversation onto Jeongguk’s major.

"I do Soulmate Studies," Jeongguk explains as he rips open another box and starts unpacking the ink. "Y’know, what makes ’em tick and how it all happened. What happens to the ones with bad bonds, incomplete and twisted and broken. But I study a lot of stuff about bondless people."

"Some people don’t have a soulmate bond?" Jeonghan asks in surprise, and Jeongguk hums, nodding his head.

"Yep. They get their colors at midnight on their eighteenth birthday and contract the hanahaki by their nineteenth birthday, maybe a little after, and die by twenty-one," Jeongguk explains. "It’s rare, but not having a soulmate literally kills people. Nobody knows why or how, but - I have some suspicions."

"That’s cool," Jeonghan says absently. "Not people dying, but like - you doing something about it. Did you know someone that was bondless?"

Jeongguk hesitates, trying to ignore the pain in his chest at the question.

"Yeah. You could say that."
Chapter Notes

god it's so long since the last update ;--; I apologize :( 

enjoy the chapter!

Oh god, he's dying.

Jeongguk is absolutely sure he's dying. His lungs are trying to escape his body through his throat, his head pounds as if someone was drilling into his skull, his joints ache and his muscles are tense. Coughs rip through Jeongguk's throat, tearing the skin raw and forcing up petal after petal. Blue and white and yellow carpet the tiles of the bathroom floor of the dorm, and Jeongguk once again is thankful that Jimin and Taehyung have shifts when he doesn't. If they caught him like this... it'd be straight to the hospital where he'd be subjected to test after test until his body gave out on him.

When the coughing slows, Jeongguk stands, bracing himself against the bathroom sink before kneeling to collect the petals. He pushes them all into a plastic bag and sighs, running a hand through his hair. He's been taking out the trash of their dorm every day for the last two weeks now; the lady at the front desk is probably getting suspicious. But Jeongguk doesn't have much of a choice if he wants to keep his Hanahaki a secret - which he does.

So he hides away the disease and pretends that he's fine whenever someone asks. He's still forced to go to Seokjin and Hoseok's apartment every Saturday, and as much as he hates to admit it, the others have grown on him. His day feels strangely empty without hearing Jimin and Taehyung's bickering, watching Namjoon and Yoongi work their asses off on another project for their music production class, and have some form of text conversation with one or all of them. After he tried to stop responding the first time, it ended in Jimin and Taehyung dragging him by the arms to Seokjin and Hoseok's, where he was subjected to a lecture that could have rivaled his mother's. So it was useless to try and get away now, or attempt to block any of the six others. That would definitely not end well.

Jeongguk leaves the dorm with the plastic bag in his hand and cigarettes in his pocket, intending to head back to the tattoo shop and dispose of the petals out back. He lights one of the cigarettes as he walks, exhaling smoke as he walks. The shop comes into view after a few minutes, and he goes to the back alley and throws the bag of petals in the dumpster, scowling at the metal bin as if it had wronged him.

He's nineteen, turning twenty in September of this year, and he isn't sure if he's going to make it to twenty. He's gotten rid of a lot of his possessions already, had done as such the day he turned eighteen - as if there was much to give away in the first place. His laptop is filled with photos and videos and bits and pieces of song she'd written and recorded for the hell of it, and he has half a mind to write a will or some shit and leave the laptop to one of the people in Jimin and Taehyung's friend group who was a music major - Yoongi, perhaps. Jeongguk stands there a few moments longer, waiting for the cigarette between his lips to burn closer and closer to his mouth before plucking it from his lips and extinguishing it under the heel of his foot.

He whirls around and heads back in the direction of the dorm, walking slowly and observing the city.
around him in silence. Don't get him wrong - Seoul is beautiful, and he wouldn't want to be anywhere else, but there's this underlying feeling of danger and dread surrounding him with every step he takes. Shops and restaurants are designed with soulmate couples in mind, most places will look at you strangely if you're alone, and everywhere you turn, there's another advert for something soulmate related. Nowhere is there a place for people like Jeongguk in the city - hell, nowhere in the world is there a place for people like him.

The Hanahaki is taboo, and some still think that it's a myth, something that's downright impossible to contract and die from. But people like Jeongguk, they're the proof that Hanahaki is real, and Hanahaki is a danger to people. It's a killer, but so many people ignore it and chase their fairy tale ideals of soulmates, leaving those whose bonds aren't perfect in the dust.

Jeongguk loves Seoul, but Seoul does not love him in return.

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Jeongguk could spin off a dozen reasons for him to die, but if you asked him for a reason to live, he would look at you with a blank expression and respond with silence. To him, there is no reason to live - if he survives, he'll be looked down upon and shunned by many, and there would be no place for him in the world. If he dies, none of that would matter. One more fuck up would be gone, another mistake erased by the world so that it can keep spinning and luring people into the illusion of a perfect soulmate system.

The system is so far from perfect, Jeongguk wonders how his professor can be so blind as he sits through yet another lecture on how the system has been working perfectly all through time, correcting its mistakes and getting better and better. Jeongguk wonders how much trouble he'd be in if he pointed out that the universe fixed the mistakes in the system by killing the defects with flower petals, a beautiful yet horrible death.

The presentation slide changes, and Jeongguk sits forwards in his seat, intrigued. Namjoon, who is seated besides him, shoots him a curious look, but Jeongguk ignores him in favor of staring at the projection in the front of the classroom. The people around him are mumbling, eyeing the slide with confusion and shock, gaping at the ancient carving before them.

The carving is of a young man, doubled over with a hand on his stomach, the other before his mouth. Flower petals are spilling from his throat onto the ground before him, and a small crowd has gathered around him, dressed in ancient tunics, facial expressions varying from face to face. The carving is showing the Hanahaki in all its glory to the class, and Jeongguk's eyes are wide before he feels a pang in his chest and he yanks up the black face mask hanging on his chin to cover his mouth as he coughs.

Namjoon sends him a worried look, but eventually looks away to pay attention to the professor, who has begun speaking.

"This ancient carving depicts a long deemed fictional disease called the Hanahaki disease. In the old books of this tribe, the disease is said to cause one to cough up flower petals until the infected either chokes on them or their organs shut down. The disease is, apparently, caused by the lack of a soulmate, which in modern day is something that is unheard of."

Jeongguk sends the professor the evil eye, wondering how badly he'd flip if Jeongguk announced his lack of a soulmate to him. But knowing how fast news spreads, Jeongguk can't mouth off to the professor in that way, unless he wants to become a lab rat for overexcited medical professionals. Doing so would also reveal his secret to everyone on campus, and he doesn't want that.
So he sucks in a breath and listens to the professor lecture, simmering with anger beneath the surface, watching the clock count down the seconds until he can leave the class.
Jeongguk almost wonders when he decided that life wasn't worth fighting for. At some point between midnight of September first and the first petal, he'd lost control of everything - his life, his mind, his will to live. He found himself not caring if he got beat up, not caring if he took drugged drinks, not caring if a car narrowly misses him while he crosses the street.

Losing control was a strange feeling, watching himself spiral downwards with no breaks, no stops. The darkness rising higher and higher, swallowing him whole and throwing him into a world full of burning alcohol and cigarette ash. The tattoos swirling up his arms and spanning across his chest give him a form of control over his mind, the stinging pain of the tattoo machine keeping him from jumping in too deep. But that doesn't mean he doesn't still jump.

He's found himself atop tall buildings and in the center of bridges before, staring out at the world spread below him, a cigarette between his lips. Often he'll look down, wondering how far from the ground he is, wondering if he'd die upon impact or have a chance at survival. Though he never tries for real - he's not scared of heights, but he's scared of falling. Falling and surviving, living out the rest of his short life knowing that he couldn't even kill himself properly.

He's be found out in the hospital, anyways. Hanahaki is difficult to hide when you're under constant surveillance and possibly rooming with other people. He'd be on suicide watch and be put somewhere for experimentation, as there's no way the doctors would pass up a chance of playing around with his disease and seeing what they could do to him before he died, and maybe even after.

That's all that seems to keep Jeongguk back from the ledge. He knew that if his doubts were gone and survival wasn't a possibility, he'd already be over the railing and falling down, down, down.

Jeongguk's shift at A Touch Of Ink lasts longer than any shift ever before, not by length, but it feels so long that he finds himself wondering if time has stopped inside the little shop that smelled of disinfectant and cigarette smoke. He knows it hasn't as clients come and go and tattoo machines buzz around him, but he still wonders and waits for the next girl to show up and relieve him of his shift, as the was working in the afternoon hours for once.

As soon as the girl comes through the door, Jeongguk is leaving, waving to Sunye as he leaves. The woman smiles at him as he goes, and soon he's walking along the streets of Seoul, wondering where he should head to. His feet lead him through the city closer and closer to the bad half of town, eventually landing him in a park.

Jeongguk lights a cigarette and places it between his lips, wandering around the small area, throwing the occasional glance towards the end of the park connecting to a street of run down houses and shitty clubs that are almost falling apart at the seams. Faint music echoes through the thin wooden walls of the clubs, growing louder as Jeongguk finds himself drifting towards that end of the park, cigarette burning between his lips and hands stuffed in his pockets. For a moment, Jeongguk hesitates, staring at the club, fingers automatically finding the fake identification in his jacket pocket. But then he's moving across the street, showing the card to one of the men at the door, and slipping
The club is different from what he expected at first glance. A stage is set up on one end, a bar on the other, a dance floor with rickety chairs and tables lining the edge spanning between them. A set of speakers is placed haphazardly near the back of the stage, and as Jeongguk walks up to the bar and glances at the menu, someone walks onstage with a microphone in their hand. Loud cheering and shouts draw Jeongguk's attention to the stage, and his jaw drops at the sight of a single man standing there, hair hidden under a backwards cap and a smirk on his face. Despite the loose hoodie and ripped jeans and light makeup, Jeongguk can recognize the man standing there, staring out at the crowd of people, confidence seeping from him.

Jeongguk turns back to the bar and orders a beer, thanking the bartender and handing over a bill before turning towards the stage again, disbelief setting upon the figure once more. Out of all the people he'd expect to run into at a shitty club like this one, Min Yoongi was not someone he would expect, but there he is. As music begins to flow through the speakers, the crowd gets louder, and then Yoongi opens his mouth.

Holy shit.

Jeongguk knows that Yoongi is a music technology major and also takes songwriting, but dear god, he didn't know that the elder man could rap. He didn't know that the quiet personality Yoongi puts out can give away to a savage and powerful stage persona. He didn't know that the man could rival most rappers Jeongguk has ever heard and most likely win. And according to the chanting all around him, Yoongi has quite the fan base and the popularity. Even the bartenders are nodding along to the song, a couple of them lip syncing as they mix drinks. Jeongguk stands in stupefied silence as Yoongi moves about the stage, spitting out verses and lines and pushing himself to the limit, time and time again. Something clicks inside Jeongguk as he watches Yoongi rap.

The elder man has such a passion for this, paired with tremendous talent. Jeongguk has never seen anything like it in all his nineteen years, and he doubts he'll find anything that can match up in the last bit of life that he has left to live. Jeongguk frowns, glancing down at the bottle in his hand as he listens to the cheering and yelling around him, dominated by Yoongi's voice through the speakers. And then the music slows, Yoongi takes a quick break for water, and then he drags a stool from offstage and sits down, the crowd's energy lowering to a murmur.

Jeongguk raises an eyebrow, wondering what Yoongi's up to, and then the beat of the song begins. It's slower than the other ones that played, and after a few moments, Yoongi starts to rap.

Jeongguk's eyes widen as Yoongi spits lines about social phobia and depression, his eyes morphing from filled with energy to dead, watering at the edges and staring down at the audience. A couple people pull out their phones to record, and then Yoongi's eyes travel past where Jeongguk is. He raises an eyebrow upon seeing the male, but keeps going.

"Min Yoongi is already dead, I killed him."

The ache in Jeongguk's chest comes to a screeching halt, and he stares blankly at the man onstage. Everything sharpens into a different view, and suddenly Jeongguk is looking at the elder man much more differently than he ever did before. Hearing Yoongi rap like this - Jeongguk has never heard someone have such raw passion and skill, pouring emotion into their words and leaving themselves completely bare and vulnerable on the stage. A spark of an idea lights in Jeongguk's mind, and he sets down the bottle in his hand.

He leaves the bar in a hurry, ducking his head and rushing back to the dorm. The moment he's there, he grabs his laptop and headphones, shoving them over his ears and opening the music production
program, fingers buzzing as he opens a Word document on the side and lyrics flow from his mind onto the keys.

Jeongguk knows what he's doing for his final song project.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

I apologize for recent chapters being so short. A lot has been happening lately, so I don’t often have much time to write...

hope you enjoy the chapter :)

For three days, Jeongguk doesn’t leave his bed, curled up in a blanket with soundproof headphones over his ears, working on his song for the final project. Taehyung and Jimin worry after the first day, but it’s only after they come back from their classes on the third day that they finally do something about it. Jimin gently pries the laptop from Jeongguk’s hands and the headphones from his ears while Taehyung makes a quick call to the nearest takeout place, getting food delivered as quick as he’s able. Once Jeongguk has been forced to sit and eat, the questions start.

"What did you get started on that made you miss classes and not sleep for three days?" Jimin asks as he fiddles with his chopsticks, watching Jeongguk eat. Jeongguk pauses and swallows, frowning as he wonders how much to tell the two men.

"I got inspiration for my song for my minor," he replies, and the other two makes sounds of understanding. Jeongguk would have wondered why they were so understanding, but they are friends with Yoongi and Namjoon, so Jeongguk gets it. Those two are infamous for working for days on end without rest of any shape or form. Compared to them, Jeongguk’s three days are basically nothing.

"I’ve never seen you that into something," Jimin says casually, raising an eyebrow. "What's the song about?"

Jeongguk hesitates, picking at the food before him. He doesn’t really want to tell them what the song was about; they would get too suspicious. For the first time since he started working, Jeongguk’s chest starts to ache, and he turns his head away, covering his mouth and coughing harshly into his hand. Taehyung scrambles up and hurries to the kitchen to get a glass of water, and Jimin hovers nervously. Jeongguk coughs a few more times, pain shooting down his throat every time he does, and when the fit passes, he clenches his fist and accepts the water with his other hand. He discreetly shoves the petals that fell from his lips into his pocket before clearing his throat and standing.

"I’ve gotta go talk to Sunye," Jeongguk lies, before sprinting out the door for the tattoo shop. He stumbles through the door, and everyone inside looks towards him. Jackson, seated near the back of the room with his sketchbook before him, shoots to his feet and rushes over, wrapping an arm around Jeongguk as he starts to cough again.

"It started, didn’t it?" Jackson murmurs as he leads Jeongguk into the back room, away from all the prying eyes. "That’s why you were gone?"

Jeongguk nods weakly, and Jackson mumbles a few curses, pushing him into a chair and crossing his arms.

"Who knows?"
"Just you," Jeongguk rasps, and Jackson makes a noise of displeasure.

"Why haven't you told your roommates? And that friend group you somehow got yourself into?" Jackson asks, leaning against one of the tables. Jeongguk shrugs uselessly.

"I couldn't, hyung. I couldn't worry them. That's why I pushed them away so hard, but recently, I've been getting attached." Jeongguk looks up desperately, and Jackson uncrosses his arms, a sad look crossing over his face. "I've been getting attached and they're always around and they'll hurt when I'm gone, and Jackson-hyung, that's what I didn't want. I didn't want anyone to care, I..."

"You failed at that, kid," Jackson mumbles, flicking Jeongguk lightly on the head. "I care, everyone here cares. Damn, even our customers were asking where you were the last couple days. Kid, you've made an impact, like it or not."

"I tried not to," Jeongguk says helplessly, his shoulders slumping. "I tried so hard, hyung. Couldn't I get even something that simple right?"

Jackson crosses the room and pulls Jeongguk into a tight hug, and the younger male relaxes for a brief moment before he tenses and begins coughing again. Jackson rubs his back, trying to ease him through the pain, but Jeongguk keeps coughing, harsh and seemingly endless.

When the two pull apart, Jeongguk opens his palm and reveals a small pile of blue, white, and yellow petals. The two men stare at them for a moment, and then Jeongguk laughs, fighting away tears.

"Always said that flowers would kill me, didn't I?"

Jackson chokes back a bitter laugh.

"Yeah. You did, kid."

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Jeongguk isn't sure why the others bother with him, just some fucked up kid that they stumbled across first year and decided to keep him around. He pushes and pushes but they pushed back, and now he's here, sitting on Seokjin's couch at god knows what time in the morning, watching as some movie flickers onscreen and the others talk softly or sleep. Taehyung narrates his reactions softly, making Jimin giggle and fall into his side, high off of sleep deprivation and probably something else too. Jeongguk honestly doesn't know. Someone probably took weed. It smells a bit like it.

His eyes wander, taking in the soulmate couples that radiate happiness.

"Ah, the colors are so amazing! I can't wait until you meet your soulmate and you can see them too, Jeonggukie!" Taehyung exclaims, and Jeongguk flinches. He smiles wryly and nods, hiding his discomfort and fear with another thin facade. He wishes he could just say something, but he'd worry them, and he doesn't want that to happen. He never wanted them to get attached to him, never wanted anyone getting too close for comfort.

But the living room has an aura of home and warmth, acceptance and joy. Jeongguk would be a fool to throw that away, to not experience it to the fullest before he's left dying of the petals in his lungs, a constant pain now. He covers his mouth and coughs slightly, dislodging a couple of the petals in his throat, hiding them away in his pocket.

His attention goes back to the movie, and then he freezes.
The woman onscreen is coughing petals, but it doesn't look raw and emotional; it looks dead, faked, as if nobody on set had seen Hanahaki in action before. Jeongguk is still, watching as the woman's presumed soulmate rushes onscreen and kisses her. The petals stop, she straightens up and kisses back, and joyful music fills the background. Jeongguk's lip curls, and he sinks back into the couch, glaring daggers at the television. They've got it all wrong. Hanahaki isn't romantic, it isn't happy and knowing that your soulmate will kiss you and right the world.

Hanahaki is knowing you don't have a soulmate, or that you've been bitterly rejected. Hanahaki is sobbing in the bathroom at two in the morning, a hand over your mouth to catch falling petals. Hanahaki is never being bothered when you cough blood, because its inevitable anyways. Hanahaki is accepting your death and marching slowly towards it, hoping that someone, something kills you sooner.

But Jeongguk has to admit...

The colors are amazing.
It's a well known fact within the group of six boys that something is severely wrong with Jeongguk. The young male is stubborn; it took him a full year to finally open up a little bit to them, and they still know little to nothing about him.

Yet all of them can tell that Jeongguk isn't quite right. He's acting strangely, has been for the last year. He smokes and stays out late, never wants to be around them. Though lately he's been okay with being around them more, they still see him rarely; even Taehyung and Jimin, who room with him.

He attends the dinners at Seokjin and Hoseok's apartment, though he usually sits in the corner of one of the couches, nursing some kind of alcoholic beverage and vanishing through the door as soon it became late enough for him to have an excuse to slip away. New tattoos sprout on his skin every other week, and Jimin and Taehyung haven't missed how he's been saving up for an apartment of his own -- effective cutting off one more form of communication that the group has with him.

Reluctantly, Jeongguk has begun texting in the various group chats, often seeming more alive digitally than they've ever seen him in real life. His personality is vastly different from the person they know in real life, and they're all determined to drag that side of him into the daylight.

But as Jeongguk pulls back further, it becomes increasingly difficult. So they all make a decision -- they're going to try, really try, to get Jeongguk to trust them. No matter the costs; something is wrong, and they're all getting scared. They don't want to lose someone that's worked his way into their lives, no matter how reluctant he was.

Jimin grips Taehyung's hand as they navigate through the streets, unfamiliar with the town but with a GPS whispering directions to Jeongguk's workplace held in Jimin's hands. They've had almost enough with the constant worrying about their roommate; they want answers, and if anyone has them, it's someone who works with him.

The tattoo shop comes into view, and Taehyung spots the man he saw smoking with Jeongguk when he came by the first time, several weeks ago. He hesitates, but eventually grips Jimin's hand tighter and walks over to the man, who eyes them up and down with a raised eyebrow, the piercing in it glinting under the streetlights, his lip ring moving as his lip curls upwards.

"Why are you here?" The older man takes a drag from the cigarette, exhaling and watching as the smoke twists into the sky. Taehyung shuffles his feet, looking nervously at Jimin, and the shorter
man answers for both of them.

"We're worried about Jeongguk, and he spends a lot of time here," Jimin begins, and the man laughs harshly.

"No shit, kid, he works here. The kid's a blessing, everyone loves him," the man looks up at the sky, a strange wistfulness falling over his expression before he shakes it away and looks back at the two men before him.

"We knew that," Taehyung says. "We were wondering if any of you knew something. Like, why he's acting weird, what's wrong with him. Is he going to be okay?"

The man hesitates, taking a few more breaths of nicotine before dropping the remainder of the burning stick and crushing it with the heel of his shoe. "I can't tell you anything of use without breaking a promise. I'm the only one here who'd be of any use to you, so don't you dare let me find you harassing my co-workers for answers. So buzz off, nobody here can help you."

"But please, you know something," Jimin says desperately, and the man pauses in where he'd begun to return to the shop. "We know nothing, and we live with him! Please, you have to help us!"

Taehyung grips his soulmate's hand, trying to reassure him, keeping a wary eye on the man's still back. After a few long moments drag by, he scoffs, running a hand through his hair and turning back around to face them.

"Yeah. I know a lot of things. I know too many things I can't tell you. But the main one?" The man's eyes fill with grief, followed by fury -- fury at Taehyung and Jimin or fury at the universe, neither are sure. "Jeongguk can't be saved."

With that, he turns on his heel and storms inside, shoulders hunched. The door slams behind him, a loud bang in the otherwise quiet courtyard. Jimin and Taehyung are left in stunned silence, staring blankly at the closed door, their minds whirring.

Yoongi loves performing; loves the way his usual nature can fade away into something more aggressive, more raw. His most frequented bar is one on a bad side of town, but he doesn't really care; crowd's nice and the alcohol is nicer. The owner is chill as well, allows him as much time for his sets as he wants. The bar is Yoongi's favorite place to be, and he doesn't expect to ever see anyone he knows there. It's small, dingy, and hidden -- the opposite of anything any of his friends would visit.

But one night, he spots a familiar face in the back. He raises an eyebrow, realizing that Jeongguk -- who is underage, what the fuck -- is at the bar, ordering god knows what before turning towards the stage. Yoongi hesitates, then walks over to where he has his track list set up. He pulls off the audio for Cypher pt. 2 and replaces it with a song he performed rarely -- The Last. Something deep inside of him tells him that Jeongguk needs to hear that song.

He doesn't know exactly what's wrong with Jeongguk, but he can see the boy's depression crystal clear. And the kid needs something to latch onto -- something that Yoongi never had, but wished he did. Whatever is wrong with Jeongguk, Yoongi wants him to have something. And if that something is a song he'll hear once and never again, then well, Yoongi is more than willing to pour out his past and insecurities to a crowd of strangers to help their youngest friend have something to fight for.

When it starts to play, Yoongi is nervous - and of course he is, that song is his heart and soul, and
he's about to perform it for the youngest man in their friend group, someone he barely knows. The things he does for those people, it's almost unbelievable.

As he starts rapping, he sees a sudden change flicker over Jeongguk's face. He watches as the hopelessness behind his eyes slowly melts away into a fire of inspiration, something that Yoongi has seen before and always awaits seeing in his eyes, hoping that he can whip out more music to perform. A fire that he's never seen in Jeongguk's eyes before, and it's a strangely relieving sight to see. Now he knows that the kid has some fight in him -- he won't go down easy.

When Jeongguk runs out of the bar, Yoongi doesn't care, doesn't take offense; he knows that something amazing is about to happen.

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Seokjin has spent the last few weeks asking Jimin for Busan native foods to make during their Saturday dinners. Jeongguk is from Busan; he's hoping that maybe a small taste off his home can spark some life into the kid. Hoseok leans against the doorway, watching as Seokjin perfects another dish, his eyes skittering over to the clock momentarily.

"It's only three, hyung," Hoseok points out, walking up to his soulmate and hugging him. Seokjin sighs and relaxes into Hoseok's arms, but the younger can tell that his soulmate is still stressed -- their bond sings with uneasy emotions and chaos.

"It'll be okay," Hoseok says after a few moments of silence, and Seokjin sighs.

"But what if it won't be?" His voice is barely above a whisper, but Hoseok can hear him loud and clear. He doesn't say anything for a moment, but after a few long moments, he replies.

"Jeongguk is a strong kid," he says, his voice tired. "Something's wrong, yes, but I think he's managing. He still comes here, doesn't he? He's becoming open. It will all work out in the end."

"I hope so..." Seokjin murmurs, and silence falls over the kitchen once more.

"I really hope so."

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Namjoon knows the moment that Yoongi steps into their apartment that something good has happened. His soulmate's side of the bond sings with joy and excitement, and anticipation crashes over him like a wave as soon as the door opens. Namjoon sets aside his book, raising an eyebrow when Yoongi collapses onto the couch with a sigh, pushing his hair out of his eyes with a small smile.

"Good night?" Namjoon asks, and Yoongi turns to him and nods.

"Yeah. The kid showed up for once of my sets," he explains, and Namjoon hums in surprise.

"Really? I didn't expect that," he says, and Yoongi laughs softly.

"Hell, neither did I. But he was there, and -- his eyes just lit up, Joon. He had some sort of moment, something big is about to happen."

"Something good, I hope," Namjoon chuckles, and Yoongi hesitates a moment before nodding.

"Yeah. The fire in him -- it was similar to me or you when we write and compose. It was like Jimin
or Hoseok when they're dancing, like Seokjin-hyung when he's cooking. It was the fire of inspiration, Joon, I've never seen it in his eyes." Yoongi turns to Namjoon, elated, and the younger man smiles fondly at his soulmate, leaning over and pecking his nose. Yoongi's nose scrunches up out of instinct, and he glares at Namjoon, who merely laughs.

"You're cute when you're excited," Namjoon explains. "And that's really good, hyung. Jeongguk could do with some fire."

"Yeah," Yoongi breathes in agreement, falling back on the couch cushions. "Yeah. I've never seen anything like it."

Namjoon's lips pull into a smile. "Well, we've never seen anything like Jeongguk."

"True," Yoongi hums. "I can't wait to see what that fire leads to."

"Me too," Namjoon responds with a smile. "Me too."
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

heyyyyy i'm finally getting back into the swing of things!! I'm super hyped!!

I have energy energy energy, I'm on a weird confidence streak lately, and everything is going really good?? like?? I have time to write?? and I'm so early?? like I've never posted a chapter this close to the last update asdfjkl

and like, I can't stop writing? I have the next two chapters halfway done already? like? I can finally set an update schedule? like I've tried and failed so many times hah

anyways, enough of me~ enjoy the chapter!

Jeongguk sings the song again and again and again. No matter how hard he tries, none of the takes come out the way he wants them to; his voice is damaged from the petals forcing their way up his throat. Several times, he has to stop recording due to a coughing fit; it seems like the amount of petals is increasing. Instead of the breathy, smooth vocals Jeongguk is used to hearing when he records, his voice is rougher, deeper, more scratchy. A shock to his own ears when he plays back the recordings, searching for something salvageable.

Biting his lip, he splices together any usable bits and pieces of audio behind the soundboard, keeping an eye on the clock. He’d reserved the studio for a good chunk of time, but he doesn’t know who’s next in line, and he wants to clear out before they arrive at the building. The instrumental he’d thrown together in his dorm room slowly melds with the vocals; though they are scratchy, more raspy than Jeongguk originally intended, they work well. It all works well.

He evaluates the sound, adjusting pieces of it. A different piano note here, another violin there. His creation comes to life slowly, and not for the first time, he wonders if he would have switched majors had he not developed the Hanahaki disease.

Soulmates had always been something he was fascinated with from a young age; but, if he knew that he had one, would he be as invested in the research of them as he is? Would he care as much as he does about the irregular and broken and twisted bonds in the world; would he give a shit about the people who had no bonds and died by twenty-one? The what-ifs are always something that have scared Jeongguk; he can’t imagine seeing the world in any way than the way he does now.

Bleak and harsh, trying to soften its own blows with the occasional happy ending and good deed. The world is cruel; the world doesn’t care about the insignificant people living in it. Why else would natural disasters tear the land apart, disease run rampant? Why else would the world have its fun killing off people in a strangely beautiful but no less terrifying way -- suffocating them with one of its most beautiful creations.

Jeongguk coughs again, pocketing the blue petals that fall from his mouth. He sighs and tugs on a black face mask, obscuring his nose and mouth. He didn’t like wearing the mask when he didn’t have to; but alas, the studio is not his, and petals in the space would look suspicious, link the petals to him, and land him in a hospital with tubes in his arms and the look of a lab rat to the doctors.
Being a lab rat is the last thing that Jeongguk wants. If the Hanahaki is going to kill him, then fine -- but he doesn’t want needles and scalpels poking at him while he’s breathing his last. Shaking away the thoughts, Jeongguk focuses back on what’s important right now -- his song.

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That night is one of the nights he has to go to Seokjin and Hoseok’s apartment. He’d noticed their sudden liking for Busan native food, and it’s not that he doesn’t mind, it’s just that he doesn’t like the constant reminders of his hometown. He left the place with no intention of going back; tasting the food again just brings back bitter memories, no matter how amazing Seokjin makes it.

He doesn’t dare say a word; Jimin looks happy eating food from his home, and the others appear to enjoy it. So Jeongguk sucks it up and slaps a smile on his face; something he’s become so accustomed to doing that it feels weird to not be wearing a fake smile.

When he arrives, he notices that something is off. He can’t pinpoint how or why, but as he buries his hands in his hoodie pocket and adjusts the mask over his face, he finds himself going through escape routes he could manage and long used lies, just in case the situation turns dicey. But as the night goes on, everything seems normal.

His roommates are crazy, with the help of alcohol, and everyone seems to be enjoying themselves. Jeongguk curls up on the edge of the couch as per usual, not saying much of anything and doing his best not to cough too much. The others talk and laugh around him, but he never feels as if he’s alone or left out. He simply chose to not participate in the conversation.

But something is different. It takes a long time for Jeongguk to understand, but once he does, the realization hits him like a freight train.

He’s happy.

His chest buzzes with warmth, not raging with the pain he’d become so accustomed to. His lips are quirked upwards, and instead of feeling bored, he finds himself suppressing laughter at the insanity of the six boys’ drunk antics. For the first time since he was sixteen, he’s pulled from his haze of grief and numbness, stumbling unceremoniously into the light of happiness and laughter. The chill of everything hanging over him has fallen away, and suddenly he understands why everyone likes being happy. It’s more intoxicating than alcohol, more of a high than drugs -- happiness is something unlike anything he’s felt before.

Jeongguk isn’t sure what to do with himself at the realization. He isn’t one to suddenly express his feelings, and the more he begins to worry, the more the warmth fades and the sharper the pain in his chest becomes. Eventually, he ducks out of the living room, coughing up petals in the bathroom of the apartment, watching helplessly as the blue and white flowers drift into his palm, only to be crushed and shoved into his pockets.

Right. The Hanahaki; no amount of happiness can cure a disease that plagues one all the way to their deathbed. Jeongguk squares his shoulders and walks out of the bathroom, telling someone that he passes that he’s headed back to the dorms. As soon as his feet hit the pavement, he lights up a cigarette, his first in a few days. As he breathes smoke, he wondered what he did to get in so deep.

Happiness…

Jeongguk scoffs and ditches the cigarette, swiping his key card and entering the dorm. He must be more drunk than he thought.
Jackson paces his apartment, one of the windows opened and a cigarette between his teeth. His arms are folded behind his back, and he drills a path into the floor, dizzy from his constant circling but not having the willpower to stop.

“I shouldn’t have said anything,” he grumbles, shaking his head and immediately feeling sick to his stomach, plopping down on the coffee table which groans under his weight. He throws it a glare and ignores it, losing himself to his thoughts.

Jesus. The first time he saw Jeongguk bent over, coughing up petals -- he wondered if he’d fallen into a horror movie. He’d always known that it would happen, but seeing it? It was a different ballpark entirely. Jackson isn’t ready to lose Jeongguk.

The younger man makes the tattoo shop light up with life, smiles on everyone’s faces, including the customers. His cold demeanor fades as he serves customers with a small smile, and slowly but steadily, his facade had dropped before his co-workers. Jackson was the first to see the star of a boy emerge; but the others saw it soon after, and Jeongguk was a valued member of their little family.

Cursing, Jackson throws a punch at the wall of his apartment; it does nothing but bruise his knuckles. He mutters profanities as he begins pacing again, rubbing his hands as he does so. His eyes drift to the clock, watching the second hand tick around the circle.

It’s funny how time changes when one of your friends could die at any moment. Jackson’s phone feels heavier than usual in his pocket, and he shakes himself continuously, wringing his hands together. The time seems to drag by and fly too fast all at once, and it’s making him sick. He wants to curl up in a small ball and never move again; but he also wants to latch onto Jeongguk and never let him go. The younger man is too precious to lose.

It’s rare to find good friends. Jackson doesn’t want to lose one of the few he has.
The petals have been coming more often now.

Jeongguk knew that it was bad enough before, coughing them up every other hour or so, but now he can expect them every half hour, or perhaps less. It all depended on the day, and Jeongguk’s emotions throughout the day. Sometimes on better days he’d cough up less petals; on worse days, they could be almost endless.

He hates how weak the Hanahaki has made him feel. He’s treated more carefully around A Touch of Ink, as Jackson pulled some bullshit lie that he had a cold and his head hurt if there was too much noise. The others bought it, and despite hating how cautious they are, Jeongguk has never been more thankful; he has enough over the counter pain medication in his apartment to open a convenience store.

The other thing is that the petals are becoming steadily more impossible to hide. He wears a jacket constantly, and pants with pockets; sometimes, he has to stuff plastic bags in his pockets or carry a small backpack with him for the more severe attacks.

His major has become more difficult to deal with; the professor is constantly going on about soulmates and happy bonds and the mythical Hanahaki that isn’t as mystical as he wants everyone to believe. Jeongguk glares at the man the entirety of the class and leaves in a huff, no notes taken and a headache coming on. Some of his worst attacks have been after that lecture.

And one time, during the lecture. The professor had been going on and on about how Hanahaki had been eradicated in some, long past year, and how nobody really coughs up flowers anymore. He dismisses cases in the news as defects and lies; and it makes Jeongguk simmer with anger. But his chest was against him; it clenched up, and he barely escaped the lecture hall for the bathrooms before petals spilled from his lips.

The attack didn’t slow for almost ten minutes; the longest attack he’d had to date. The petals barely fit in his bag, and he resorted to throwing some of them away in the trash cans, praying that nobody figured out who put the petals there and what exactly they were.

Jeongguk barely spoke anymore, not wanting anyone to hear how damaged and raspy his voice had become. He’s glad that he at least managed to record his final project song before his voice got this bad; he’d have to drop his minor next year if he couldn’t sing at all anymore. The thought killed him; he’d loved singing since he was a kid, and being a singer had always been one of his side passions. But now, that dream has been smashed into pieces at the hands of the Hanahaki.

The least he can do is suffer through the rest of the year; which wasn’t terribly long. After that, he could drop his minor and focus on Soulmate Studies, even though he knows that every class he takes will lead to petals and pain.

His ideas for the future brings nothing but bitterness. He’d forced his way through Christmas, staying in the dorms while his friends went back to their hometowns for break. He had no home to go back to; he had no choice but to stay, alone and miserable. New Year’s had been so much worse; he could hear the parties from his dorm room, saw them plastered all over social media. The midnight countdown had been pointless to him. What was he supposed to celebrate?

_Hooray, it’s even closer to his death! One more year and he’s gone!_
Something tells him that something like that is nothing to celebrate. So he closes the windows and
blinds, turns off the television, and sinks into his work. His course in college required a thesis to
graduate; and since Jeongguk won’t be alive to graduate if he continues coughing petals, he decided
to write his thesis two years early.

While everyone around him is out partying and getting drunk and posting new year’s shit all over
social media, Jeongguk fastens soundproof headphones over his ears, throws a couple blankets over
himself, and gets to work.

Yoongi hasn’t gotten a tattoo since he was eighteen and rebellious. But Jeongguk works at a tattoo
shop, and he has a weird need to make sure that the location is a decent place to work so that the kid
doesn’t get himself killed behind the building. So here he is, standing before A Touch of Ink, lips
pursed as he prepares himself mentally to go inside.

It’s significantly warmer inside the store, which is good, because the bite of Seoul’s winter is harsh.
Yoongi unwinds his scarf a little and approaches the front desk; and oh, that’s the section of the store
Jeongguk works. He’s flipping idly through the book before him, twirling a pen in his other hand.
He looks up when Yoongi approaches, and his eyes widen.

“Welcome to A Touch of Ink, how may I help you?” He asks, a little shaky, and Yoongi smiles.

“Don’t be so jittery, kid. I’m here for my appointment.”

Jeongguk’s mouth drops open, but he nods and opens the large binder on the desk, flipping through
and crossing something off. “Alright. Your artist is Jackson Wang. He’ll be out in a few minutes.”

Yoongi nods, taking the time to gaze around the small shop. Three tattoo chairs are set up behind the
desk, the walls littered with half finished sketches and colorful designs. The other side of the shop
hosts photos of various piercings and a few stations. The waiting area is small; a couple beaten up
couches and a coffee table covered in scratches and cracks. In one corner, an old radio is blaring a
90’s CD; in the other stands a magazine rack.

“Nice shop,” Yoongi says at last, and Jeongguk blinks a few times before smiling.

“Yeah. Sunye-noona has a way with making this place feel cozy,” he responds, and Yoongi tilts his
head, scanning the various people at work behind Jeongguk. The younger man laughs.

“Boss isn’t in right now; we’ve only got Jeonghan.”

“Hey!” The guy with half shaved purple hair complains, looking up from where he’s cleaning one of
the tattoo machines. “Sunye-noona trusts me!”

“She likes me better, though,” Jeongguk shoots back, winking as Jeonghan steams and returns to
cleaning; though Yoongi doesn’t miss the half smile that tugs on his lips when Jeongguk looks away.

“Um, so what tattoo are you getting?” He asks Yoongi, a bit shy, and Yoongi smiles.

“Well, Joon and I always talked about getting tattoos with each others’ lyrics on them. So that’s what
I’m doing as part of my anniversary gift for him,” Yoongi explains, half shrugging as Jeongguk
listens, enraptured. “His mixtape was good, but I loved one of the singles he put out. So, I’m getting
the word ‘always’ on my wrist.”

“That’s so cool,” Jeongguk says, smiling slightly. “You and Namjoon-hyung are a good match. I’m
“Sure he’ll be happy.”

“He should be,” Yoongi responds, scratching the back of his head absently. “At least, I hope he will.”

“Yo, Kook! My next appointment is here, right?” A man emerges from the back room, effectively cutting off Yoongi and Jeongguk’s conversation, and Jeongguk looks back at him and nods.

“Yep! Yoongi-hyung just got here,” he gestures to Yoongi, and Jackson looks over Yoongi before grinning.

“Chill. Come with me, Yoongi-ssi, and we’ll get started.”

Yoongi moves to follow Jackson, who quickly ruffles Jeongguk’s hair as he passes, causing the younger to scowl after them. Yoongi eyes the interaction strangely; Jeongguk has never acted like that around them. Hell, that was the longest conversation he’s ever held with the kid. As he sits down and the tattoo process starts, he wonders when Jeongguk will finally break out of his shell around them. He’d rather like to see the younger be the way he is here around the others.

It would definitely be a shock.

After Yoongi leaves, his tattoo safely wrapped and a list of instructions tucked into his pocket, Jeongguk collapses on the counter and sighs, rubbing his eyes wearily. Why are all of those people he’s somehow befriended so nice and so cool? It’s almost enough to make him feel bad for not telling them anything about the Hanahaki.

Speaking of -- as if waiting for its cue, the coughing starts up again, and Jackson abandons his tattoo gun halfway through cleaning and hurries up to Jeongguk, a water bottle in his hand that the younger takes gratefully, spitting out the petals on his tongue into his hand before taking a few sips of water. Jackson frowns when Jeongguk pockets the blue and white petals, but says nothing; by now, he knows that no amount of lecturing will make Jeongguk go to a hospital or ask for help.

“That was one of your friends?” Jackson asks, and Jeongguk hesitates before nodding.

“Yeah. Yoongi-hyung. He’s the one who inspired me for my song for my minor, and he’s actually really nice, even though he seems cold.” A half smile flickers over Jeongguk’s face before it falls away again and he sighs, rubbing his eyes.

“He seems like a good friend,” Jackson mumbles, and Jeongguk laughs bitterly.

“He’s amazing. God. I need a smoke; I’ll be back.”

Jeongguk stands and walks out the side door, pulling a box of cigarettes and a white lighter from his pockets. Jackson stays behind, staring at the spot where Jeongguk was moments before, mixed emotions racing through him.

He’s never heard Jeongguk that -- broken. He can hear how much the younger cares for these friends of his, even though he tries not to get attached; he can see clear as day that he’s struggling with reality and a hopeless dream he’s found himself thinking of lately. A dream of survival, a dream of it all being a mistake and he has a soulmate after all.

Jackson looks towards the side door; he can see the young male through the glass portion of it, a cigarette held to his lips, head tilted back. Every so often, smoke drifts up from his mouth and into
the dirty air of Seoul.

Taking a deep breath, Jackson returns to cleaning his tattoo machine. He has to stop giving himself false hope. But how can he not, when he’s already so attached to the boy who covers his skin with tattoos and smokes too much and has eyes that are much too sad?

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Jeongguk always tries to prevent himself from coughing up petals in a public spot. He uses face masks and ducks away whenever he feels the telltale signs of petals climbing up his throat. But sometimes, he isn’t lucky enough to find somewhere to hide.

He’s in the middle of the Gangnam district, walking down one of the many densely packed roads and looking for a cheap restaurant. He’s a fair distance from his college dorm, though he has the money to get a cab; what he doesn’t have is the knowledge of the area to know where he can hide away when he feels the petals rising in his lungs, a stabbing sensation in his chest.

Yanking his face mask up, Jeongguk scans the shops desperately, looking for a small alleyway or mostly empty shop; but every place he looks is filled with people. Panic rises, worsening the pain, and finally Jeongguk finds a small alleyway. He ducks into it, pulling down the mask, taking deep breaths.

Jeongguk hunches against the wall, clutching at the rough surface with the tips of his fingers as his other hand covers his mouth. Petals spill into his palm, and he stifles a sob, trying not to draw any attention to himself and make his fit worse. Someone approaches and winds an arm around his waist, and Jeongguk is too weak to struggle.

The person is shorter than he, though manages to hold his weight perfectly fine. He’s led through the busy streets and into an apartment building, an almost ten minute walk if his perception of time is any accurate, onto the elevator. Eventually, they go through one of the doors, and he’s placed on the stranger’s couch. The stranger vanishes and returns with a glass of water that they press to his lips, and Jeongguk takes it, murmuring a thanks.

“Hanahaki, eh?” A feminine voice asks, and Jeongguk looks up to meet the eyes of the blue haired Thai girl who got her tattoo sleeve done at A Touch Of Ink. Jeongguk hesitates, but nods, unable to hide the petals in his hands and on his shirt.

“My name’s Lalisa Manobin,” the blue haired girl says tiredly, rubbing her eyes as Jeongguk stares up at her. She gives him a small, bitter smile, extending a tattoo-laced hand towards him. “I’m nineteen, and we’re in the same boat. I don’t have a soulmate, and I’m coughing up petals.”
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

whaaaaat I'm being consistent with updates?? what is this madness?!?!?

haha it'a just this weird ass streak of confidence and inspiration I've had lately, I suppose~ maybe I'll even manage to finish this story by summer if this keeps up :0

anyways~ enjoy the chapter!

“How long have you been coughing them up?”

Jeongguk looks over at Lalisa, tapping his fingernails against the glass in his hands, a disjointed melody. The blue haired girl is relaxing on the other end of the sofa, twirling a lollipop stick between her fingers.

“A few months,” Jeongguk responds with a shrug. “It’s been a while.”

Lalisa hums, pursing her lips and glancing at the black television screen. “I’ve only had it a few weeks. Started not long after I got my sleeve finished off.”

She raises her arm, tugging back her hoodie sleeve to reveal spiraling lines of black and color, mixing together into a garden of flowers laced with other little doodles. Jeongguk admires the sleeve for a moment -- it’s definitely one of Jackson’s best works. And then Lalisa pulls down her sleeve again with a sigh.

“Was that your worst attack?” Lalisa asks, slightly timid, and Jeongguk shakes his head, looking down at the glass of water in his hands, the condensation collected on the outside as the ice melted dripping down over his fingers. Silence falls for a few minutes, and then Lalisa speaks.

“When’s your birthday?”

“September first,” Jeongguk responds, raising the glass to his lips. Lalisa hums, then flashes him a small smile.

“March twenty-seventh. Guess I’m older by a few months,” Lalisa muses, pausing in spinning the lollipop stick. “Shouldn’t that mean I have it worse, though? Why’d I only start coughing them up recently? It doesn’t make sense.”

“Hanahaki in general doesn’t make sense,” Jeongguk says tiredly, and Lalisa mutters “true” under her breath. “The whole soulmate thing is such bullshit anyways.”

“I agree!” Lalis shouts, jolting upright and throwing the lollipop stick onto the coffee table. “Like, girls don’t want to date me because they’re all out looking for their soulmates! And I can’t tell my friends I see color, so I had to get my hair dyed with one of them and have her pick the color for me so I wouldn’t give myself away. It’s so stupid and it’s going to kill us so it’s even more stupid!”

Jeongguk nods along, a scowl on his face. “And since you can’t tell them about the color, you have to hide the petals, and you know you’re dying and it hurts to see them be attached to you because
“I know, right?” Lalisa borderline shouts, jumping up from her seat and pacing the living room, shoulders hunched. “Like, I can’t even try to live my life the best I can because they’ll get suspicious. The tattoo was my only thing of rebellion, something on my bucket list. And even though I don’t want them getting hurt, I can’t just fucking -- pull away from them, because I love them too much and it’d hurt me to force myself away from them.”

Jeongguk nods furiously. “Yes! Like, I tried so hard not to get attached but here I am, attached as fuck and about to break all their hearts and I hate myself because I can’t -- I can’t fucking do anything about it, shit.”

Lalisa pauses, then looks over at him. “Let’s get drunk. I can’t be sober and think about all of this right now.”

Jeongguk nods in agreement, then gets up and follows Lalisa to the apartment kitchen, where she pulls several bottles of soju from the fridge then hops up on the counter, popping the tops of two of them, offering one to Jeongguk. He takes it with a small smile, and they clink the bottles together before starting to drink.

Half an hour later, they’re both tipsy, chilling on the counters of the kitchen, shoes kicked off and resting on the floors. Empty bottles litter the remaining counter space, and they lean against the cabinets, half empty bottles on their hands.

“What flowers are you coughing?” Lalisa asks, her words slurring slightly. “Mine are -- mine are snapdragon petals. Or, like, antirrhinum, I don’t -- I don’t fuckin’ know. They’re pink and orange and pretty, but like, also deadly. You know?”

Jeongguk nods, then regrets it. It makes the room spin even more. “Mine are morning glory. They’re blue and white and yellow and they’re, like, really pretty. But like. I don’t like them. Because, you know, they’re gonna -- gonna kill me.”

Lalisa laughs, harsh and bitter, knocking back the rest of her bottle. “Hell. Hell, this is fucked. The world hates us. Fuck.”

Jeongguk sighs, taking another sip of the soju in his hand. “Yeah. We must’ve, like, pissed off Mother Nature in a past life or something.”

“Yeah, like, cut down a bunch of trees,” Lalisa speculates. “Or picked too many flowers. Way too many flowers. All the flowers. And now she’s, like, gonna kill us with them. In revenge. Because we picked all the flowers.”

Jeongguk shakes his head, laughing. “Fuck. We’re so drunk.”

“We are,” Lalisa chuckles. “Let’s like. Get off the counters. I don’t wanna sleep here.”

Getting down is a struggle; Jeongguk always loses his sense of balance when he’s drunk. But he manages, and Lalisa directs him to the showers, and he sober up a little as he stands under the stream of water. Once he’s done, the girl darts in, showering and changing and then directing him to extra pillows and blankets before crashing on her bed.

Jeongguk makes a spot to sleep on the sofa and falls asleep listening to the rush of cars in the street and the noise of the city whispering in his ears.
The next morning, he wakes up with a killer headache. Groaning, Jeongguk shields his eyes from the light, rolling over on his side. A few moments pass, and then his chest constricts and he starts coughing. Petals spill between his fingers as he tries to stop them, and a few minutes later, Lalisa emerges from her room, wild-eyed and disheveled.

She sighs when she sees the problem, then gets Jeongguk a glass of water and a bottle of pain medication; Jeongguk thanks her softly and takes a couple pills more than the recommended amount, wanting to stop both his head and his chest from hurting. Lalisa says nothing; Jeongguk is sure that at some point, she’s done the same, so she can’t say anything about it.

They sit down on the couch together, leaning back, complaining about nothing into the space between them. The city comes alive outside the window, and Lalisa scowls and gets up to yank the blinds shut, cursing at the sun for rising so damn early. Jeongguk can’t help but laugh, and after a few moments, Lalisa is laughing too.

She falls back on the couch with a grin, and their complaining turns into meaningless chatter. Lalisa is majoring in fine arts at the same university as Jeongguk; they end up talking about shitty professors and assignments with impossible deadlines. It’s easy to talk with Lalisa, and Jeongguk finds himself opening up more and more as the day goes on and their headaches die down.

Every so often, one of them will stop speaking mid sentence and turn to the side, petals spilling past their lips. The other will stand and get a glass of water, or refill their previous glass, and the conversation will pick up when the coughing fit ends. Jeongguk has fits more often than Lalisa, and the girl ends up doing a majority of the talking. Not that he minds -- he’s painfully shy as it is, having someone else talk is what he prefers.

And Lalisa talks and talks. She’s from Thailand, moving to Korea when she was ten. She speaks three languages -- Korean, Thai, and English. She has three close friends at university, one of them the same year as them and the other two are older -- Chaeyoung, Jennie, and Jisoo. She came out to them the first year she knew them, and they readily accepted her. She roomed with Chaeyoung for a year before getting her own apartment, afraid of the other figuring out that she didn’t have a soulmate. Lalisa had designed some of her tattoo sleeve herself, and Jackson did the rest.

When Jeongguk can talk, he does. He tells Lalisa about how he lost his best friend, three years older, to Hanahaki, about how he was helpless as white lily petals fell from his lips. He tells Lalisa about how he ran away from home, how he applied to university in Seoul and never looked back. He tells her about how he was pulled into his friend group kicking and screaming, and her eyes sadden at that.

Jeongguk pulls the lighter from the pocket of his jacket discarded on the floor, and Lalisa reaches for it, taking it from his fingers gently and admiring the simple white plastic. She twirls it between her fingers for a moment, then hands it back.

“No smoking indoors,” she says, and Jeongguk smiles.

Being with Lalisa is easy. They can talk without an issue, open up unlike any way they have before. It’s a shock for Jeongguk to think that they only met last night; he’s told Lalisa more in twenty-four hours than he’s told his friend group in almost two years. He can sense that Lalisa is shocked with herself as well, going off of how she hesitates occasionally as she speaks and zones out every so often, staring at him.

But eventually, Jeongguk has to go back to his dorm. He and Lalisa exchange numbers and social media handles, promising to meet up as often as possible. They need each other, in a strange way --
Jimin worries when Jeongguk doesn’t return to the dorm one night. Taehyung picks up on his agitation, and they stay awake together, waiting for the door to swing open quietly and for their roommate to appear, surrounded with the scent of smoke and antiseptic, remnants of his job at the tattoo parlor.

But Jeongguk doesn’t appear, and they really start to worry. They can’t exactly call anyone and ask; Jeongguk would never crash anywhere but the dorm and possibly the tattoo parlor, but the shop isn’t in the best of areas and Jeongguk, as dense as he is, isn’t stupid enough to stay there overnight.

Sunlight streams through the windows, and still the youngest hasn’t returned. Taehyung gets up to fix breakfast for the two of them, returning quickly to curl up under the blankets with Jimin and hold him close, hoping, watching.

As the clock nears noon, the door opens, and Jeongguk walks in. He’s in his clothes from yesterday, jacket thrown over his shoulder, a strange scent of perfume lingering around him. And his face -- he looks like he’s glowing. A happy shine that neither Jimin or Taehyung have ever seen on his face before. When Jeongguk sees his roommates, he kills the smile, but the strange aura of happiness remains.

“Where were you?” Taehyung asks, and Jeongguk raises an eyebrow. “Out getting laid? Didn’t take you as a ladies’ man.”

“Nah, I’m pretty fuckin’ gay,” Jeongguk responds lazily, throwing his jacket on the top bunk and shedding his t-shirt, wrinkling his nose at a stain on the hem of it. It takes Jimin a moment to realize that it’s soju; the youngest must have been out drinking, then.

“So was the girl I was hanging with, now that I think of it,” he says thoughtfully, pulling on a new shirt and shedding his black jeans. “So yeah, just a friend. Sorry if you were up all night; didn’t mean to worry you.”

Taehyung shakes his head, and Jimin’s lips twitch.

“We’re gonna worry, like it or not,” Taehyung says bluntly, and Jeongguk turns around, a surprised look on his face. “So next time, shoot us a message, okay?”

Jeongguk hesitates as he pulls on a pair of sweatpants, looking torn. But as he collapses on his bed, he responds, his voice muffled by the pillows.

“Okay.”

“Should we just order pizza and have ramen stocked up this time around?” Hoseok asks, leaning against the doorframe of the bedroom. Seokjin looks up from his computer, pushing his glasses up on his nose and shrugging.

“Yeah, sure. One week of junk food won’t kill us all,” he replies, before dropping his eyes down to the papers scattered around him on the bed, rifling through in search of something. Hoseok isn’t
entirely sure; it looked like being a cooking major was more complex than he first thought.

“You think the others will be good with it?” Hoseok glances down at his phone, tapping through to pull up the group chat, rolling his eyes as he scrolls past dozens of gifs and memes, courtesy of Taehyung. Seokjin snorts.

“They’ll eat anything as long as they can get to the alcohol,” he points out, and Hoseok tilts his head to the side. “Honestly, they won’t care. I’ll whip up something simple for a dessert, that way we can still have something homemade.”

“Sounds good,” Hoseok says, shooting off a message into the chat before pocketing his phone. Silence stretches for a few moments, the soulmate bond between them humming with uncertainty and worry. Then Seokjin sets down the papers and closes his laptop, removing his glasses and rubbing his eyes with a sigh.

“Nothing’s working,” Seokjin says after a few more moments of quiet. “Jeongguk still won’t open up. He’s said nothing. He’s more vibrant, sure, but there’s just so much we don’t know about him.”

Hoseok strides over and moves aside some of the papers before sitting down next to his soulmate. Seokjin leans against him, staring at the wall across from them.

“I know,” Hoseok murmurs. “He’s so closed off, he smokes so much. He never talks as much as we do. Hell, Yoongi talks more than him.”

“That could just be his personality,” Seokjin sighs, and his eyes slide shut. “Well. That’s what I want to say. But Jimin and Taehyung met him before he closed himself off after he turned eighteen. Something happened on that day, but none of us have a clue what.”

“Maybe he’s just down because he can’t find his soulmate?” Hoseok offers, and Seokjin crosses his arms, considering the prospect.

“Maybe. But none of us were like that before meeting each other. I’ve never seen someone that… I don’t even know how to describe it. I’ve never seen that before.”

Quiet falls over them once again, and Hoseok reaches an arm to wrap around Seokjin’s shoulders, pulling him closer.

“We’ll figure it out,” Hoseok says firmly, and Seokjin flashes him a weak smile. “We’ll crack him and figure out what’s wrong. I’m sure of it.”
The next time Lalisa and Jeongguk meet, it’s in the university library. They both need to study for their respective majors, but they also kind of wanted to talk to each other during the process, so there they were. The noisy section of the library is relatively empty, with Lalisa and Jeongguk on one end and some random study group of about ten kids on the other, tables and chairs all pushed up together.

The study group talks, mindless chatter, and it effectively covers any conversation Lalisa and Jeongguk could have. So, after a solid half hour of actually doing work, they abandon their papers and laptops on the table between them and just -- talk. They talk about Jeongguk’s roommates and how they keep insisting on Jeongguk telling them about his day, about Lalisa’s dating failures, which she now laughs at.

“That girl in the purple hoodie over there, who frowned when I walked in?” Lalisa loosely gestures towards the study group. “We were steady for about two months. Then she found her soulmate and broke up with me over text. Fucking -- over text. That was so shitty of her. I cried for three days.”

Lalisa laughs, shaking her head, and Jeongguk’s lips tug into a wry smile. She seems to take all her past relationships as a joke, and honestly, Jeongguk gets it. Any time he thinks of the people he was with before he turned eighteen, the boy he lost his virginity to or the guy he blew in the third floor bathrooms of his high school, he laughs at his own childish stupidity.

Because back then, soulmates weighed heavy on everyone’s minds, always a possibility. Perhaps that’s why some couples stayed together and other people just kind of dated around, testing out their abilities before turning eighteen. Some lucky seniors found their soulmates, having turned eighteen while still in high school; most were not so lucky and graduated color-less.

“So, what’s your paper on?” Lalisa asks, gesturing to the laptop before Jeongguk. He glances down at it and smiles slightly.

“How fucked up the soulmate system is,” he replies with a shrug. “It’s technically the senior thesis; developing a view on soulmates and proposing some new or original idea. Most people write about how good and fairy tale like the system is. But we know it’s not really like that.”

Lalisa hums, nodding in agreement. “Yeah. I feel. In my classes, we were assigned a project that had to center around the theme of soulmates, some big ass painting or drawing or whatever we wanted. I purposely did mine all in black and white, incorporated a lot of the infamous failure stories.”

“How’d everyone take that?” Jeongguk asks, leaning his chin against one of his hands. Lalisa scoffs
and rolls her eyes.

“About as good as you’d think. Everyone’s on and on about how my interpretation is wrong, how those people were a small percentage, how the system doesn’t mess up like that anymore. Like damn, they’re talking to one of the failures.” She crosses her arms with a huff, shooting a glare at the papers littering the table between them.

“That’s the worst,” Jeongguk sighs. “If people with Hanahaki could survive and tell their stories, then maybe they wouldn’t be like that.”

Quiet falls over the two of them, and Lalisa leans forwards, eyes sparking with a fire of determination.

“Who says that we can’t? There’s gotta be a cure somewhere.”

“But where? If doctors knew about it, I wouldn’t be here, I’d be taking the cure, and so would you,” Jeongguk points out, and Lalisa smiles.

“In some ancient mythology, they said that people could survive Hanahaki. There’s documented instances of some people surviving out there in the history books that got hidden away. We just have to figure out exactly how they did it.”

Jeongguk eyes her skeptically, but relents.

“Fine. Where do we start?”

Jimin’s noticed that Jeongguk spends a majority of his time away from the dorm. He and Taehyung barely caught a glimpse of him the days leading up to Seokjin’s -- he comes back late at night and is gone before they wake up. But the visit to Hoseok and Seokjin’s apartment is something that Jeongguk knows better than to miss; however, he still shows up late.

“Sorry,” he says breathlessly as he collapses at the table, everyone’s eyes on him. He’s got a strange aura about him, almost like he’s actually, well. Happy. It’s unnerving, though relieving. Jimin was getting tired of him being sad and angry all the time, always with a cigarette between his teeth or his fingers.

“I was studying at the library, tough class,” Jeongguk explains vaguely. Everyone accepts his excuse, though Jimin glances at Taehyung and knows that they’ll be questioning their black haired roommate that night. Jeongguk prefers to do his homework in the dorm room -- he once mentioned thinking that too many people were at the library for him to focus. And if his class was that difficult, why is he... smiling? God, that’s a sight to see.

“If you ever need help, I’m free, Gguk,” Namjoon offers, and Jeongguk stills, looking up at him with wide eyes. It takes everyone a few moments to understand what’s going on -- and then Namjoon is apologizing for using the nickname while Yoongi slaps his arm, saying that it was a slip, he won’t do it again --

“No, no,” Jeongguk interrupts, looking a bit nervous, eyes darting, fidgeting in his seat. “It’s okay, I don’t mind. You just, um. Surprised me.”

Everyone relaxes a bit, but Jimin regards Jeongguk with a strange expression. The younger man hated nicknames -- he’d made it clear several times that he preferred people using his full name. Why would that change now?
Taehyung locks eyes with him, and the two come to a silent agreement.

Jeongguk has changed. Again.

But why?

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Jeongguk paces the space behind the tattoo shop counter the day after the dinner at Seokjin and Hoseok’s, wondering why he didn’t fight the use of that nickname anymore; usually he scowls and tells off the people who use it. The last time he heard it used in a way that didn’t make him hate it was right before his best friend died choking on lily petals, back when he was sixteen.

Fuck. Just thinking of the incident makes his chest hurt, his throat hurt, his head hurt. His eyes always sting with unshed tears, tears he hadn’t let fall since he watched the coffin lower into the ground and broke his dead best friend’s soulmate’s nose out of rage when he showed up on the doorstep, hands in his pockets and a look of fake sympathy on his face. He didn’t regret it; he would have done it a hundred times over. The man had killed his best friend, why in hell would Jeongguk be rational and talk it out? Someone was dead. You don’t talk over something like that -- you act. And Jeongguk did.

Folding his hands into his pockets, Jeongguk looks absentmindedly towards his feet, where he knows he has his best friend’s name and birth and death dates carved into his ankle. It was the first tattoo he ever got, eighteen and teary-eyed and with a world of color for a death sentence, quietly handing the tattoo artist his friend’s name and the dates on a small slip of paper.

He’d found the name written in the dead boy’s handwriting and had the artist copy it. He’d taken the writing from the boy’s old schoolwork, barely able to read past the family name before breaking down. So now, the name Oh Sehun is carved into his skin in blue, the color Sehun had talked about most before he died, outlined with black. The dates followed, wrapping around his ankle.

Jeongguk’s eyes flit over to his backpack, thrown carelessly besides the desk. Inside were three different history books from various parts of the world he’s reading through, searching for any mention of the Hanahaki. He’s entertaining Lalisa’s insane idea of a cure for now, though he’s skeptical and still rather sure that there’s no way out. But he’s not one to crush someone’s hopes, so he lets her speculate and reads what she asks him to.

But a small, hidden part of him wonders -- if he’d had the thought of researching and finding a cure somehow while Sehun was still alive but diseased, would the older man still be alive? Would he he be here now, ruffling Jeongguk’s hair as Jeongguk gets sent into some hospital to get the cure for the Hanahaki? Would he have calmed Jeongguk down from his first panic attack of many upon gaining his colors when turning eighteen?

What would life have been like if Jeongguk had found him a cure, and he didn’t die that day in Jeongguk’s arms?

Perhaps that’s the only thought keeping Jeongguk in the game with Lalisa. Perhaps that’s why he’s going with her fruitless scheme, her ideas that just scream crazy. If he can somehow find a way to save people like Sehun, people like Lalisa, then maybe, just maybe, it’d all be worth it in the end; even if he can’t manage to save himself.
“Jeongguk.”

Said boy looks up from the book in his lap, frowning when he sees his two roommates standing in the doorway of the bedroom, strange looks pinned on their faces. After a few moments, Jeongguk marks his place in the book and sets it aside, raising an eyebrow in an indication for them to speak. Jimin and Taehyung exchange a look, before Jimin starts talking.

“Jeongguk, you keep changing,” he says, crossing his arms. “When you first got here, you were shy but at least a little talkative and happy. Then you become closed off and rude, barely talking to anyone, and now you’re weirdly happy again. What’s going on with you?”

Jeongguk’s mouth opens and closes, unsure of how to respond. His chest burns, petals forcing their way up his throat, and he swallows a few times in hopes of keeping them back. Before he can lose his grip on himself, Jimin’s phone rings, cutting through the silence. Jimin pulls it from his pocket and frowns when he sees the caller ID. He turns the screen to Taehyung, and the two of them excuse themselves, closing the door.

As soon as their footsteps head for the living space, Jeongguk doubles over and coughs up the petals into his hands, unable to breathe for a minute or two until the petals leave his airways. He straightens up and takes a few deep breaths, crushing the petals between his fingers and shoving them in his pockets. Getting up, he pulls on his uniform for A Touch of Ink, grabs his phone, and heads out of the dorm.

He waves to his roommates as he goes; they wave absently in return, Jimin with his phone pressed to his ear, listening intently to whoever was on the other end. Once the door of the dorm closes, Jeongguk sighs and shoves his hands in his pockets. The weather has been warming up lately; winter is finally melting into spring, and Lalisa’s twentieth birthday is quickly approaching.

Even though some Hanahaki victims make it to twenty-one before their petals choke them, Jeongguk is worried. They’ve read through dozens of history and medical books to no avail, but it isn’t slowing Lalisa down in the slightest. And so he’s still along for the ride, wondering if their search would have an end, or if they’d both die before they found any semblance of a cure.

Seoul is busy no matter the time of day, and Jeongguk dodges around people on the sidewalks, tugging his mask to cover his nose and mouth. He blends in easily, just another face in the crowd, and a small part of him wonders. Wonders how many people he passes has Hanahaki like him, how many people still wander around in black and white. How many people have color, and a soulmate waiting for them at home; how many have color but no knowledge of where their soulmate is now or
who their soulmate is.

Jeongguk sees himself in the people with tired eyes and brightly dyed hair, the people with tattoos climbing up their skin and people dressed in ripped clothes. He sees himself in a person on the corner of the street, a hand over their mouth as they cough, and when they straighten up again, a single red petal drifts to the concrete from between their fingers as they shove the hand in their pocket.

Seoul is filled with people who have their own issues, their own thoughts, their own paths. Some people don’t know where their path will lead; others walk forwards with a sure destination in mind. Jeongguk stumbles through this vast ocean of hopes and dreams, unsteady on his feet, doubt and fear surrounding him like a dark cloud. He’s a splotch of darkness on the wide tapestry of the city, blending in with the other lost boys and girls and people. And yet, as he spots the tattoo shop, he realizes that he’s growing lighter.

His inky black has gradually faded into a deep grey, Lalisa’s vibrant colors clashing against his darkness and making it lighter, dragging him into the light. Her sparks of hope seep into him, slowly igniting a fire that had long since died. The smoking embers are fanned into a small fire, fueled by Lalisa’s determination, by Yoongi’s passion, by Taehyung and Jimin’s cheerfulness. By Seokjin’s care, by Hoseok’s smile. By Namjoon’s wise words, by Jackson’s careful hugs. Jeongguk allows these people to light the fire he’d put out himself.

He allows them in and lets them begin to heal his wounds, all without them realizing what they’ve done. His lighter sits unused on his desk, a half empty packet of cigarettes besides it. Occasionally, he will smoke, but his need for it has decreased. The last party he went to was before he met Lalisa; the last time he drank so much he couldn’t remember the night when he woke up was weeks, maybe even months, in the past. He’s starting to see a place to go, a goal to aim for.

He’s in the game to find a cure for Lalisa, to find a cure to stop any deaths like Sehun’s, but he’s also in the game to find a cure for himself. His denial of wanting to live has faded, and even though his voice is too damaged to sing, he still creates music and tweaks his song. He writes the nights away, working on his thesis, even though he may be around for his senior year if the cure is found. But a small piece of him still clings to the hopelessness, the suicidal thoughts, the depression. It doesn’t go away; no amount of friendship and smiles can change that.

But he’s better. He’s getting better, little by little. He’s smiling, he’s responding in group chats. He’s accepted the friendship of these people around him.

Jeongguk pushes open the door of A Touch of Ink, and he greets his co-workers with a smile.

Right now, even with the Hanahaki hanging heavy over him, life feels good. For the first time in a long time, Jeongguk feels good.

Namjoon likes to think that he’s observant; that he can pick out the fine details and hone in on a decision or a problem. He likes to think that he can look at a problem in any which way and find a result, and even if it takes him a while, he’ll get there.

But Jeongguk -- god. That boy is an enigma, a walking mask of a person. Lately, his facade seems to be cracking open, piece by piece, but there’s another layer below it and Namjoon doesn’t know what to make of it. It seems no amount of laughter and smiles can open him up, no amount of banter and deep conversation can make him crack. Namjoon has studied the boy as if he’s a psychology project, and no matter what, he’s always come up blank.
Jeongguk has a fire inside him. Yoongi has seen it first hand, when the kid appeared at one of his shows and left with wild eyes and ideas buzzing around in his mind. But Namjoon has yet to see the fire in person; it seems that Jeongguk’s fire has remained dormant around them, even after Yoongi’s set at the small, run down bar. Namjoon wants to see this boy’s fire; wants to see what makes him tick. And it drives him mad that Jeongguk is the one person in the universe that he hasn’t cracked.

He knows the other five like the back of his hand. Yoongi, his soulmate, is easy; cool and unbreakable facade that melts into a kind and compassionate core whenever they’re alone or among friends. Hoseok isn’t difficult either; always happy and always smiling, but sadness permeates him every so often and then only Seokjin can make him smile again. Seokjin took more time, but Namjoon knows him well now. A parental-like figure for them all, caring and passionate, but with a bite to him that allows him to spit fire when someone is being rude or disrespectful.

Jimin is sweet and kind through and through, but cross him, and you’ll never see anything more terrifying. Despite being one of the shortest members of their little group, Jimin is by far the most intimidating when angered; it takes a lot for him to break, but when he does, holy shit you’re in danger. Taehyung is friendly and outgoing, talkative but able to be serious when the time calls for it. He’s silly and acts in a way that’s difficult for Namjoon to predict, but Taehyung is Taehyung and nobody wants him any other way.

But Jeongguk -- Namjoon can only draw blanks. He knows the kid’s age and birthday, his major and his job, but his personality? He always appears cold and stoic, but Yoongi has seen his fire and a playful, mischievous side of him at the tattoo shop. Jeongguk talks shortly and devoid of emotion, but lately, he’s been smiling more. It’s as if he has a million different faces and Namjoon can’t tell which one is actually his.

It drives him absolutely mad, but Namjoon is also good at picking out patterns and change. And Jeongguk is definitely changing. He just has to wait for the transformation to end, and then maybe, just maybe, Jeongguk’s real face will finally show itself.

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Mark has met Jeongguk a total of one time. And even then, it was brief; a quick exchange of “hellos” before Jackson emerged from the back room and laced his hand in Mark’s, effectively making Mark forget about anything except his soulmate. His soulmate which he didn’t know was actually his soulmate for almost six months.

The thought eats away at him as he leans against the graffiti splashed walls of the tattoo shop, one leg kicked up against the brick and arms crossed, waiting for Jackson to finish working on his current client so that they can go home. No matter how many times Jackson insists that it’s okay, that everything worked itself out now, they’re still soulmates -- Mark can’t help but worry and wonder. He’s jolted from his thoughts when the side door opens, revealing Jeongguk. The younger male blinks a few times, seemingly surprised to see him, before nodding and closing the door gently behind him.

“Hello, Mark-ssi,” he greets softly, and Mark shakes his head.

“Just hyung is fine.”

Jeongguk regards Mark strangely for a moment, but nods once in acknowledgement. Silence falls again, and Mark begins to sink back into his thoughts, but then Jeongguk speaks again.

“Hyung, you know that Jackson-hyung never shuts up about you, right?”
There’s a strange light and knowing look in Jeongguk’s eyes when Mark turns to him, and after a few moments, he shakes his head.

“No, I wasn’t aware,” Mark responds quietly, and Jeongguk leans against the wall besides him and huffs out a small laugh.

“Damn, hyung. Jackson-hyung literally never shuts up. Yesterday he went on for almost half an hour about your eyes. I timed it. It was so sappy and romantic and weird.” Jeongguk’s nose wrinkles, but Mark can’t help the rush of fondness for his soulmate that races through him like a bolt of lightning. Slowly, his dark thoughts begin to recede, and Jeongguk smiles thinly.

“Feeling better, hyung?”

Mark eyes him warily. “How did you--?”

Jeongguk smiles sadly, shaking his head. “Because I’ve seen the look in your eyes one too many times in the mirror.”

Silence falls for a moment, and then Jeongguk coughs.

“Anyways, Jackson-hyung is almost done with the tattoo. He’ll be out soon.”

Jeongguk turns to leave, and Mark hesitates a few moments.

“Thank you.”

Jeongguk stops where he is, one hand on the door handle and the other stuffed in his pocket. He turns around and flashes Mark a shaky smile.

“Of course, hyung.”

And then he’s gone, the door slamming shut behind him, Mark’s darkened thoughts being whisked away with him. Renewed, Mark leans back again, content to count the lights in the window of the skyscrapers towering above as he awaits the appearance of his soulmate.
Yoongi doesn’t know what to make of the sight before him. Jeongguk is sitting on the end of the couch, as always, with a beer in hand, as always. But what’s different is the giant ass smile on his face. In all the weeks and months that Jeongguk had been coming to the parties, he’d never once cracked a smile. It’s not like the kid couldn’t smile -- Yoongi had seen it before, in the tattoo shop, a shy upwards tug on the edges of his lips. He’d seen it when Jeongguk let himself slip, lips parting slightly to reveal his teeth, a shimmer of laughter in his eyes that he kills when he sees Yoongi looking.

But Jeongguk had never smiled so openly around them, and it’s throwing Yoongi off. Almost like someone yanked the rug from beneath his feet, leaving him with a spinning head and a world of confusion left behind. Jeongguk’s smile is that pull, the thing that throws Yoongi off and makes everything sit a little bit unlike usual, a sensation of something being wrong. But nothing is wrong -- hell, Jeongguk’s smiling, that doesn’t happen every day.

But the sensation of something being wrong remains.

It seems that Namjoon shares his thoughts; their soul bond sings with uncertainty and nervousness, an amplification of both of their emotions. Yoongi leans back against him slightly, and Namjoon adjusts his position, wrapping an arm around Yoongi’s waist. Neither of them have bottles or cans in their hands; the wrong feeling is throwing them both off and neither have an urge to be drunk when the air is charged with something strange.

Jeongguk’s phone rings.

Almost instantly, the smile drops, moments before all eyes are on him. The youngest coughs awkwardly, immediately looks like he regrets doing that, then pulls out his phone. His eyebrows furrow as he reads the caller ID, and then he’s picking it up and putting the phone to his ear.

“Hello?”

The apartment slowly falls quiet as Jeongguk listens to the person on the other end, a range of emotions flashing through his eyes. But they all dissolve into a sudden, panicked expression.

“Hey, hey, just breathe, okay?” His voice is laced with concern, his grip tightens on the bottle in his hand, and Namjoon and Yoongi exchange a look. Something isn’t right. Who in hell is on the other end of the phone call?

Jeongguk’s features smooth out after a few moments, and he listens intently before his head tips back with a sigh.
“Yes, Lali, I read it -- no, I didn’t find anything. Yes, I read through it twice. Yes, I even read the
articles cited in the appendix. Y-- no. I’m with people, I can’t exactly -- yes, tomorrow -- I’ll be there
at eleven. Okay, bye. Don’t die on me, please, text me every time -- yeah. Yes, I’ll be fine -- only
once, relax -- okay, I’m hanging up, bye!”

Jeongguk sighs as he drops the phone into his lap, but a weirdly fond smile curls on his lips. Silence
reigns for a moment, and then Seokjin speaks up.

“Who’s Lali?”

“Oh, it’s Lalisa,” Jeongguk corrects, dropping his head down and smoothing out his facial
expression. “We’re friends. Met on campus, we’re doing some research work together. She was
interested in Hanahaki and well, soulmate studies is my major. So.”

He shrugs, taking a sip from the bottle in his hand. The others exchange looks before shrugging and
falling back into their conversations, but Yoongi’s eyes stay pinned on Jeongguk.

“Why’d you tell her not to die on you?”

Jeongguk turns to Yoongi, raising an eyebrow. Yoongi barely sees the flash of worry and panic in
his eyes before he’s putting on his usual facade and responding smoothly.

“Inside joke. We say that to each other when we part ways,” he explains, though a strange sense of
something more hangs behind his words. “Just feels right, you know? It’d be weird now if we didn’t
say it.”

Yoongi accepts the answer reluctantly, and the party goes on around him. Namjoon is stiff besides
him, a testament to the fact that he wasn’t the only one to notice the strange behavior from Jeongguk.

But the smile slowly creeps back onto the younger man’s face, and Yoongi’s worries fall onto the
back burner. As long as the younger man is smiling, it can’t all be bad, right? Something must be
going right for him. Yoongi just hopes that it stays that way.

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Jeongguk’s phone rings at eight in the morning.

He’s awake, unable to sleep in a strange environment and constantly awoken by his coughing fits.
They’d been too tired and too drunk to go home last night, so everyone ended up crashing
somewhere in the apartment. He’s glad he had the sense to bring his backpack to Seokjin and
Hoseok’s; it’s now filled to the brim with petals.

The phone screen displays an area code from his home town, Busan, and, assuming it’s an old
acquaintance whose number he deleted, Jeongguk picks up the phone, stretching his spare arm back
and wincing as his joints crack. As the line connects, he glances around the small living room; Jimin
and Taehyung had crashed on a pile of pillows and blankets in the corner, cuddled up together and
completely content. Trash litters the floor, and Jeongguk is sure that Seokjin and Hoseok will force
them to help clean up since they slept over.

The line beeps, signaling the connection to the other end, and Jeongguk turns his attention back to
the phone.

“Hello?” He asks, uncertain of whose voice will return. He’s long forgotten the names of the people
he met in Busan, pushing his high school years as far from his mind as possible. His memories are
filled with Sehun, and thinking of Sehun was too painful.
“Jeongguk.”

Jeongguk stiffens, ice injected into his veins via the cold voice on the other end of the line. His spine straightens unconsciously, and he draws his lips into a thin line, his eyes focusing on the blank television across the room from him, unwavering. After a long, stifling moment, he replies.

“Father.”

There’s a sigh on the other end, and unintentionally, Jeongguk’s muscles lock up, a million rehearsed lies right on the tip of his tongue, waiting for whichever scenario they’d been perfected for to play out. Jeongguk waits, free hand falling onto his lap and twisting his shirt between his fingers.

He hasn’t gotten a phone call or had any contact, really, with the man on the other end of the line since Sehun died. Hadn’t seen the man since the funeral when Jeongguk lost it and broke the nose of the man who killed his best friend. Hasn’t had to lie and cheat and steal his way out of the house every night for a few moments of freedom and safety in years. But now it’s all rushing back, and Jeongguk doesn’t like it one bit.

“How are you?” The man says after a long moment of nothing. “How’s college?”

“Good,” Jeongguk says stiffly. “I’m majoring in soulmate studies. It’s fascinating.”

Another sigh. “I thought you outgrew that childish idea of irregular bonds. And now you’re in college for it? That’s a useless major, Jeongguk, you’re just wasting my money.”

A flame of anger burns in Jeongguk’s chest, and a moment later, it comes out in the form of flower petals. He throws the phone down as he coughs, both hands flying to cover his mouth, waiting out the attack and throwing the petals in his backpack with a dejected look. His hands shake as he picks the phone up again.

“Sorry,” he rasps, wincing at the sound of his own voice.

No response. Jeongguk waits, fiddling with the hem of his shirt, muscles locking up as adrenaline fuels an escape he still hasn’t managed to realize that he’ll never have to make again. Seconds tick by slowly, as if someone had hit a button that made time move twice as slow. And finally, the reply comes.

“You should switch to business or something in the medical field. Then you’ll make money and not waste mine.”

Jeongguk closes his eyes briefly. He’s fought to be where he is. He’s running mostly on scholarship money, and the man is well aware of that. Jeongguk was always seen as some sort of prodigy, though his reputation in high school and on campus dragged his name into the dirt; but colleges didn’t see a track record of suspensions and jail time because Jeongguk was never caught. He’s fought his way to the top and he’s tired of his aspirations being dismissed without a second thought, even though he knows anything he does will go to waste before he can make anything out of it.

“You talk big about my life for someone who isn’t even biologically my father.”

The words slip before Jeongguk can catch himself. Once he realizes what he’s done, his lips part in shock, and his grip on the phone loosens. Hands shaking, he yanks the phone from his ear and hangs up, heart racing a mile a minute. He slumps back against the couch cushions, his gaze trained on the ceiling as his head tips back.

Of all the things he could have said, why did he remind his step-father that Jeongguk isn’t
biologically his child? Why would he rip open that wound, force the man to remember that his soulmate had a kid with someone that wasn’t him? Why did he ever think of saying that, and why was his filter broken at that exact moment? Jeongguk shoves the phone in his pocket and checks the time on the clock on the other end of the room -- it’s nearing a quarter after eight. Jeongguk’s first shift is at nine; and the tattoo shop is a twenty minute walk.

Standing, Jeongguk exhales heavily as his back cracks. He twists to either side, sighing, before pulling on his shoes and jacket and shouldering his bag. He glances over at Taehyung and Jimin, who are still asleep somehow. He hesitates at the door, and in the end, scribbles a note on the notepad stuck to the fridge before leaving, shoving his hands in his pockets.

What he doesn’t notice is Hoseok’s head poking out of the master bedroom the entire time, listening in silence.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

yall I moved this story into a google doc just for safety and this shit was 74 pages long and Im updating two days in a row because formatting this shit gave me an idea for the next chapter so I wrote it in like two hours, if that

74 pages tho holy shit... that's like... half of a real fucking novel wtf have I done

anyways,, enjoy the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jeongguk is having a bad day.

He thought he knew bad days, back when the Hanahaki first started and his will to live plummeted, leaving him depressed and confused. He thought he knew bad days back when he was sixteen and trying to cope with Sehun’s death. He thought he knew bad days when the first flower petal came from his mouth.

God, all of those days were nothing compared to this day. Jeongguk had pulled an all nighter in an attempt to find something, anything about a cure for Hanahaki. His first lecture was at eight, and he was running purely on coffee and sleep deprivation when he walked through the doors. And, with perfect fucking timing, the professor assigned a group project and Jeongguk doesn’t have the patience to work with anyone.

Once he reluctantly gave his partners his number, he’d had to run down to the library to meet Lalisa. By that time, he’d already had four coughing attacks, which ticked up to five when he sat down with her. She managed to help him through it and offered water, which was probably the best thing about his day.

The professor of his Soulmate History lecture was on about debunking the Hanahaki again, and Jeongguk simmered in silent rage through the first fifteen minutes before leaving. He had an attack in the bathrooms, cried for twenty minutes, then headed home.

He crashed for a bit, but work called, and he had to get up and get going as petals fell from his lips. At least at the shop Jackson would cover for him whenever he started coughing, but it was one of the clients that brought the whole day to a spectacular, flaming end. Apparently, Hoseok thought that today was the perfect fucking day to walk into the shop and book an appointment, and on the way out, ask to speak with Jeongguk.

Jeongguk follows him reluctantly, taking him to the smoking zone on the side of the building. The scent of smoke hangs heavy in the air, and god, Jeongguk needs a smoke. After Hoseok leaves, for sure. But for now, he has to listen to whatever the fuck Hoseok has to say to him.

“What is it?” Jeongguk asks, crossing his arms and leaning back against the wall. Hoseok looks mildly uncomfortable for all of five seconds before his gaze hardens and he opens his mouth.

“How long?”
“What?” Jeongguk laughs, scrunching up his nose as he stares blankly at Hoseok.

“I said, how long?” Hoseok steps closer, a look of anger and betrayal simmering in his eyes. “How long have you been dying and not said anything? How long have you been lying to me -- to all of us? How long has this been going on? Stop lying to us! Don't lie to me!”

Jeongguk’s blood runs cold, but he keeps his expression guarded and steely. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“This!” Hoseok says in exasperation, opening one of his hands and revealing a small, blue petal. “How long have you had Hanahaki, Jeongguk? Stop fucking lying to me!”

Jeongguk stares blankly at the petal in Hoseok’s hand, dread seeping through his veins. The one thing he wanted to do -- keep it all a secret -- he’d failed at it. He’d failed and he’s such an idiot for sleeping over on Saturday, he should have gone to the dorms. Slowly, he raises his gaze to meet Hoseok’s.

“I don’t know what you’re playing at or where you got that petal,” he says in a low voice, forcing anger and ice into his tone. “But I don’t like it. Hanahaki is just a myth, Hoseok. Don’t tell me you bought into that shit from those cheesy ass movies.”

“Well, I didn’t! Not until you started fucking -- throwing up petals in my living room while on the phone! Which is another conversation entirely!” Hoseok throws down the petal and runs a hand through his hair. “I just want to help you, Jeongguk, let me take you to a hospital or -- or I don’t know, get help from someone --”

“No.”

Jeongguk’s voice is as hard as diamond, his stare piercing right through Hoseok. For a moment, the older boy is absolutely terrified; he’s never seen such a deadly look from anyone he knows, not even Yoongi back when he ruled the underground scene and had a reputation for beating people up in alleyways.

“I mean, I’m fine. I don’t need to go to a hospital because you believe in a child’s story,” Jeongguk scoffs, crossing his arms and looking off to the side. Hoseok blinks, before a scowl tugs at his lips.

“You fucking told us it wasn’t a story,” he says boldly, snapping Jeongguk's eyes back on him. “Back at one of the first times you came to my apartment. You told us about how the Hanahaki is real and how people don’t have soulmates. Now tell me, Jeongguk. How can you dare to have the nerve to call me a child if you’re the one who made me believe?”

Jeongguk is still, staring at Hoseok, and for a moment, Hoseok expects the younger man to punch him in the face, possibly break his nose or kick him in the crotch; something of that nature. But he doesn’t -- no, instead he doubles over, coughing harshly, and after a moment, falls to his knees. All anger thrown aside, Hoseok kneels down to help him.

“Breathe, kid,” he mutters, rubbing circles on Jeongguk’s back. “Jesus fuck -- breathe, kid. It’s okay.”

“Okay?”

Jeongguk looks up, meets his eyes, and Hoseok’s heart breaks clean in two. He’s never seen someone look so defeated, so... broken. Jeongguk’s eyes hold too much depth and wisdom for a kid of his age, too much pain for someone only in their second year of college. His eyes are watering and his lips are cracked, blue petals sticking to them, beautiful and horrific all at the same time.
“Does this look okay?” Jeongguk demands, wiping his mouth to get rid of the petals, rising to his feet, Hoseok following his lead. His voice is rough, rougher than it was before the attack, scratchy and almost painful to hear -- Hoseok can't imagine speaking with his vocal chords like that. “God. It’s not okay now, but --”

Jeongguk hesitates. He can lie now, lie again, say that he has the cure. Lie and say that he’ll live, that he’ll pull through. For a moment, he considers telling the truth -- Hoseok’s voice screams ‘stop lying to us!’ on repeat in his head. But he takes a breath, squares his shoulders, and slaps on a smile, pushing the little voice away, far away.

“But, I have a cure. Lalisa and I have been researching for months, we’ve got it,” he turns around with a bright smile, and internally flinches when he sees Hoseok’s anger and grief falter. “We’re testing now -- but it’s almost there. I’m gonna be fine, hyung. Just…”

Biting his lip, Jeongguk takes a deep breath. He can’t let the others find out. Can’t let them know. Won’t let them worry, won’t let them break. He wants to protect them. Protect them from reality, from the harsh truth that is his life.

Stop lying to us!

Jeongguk releases his bottom lip, tasting blood but not caring.

“Just don’t tell anyone, please. I don’t want them to worry.”

Stop lying to us!

Jeongguk clasps his hands behind his back, nails digging into his palms. The words echo and echo and echo but he won’t stop, can’t stop, because he refuses to let anyone but himself feel pain.

“I--” Hoseok hesitates for a moment, but Jeongguk crumbles his resolve into dust by pulling out his convincing puppy eyes. He knows from years of experience that they can get him almost anything he wants; and Hoseok is especially weak to cute things.

“I won’t.”

Jeongguk nods slowly, then forces a desperate note into his voice, mentally thanking his step-father for forcing him to hone his acting techniques early on.

Stop lying to us!

Jeongguk almost winces when the voice comes back with a vengeance, slamming him in the lungs with guilt upon seeing the conflict on Hoseok’s face. Even with his experience in lying, his voice wavers as he speaks again.

“Promise me.”

He wants to say, I'm sorry. Forgive me. But I can't stop lying. I refuse to let you get hurt. Wants to say, please don't be mad when you find out the truth. But he doesn't. Instead, he begs for Hoseok to keep his secret, to keep everyone else in the dark, to protect him and protect Lalisa and pretend that nothing is wrong.

He can see Hoseok hesitate, fight internally with himself. But Jeongguk knows before the decision is made that he’s won, and a small, regret-tinged smile breaks on his face as Hoseok nods and utters the words that seals everything back in place, good as new. As if nobody ever found out in the first place.
“I promise.”

Lalisa aches.

She’s been running on empty for almost three days now, she’s skipped some of her lectures to do research, she’s been in the library more often than her dorm room. Her phone is littered with missed calls and unanswered texts, and she’d turned off any kind of tracking feature that he friends could use.

Her chest hurts like all hell, even with an obscene amount of painkillers in her system. Jeongguk has warned her time and time again not to go too far over a double dose, but it just hurts so badly. But even with the high dosage, nothing seems to help.

“Lisa.”

Lalisa’s head jerks up from the history textbook she’s immersed in, the end of her pen slipping from between her teeth; a nervous habit she’d developed. Chaeyoung is standing before the table, arms crossed. Lalisa blinks a few times, confused.

“How’d you find me?”

“Snapchat, dumbass,” Chaeyoung replies, opening her phone -- and yep, there’s Lalisa’s bitmoji, hovering over the school library.


Her words are muffled, but Chaeyoung hears them anyways; the older girl shakes her head, ruffles Lalisa’s hair, and falls into the seat next to her.

“What gives? You’re never at the dorm, you haven’t been answering your phone, I had to find you through fucking Snapchat. Jesus fuck, Lalisa, what is up with you?” Chaeyoung crosses her arms, and Lalisa eyes her, a small frown creeping over her face.

Chaeyoung recently dyed her hair strawberry blonde, her third dye job since the beginning of their sophomore year. Lalisa watches from the corner of her eyes as Chaeyoung brushes a stray strand of hair away from her face before checking her phone; Lalisa’s heart hurts.

“Oh, my soulmate’s calling,” she says with a soft, apologetic smile. “Don’t go anywhere. I’ll be back.”

Chaeyoung stands and walks out of the library to take the call, her face lighting up in a smile as she answers the phone. Lalisa sits up straight, hits herself in the face with the textbook in front of her, and begins packing up. She’s not staying here.

She leaves through the back door of the library and pretends she doesn’t see Chaeyoung’s surprised and betrayed face as the girl glances at the table Lalisa previously occupied and sees it empty.

Jeongguk closes his eyes briefly when Hoseok sits down besides him at the library. He shuts the book before him, leaning against one of his hands with an unimpressed and expectant look.

“What do you want now?” He asked tiredly, rubbing his eyes.
“The rest of that morning,” Hoseok says cautiously, unsure of what could set Jeongguk off. “You were on the phone with your -- um, your father?”

“Stepfather,” Jeongguk corrects, still not looking directly at Hoseok. “What’s your point?”

“Do you not get along with him?”

“Well. Seeing as I’m the kid of his soulmate and some guy he’s never met before, and the fact that I graduated high school early, and the fact that I said what I said to him, can’t you make an assumption?” Jeongguk stacks the books before him into a pile, standing and slinging his bag over his shoulder. Hoseok stands as well.

“I assume you want that kept a secret too.”

Jeongguk hesitates, then looks over his shoulder at Hoseok. “Yeah. I’d appreciate that. Now, stop prying into my past and just keep your mouth shut, please. Hyung.”

The ‘hyung’ is thrown on almost as an afterthought, a show of blatant disrespect and a display of false authority, and Hoseok clenches his jaw before relaxing. To be completely fair to the young male, he had found out a lot of personal information Jeongguk hadn’t yet felt ready to share by accident. He kind of owes it to him to stay quiet and take the one small act of disrespect without too much protest.

“Yeah. I will. You have my word, remember? I don't break promises.”

Jeongguk picks up the books, and he flashes small smile to Hoseok. “Thanks, hyung. See you Saturday.”

And with that, the black haired boy is gone, leaving Hoseok behind at an empty table with just his thoughts for company.

Chapter End Notes

:)
Jeongguk doesn’t have nightmares.

He swears that he doesn’t. Nightmares are childish, and he is no child. He’s nineteen, an adult. But tonight is the night before Lalisa turns twenty, and he’s a little bit paranoid.

Sue him, he’s scared. Terrified of losing the only person who can understand him right now, the person that’s given him something to do with his life. The person who’s shown him a side of himself he’s long forgotten and allowed that side of him to come to light around other people.

But still, he doesn’t have nightmares. He doesn’t.

Then why?

Why is he back at the home he hates, the home he wished he never grew up in? The home he ran from as soon as he got his college acceptance letter? Why is he paralyzed in the room painted red and black, staring at taekwondo trophies and posters of IU and G-Dragon?

His body barely moves as he gets up, limbs sluggish and unresponsive. He looks down and sees black and blue and yellow, and he inhales and grabs a hoodie from the cluttered floor and hides his arms away from sight. Pretending that the wounds don’t exist, as he always did. Always does.

Jeongguk is scared to leave the room, but his feet carry him anyways. As he descends the stairs, he realizes what today is. Today, he’s turned fifteen, and nobody will care. Nobody will care because his step-father hates him, and his mother loves her soulmate too much to defy him.

But Sehun will care.

This idea proves correct when the blond-haired boy appears at the doorstep after what seems like no time at all to Jeongguk in the dream. But when living the memory in real time, it took ages. Sehun smiles as the door opens and tugs Jeongguk along into his car, driving them around Busan.

Their words are garbled, lost to the radio blaring music. Lost to the dream world. Jeongguk smiles as he stares at Sehun, his happy face and bubbly attitude. Jeongguk almost forgets about what today brings as well.

He remembers when Sehun leads him to the mall. As they eat ice cream and wander, Jeongguk spots a black haired boy moments before Sehun does. He sends the oblivious man a nasty glare, and then Sehun looks up, and his eyes lock with the mystery man’s.

Jeongguk knows that Sehun sees color. The cone in Sehun’s hand falls, slowly, and the black haired
man stares back, indifferent. Jeongguk knows that he’ll walk away and take Sehun’s heart and chances of survival right with him.

And then the world warps around him.

He’s dressed in black, a suit. The air is still, somber. A casket sits closed at the front of the room, and Jeongguk knows whose it is. His jaw clenches as a familiar black haired man walks into the room, and in a moment, Jeongguk is on his feet.

He strides across the room, raises his fist, and connects with the man’s nose without a second thought, nothing but rage and grief flooding through him. Feeling blood beneath his fingers but not caring.

Never a sliver of regret.

Then he’s falling, falling, memories and nightmares blending together around him, colors flashing through his vision. Morning Glory petals fly upwards, opposite of him, and his chest hurts, aches, he wonders if he hits the ground hard enough he’d die in both the dream and real life.

Then he’s landing.

Before him stands a man with black hair and a sad smile, an older version of himself. The man he couldn’t remember, the man who he didn’t know existed for a long time. His mouth opens, and Jeongguk knows what he’s going to say, but it doesn’t make it hurt any less.

“I love you, son.”

The words echo and echo and echo and Jeongguk tips backwards once again, darkness sweeping up to meet him.

He wakes up shaking and crying and has to leave the dorm, too worked up to stay in one place. Too worried to not go to Lalisa’s apartment and check up on her. Too emotional to risk letting one of his roommates wake and see his face.

Jeongguk won’t let anyone see him cry.

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Sunye isn’t stupid. She knows that whatever is affecting Jeongguk, it’s more than a simple cold. Hell, it’s not just any sickness, and she knows it all too well. Joohyun had told her all about what happened before her brother died, and fuck, if Jeongguk doesn’t match her description to a damn t.

The issue is that she doesn’t want to scare him off. She’s aware that Jackson knows, that he helps Jeongguk through his attacks and watches the desk when Jeongguk can’t come in. She knows that Jeongguk is not one to accept help or sympathy, and he’d fight tooth and nail before someone took him to the hospital.

She aches with the need to help him, to watch over the young man who is so much like a little brother. She hasn’t felt like this since she became close with one of her patients back when she was a surgeon, a little girl whose date kept being pushed back. Sunye had mothered the girl as best she could, as her parents couldn’t afford to stay near the hospital and pay for the needed heart surgery at the same time. But in the end, the girl died on the operating table, on Sunye’s watch.

Sunye refuses to allow Jeongguk to be that little girl. She won’t let any more people die on her watch, not when she’s at the head of the ship. Jeongguk will live, somehow, and Sunye will do
anything to ensure it. She may not have saved that little girl, but she can save Jeongguk.

With no idea how, Sunye is lost. But that doesn’t mean she won’t fight like a horse from hell to find a way to save him. Petals will not be his demise; Sunye will make sure of it. Not on her watch.

Not this time.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Seokjin frowns as Hoseok lazily flips through channels on the television, his gaze distant, grip loose on the remote. His boyfriend has been acting strange since the night Jeongguk, Taehyung, and Jimin crashed at their apartment after one of the Saturday get togethers. He doesn’t know why, and it’s driving him mad to see his boyfriend upset without having the slightest clue of how to help him.

“Are you okay, babe?” Seokjin asks at last, sliding into the seat besides his boyfriend and wrapping an arm around Hoseok’s shoulders. The younger man tenses, only for a moment, and then relaxes into the touch.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just stressed -- I got a major piece coming up,” he explains, flashing Seokjin a bright smile. “Might use one of Yoon’s songs. He’s got a lot of good ones.”

“Mmm. That sounds good,” Seokjin agrees, a small smile tugging on his lips as Hoseok melts into his side and stops at the local cooking channel. Seokjin huffs out a small laugh.

“You hate cooking shows.”

“Yeah, but I love you,” Hoseok replies easily, and Seokjin can’t help the broad smile that crosses his face. He leans over and kisses Hoseok, deep and careful, and when they pull apart, Hoseok looks more alive than he has in the last week.

“I love you too.”

Silence falls for a moment as the show plays, and then Seokjin shifts slightly.

“You’d tell me if something was wrong, right?” He asks, and the question hangs in the space between them for a moment.

“Of course, hyung,” Hoseok replies, though the smile he gives Seokjin doesn’t reach his eyes. Seokjin nods, and they turn back to the show. But a small, dark piece of Seokjin keeps whispering, wondering what’s wrong. Why Hoseok won’t tell him. They’re soulmates, boyfriends; shouldn’t they trust each other with everything?

Seokjin shakes off the prying thoughts with difficulty. It’s probably nothing. Just that assignment.

He sinks into the warmth of the apartment, the heat radiating from Hoseok’s body, allowing himself to forget about it for now. Hoseok will tell him eventually.

Right?
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

sorry for being so late ;-) I'm sick and I had a shift yesterday which sucked until the manager was kind enough to let me go home because I wasn't feeling well

anyways enough about me~ enjoy the chapter!

“Hey, Jeongguk, you’re from Busan, right?”

Jeongguk looks up from the laptop before him, slipping out one of his earbuds. He nods in confirmation, quirking an eyebrow at Jimin in question. The older hums, then leans back against the wall, stretching out his legs over the mattress of the bed.

“Can we speak in satoori? I kinda miss it,” Jimin’s expression turns a bit wistful, and Jeongguk notes that he’s already slipped into the familiar Busan drawl, his voice deepening slightly.

“Sure,” he replies, relishing in the familiarity of the speech. It’s been a long time since he spoke in the dialect of his home region, having moved to Seoul when he was only seventeen, and nearly three years have passed. It feels good to speak without filtering his words.

“Thank you,” Jimin sighs, glancing over at Jeongguk. “I miss Busan. The beaches, the food, the city…”

“The sky and the sunsets,” Jeongguk continues, a small smile tugging at his lips. “The best place to watch the sunset was on that one beach with the pier…”

“Right next to the rocks,” Jimin finishes with a grin. “Wow, we lived close by. How have we never met before we roomed together, Jeongguk?”

Jeongguk shrugs, turning his eyes back to his laptop. Honestly, Jimin probably did know him and didn’t even really know it. When Jeongguk lived there, whispers surrounded him, talk of him being the devil’s son because he was born from a union of two people who weren’t soulmates. Nobody ever knew his name or spread it around, but everyone knew about what happened with Jeongguk’s mother and her soulmate. The fighting wasn’t exactly quiet.

“Busan is a large city,” Jeongguk says after a few moments. “And I’m younger than you. I’m not surprised we hadn’t met before.”

“I suppose,” Jimin pouts, looking briefly at the textbook balancing on his thighs before closing it and tossing it aside. “What high school did you go to?”

“Gwangan High, it was close to Gwangalli Beach,” Jeongguk responds. “It was alright. I graduated early so I didn’t get the full experience or whatever, but I didn’t care much.”

“Ah, you weren’t too far from me, I was in Namcheon High School,” Jimin says with a smile. “It’s, what, fifteen, maybe twenty minutes by train?”

“That’s a bit far, hyung,” Jeongguk points out, and Jimin scowls. Silence falls for a few moments,
then Jimin speaks again.

“Thanks, Jeongguk. It feels nice to use satoori. Can I keep using it with you?”

Jeongguk shrugs. He’d rather not think of his hometown, but if it makes Jimin happy to hear and use the familiar dialect, he’d keep his mouth shut. Anything to make the people around him happy, never mind his own discomfort.

“Yeah, sure.”

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Jeongguk doesn’t like thinking about his family, but it’s hard not to when advertising for Parent’s Day starts going up all around Seoul. It’s been barely two weeks since Lalisa’s twentieth birthday, and she’s still fighting, going strong; Jeongguk never sees her without ink smears on her hands and sometimes her face, books in her bag and her laptop never far away. He admires her dedication, and does his best to keep up.

But all the talk about Parent’s Day is dampening his motivation, and to his secret delight but outward concern, it’s slowing Lalisa down too. He doesn’t pry at first, but one night, while they’re watching some scientific documentary on the television, an ad for Parent’s Day pops up. Lalisa’s jaw clenches and she turns away from the screen. Jeongguk hesitates before muting the sound and turning to her.

“What’s wrong?”

Lalisa sighs and turns to face him, a scowl on her face. “My parents weren’t soulmates,” she explains. “So when they met their respective soulmates, they dropped me in the nearest orphanage as if I was some dirty secret, a reminder of everything they’d done wrong. I hardly remember either of them.”

Jeongguk winces apologetically. “That’s awful. Mine… weren’t soulmates either, actually. My step-dad hated me but my mom refused to get rid of me. It wasn’t a fun life, I never even knew until I was fifteen. I ran out and found my real dad. It was…”

Jeongguk trails off, unsure of what to say.

“Like the whole world crumbled down around you?” Lalisa supplies, sounding soft and empathetic. “As if everything you ever knew was a lie, as if even you were a lie.”

“Yeah,” Jeongguk breathes, tipping his head back.

“I met my mom once,” Lalisa says after a few moments of silence. “Back in Thailand, before I moved here with what money I had on a scholarship to this university. She looked at me as if I was everything wrong with the world, as if I was some disgusting freak. God.”

“Jesus,” Jeongguk mutters, and Lalisa laughs shortly.

“Jesus,” Jeongguk mutters, and Lalisa laughs shortly.

“Yeah. That happened. Therefore, I hate Parent’s Day and how all my friends are calling their parents and sending gifts and insisting that I do to. As if I even have a number to call or an address to send mail to.”

Jeongguk sighs, a frown falling over his face. “I’m going to my friends’ the day before. That’ll be a painful night.”

“Yeah. That happened. Therefore, I hate Parent’s Day and how all my friends are calling their parents and sending gifts and insisting that I do to. As if I even have a number to call or an address to send mail to.”

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“Yeah. That happened. Therefore, I hate Parent’s Day and how all my friends are calling their parents and sending gifts and insisting that I do to. As if I even have a number to call or an address to send mail to.”

Jeongguk sighs, a frown falling over his face. “I’m going to my friends’ the day before. That’ll be a painful night.”

“Ugh. I wish you the best,” Lalisa says, lightly tapping Jeongguk’s bicep with her fist. “Knock ‘em
dead. Literally if you must.”

“Lali, no.”

“Lali, yes.”

“I hate you.”

“You love me!”

“God, I really hate it when you’re right.”

“Say it!”

“For fuck’s sake -- fine.” Jeongguk rolls his eyes and pulls a smile that looks much more like a grimace. “God. I love you, Lali. My bestest friend. My bestest best friend. My platonic soulmate who isn’t really my soulmate because neither of us have soulmates so we’re both coughing up petals but hey, best friends ride and die together.”

“I really hate you sometimes, Gguk,” Lalisa laughs, slapping his arm lightly, though she looks more touched than she’ll ever let on. “Love you too, dork. Now, why don’t we stop watching this shit of a show and actually get some work done? We’ve got a long road ahead of us.”

It’s the day before Parent’s Day, and it’s also a Saturday. Hoseok watches as his soulmate works on cooking food, chipping in whenever he could be helpful. The others would be arriving in a little over an hour, and they’d all agreed to lay off the alcohol so that they wouldn’t be hungover on Parent’s Day.

It’s been over a month since Hoseok saw Jeongguk coughing up the flower petals, and every minute was excruciating because he swore not to tell anyone -- not even Seokjin, the person that he tells everything. It’s borderline torture, the scene that plays behind his eyelids every time he closes his eyes -- Jeongguk hunched over, phone on the couch besides him, blue petals spilling from between his fingers as he held them before his mouth.

“You alright, Hobi?”

Seokjin’s voice snaps Hoseok out of the memory, and he flashes his soulmate a bright smile. “Yep! Just spaced out a bit, sorry.”

Seokjin eyes him suspiciously, but lets the subject drop. “Well, okay. Can you grab the egg carton from the fridge, please?”

Hoseok does as he’s asked, placing the carton on the table besides Seokjin, who hums and kisses his cheek in thanks. Guilt sparks in Hoseok’s chest, though he does his best to hide it, not allowing the emotion to be transferred through their bond. If Seokjin catches any of the emotions that would give him away, his soulmate would be relentless in knowing what’s wrong. And Hoseok knows that it wouldn’t take long for his resolve to crack and for him to betray Jeongguk’s trust.

Time passes quietly, and then the doorbell rings, and Hoseok hurries to get it, greeting Namjoon and Yoongi as they enter, smiles on their faces. Jimin and Taehyung arrive not much later, and then Jeongguk, smelling slightly of antiseptic and smoke, dark circles under his eyes and still in his work shirt.
“You alright?” Hoseok asks hesitantly as Jeongguk kicks off his shoes before the door. Jeongguk looks up, hesitates a moment, then nods. Then he moves around Hoseok into the living room, and the elder closes the door and follows quietly.

The food is finished not much later, and the seven of them pack together around the table to eat, most of them chattering away. Jeongguk is as quiet as ever, picking at his plate, refusing to make eye contact for the first twenty minutes before he slowly relaxes.

But all the tension returns as soon as Parent’s Day comes into the conversation.

“I’m sending an order of flowers and chocolate home,” Taehyung says, shrugging. “For my grandma, actually. My parents passed away when I was a kid.”

Jeongguk blinks a few times at the information, and Hoseok watches his reactions carefully, trying to see any sign of discomfort.

“It’s a big holiday,” Namjoon remarks. “Ads everywhere on the television. It’s rather important. It’ll be my first time calling home in a couple weeks, I’ve been so busy.”

“Same here, it’s been almost a month,” Yoongi blinks a few times in surprise as he says it. “Wow. That’s a bit crazy. Almost a month since I spoke to either of my parents.”

“How? I call my mom like, every day,” Jimin laughs lightly, taking another bite of food. “I can’t imagine not calling on the daily.”

“I don’t call daily, but I call every Friday,” Seokjin pipes up. “It’s a long holding tradition. As long as I text during the week, my parents are okay with weekly calls.”

“I do my best to call often,” Hoseok adds in, still keeping a watchful eye on Jeongguk, though he tries not to make it too obvious. “I’d miss my parents if I didn’t call as much as I could.”

“What about you, Jeongguk?” Jimin asks, turning to the youngest boy. “I never hear you on calls with your parents in the dorm.”

“That’s because I haven’t spoken to them in almost three years,” Jeongguk replies shortly, setting aside the chopsticks in his hand, looking a bit uncomfortable. “Well, I haven’t spoken to my mom in three years. My dad I text every so often.”

“Your step-father?” Hoseok asks carefully, trying to gauge Jeongguk’s reaction. The boy looks at him with an unreadable expression, then shakes his head.

“No. My biological dad. Met him when I was fifteen,” Jeongguk explains, his voice stiff. His shoulders are tense, and sensing the touchy subject, Taehyung jumps in and changes it.

“Have you guys seen Black Panther yet? It’s one of the best Marvel movies I’ve ever seen!”

As the others dissolve into a discussion about the film, praising the actors and wondering of they’re really gay if Shuri made them feel things, Hoseok looks over at Jeongguk. The boy has a blank expression on his face, and after a moment, his gaze meets Hoseok’s.

They stare at each other for a few moments, neither sure what to say, and then Hoseok ducks his head lightly in apology. Jeongguk’s lips quirk into a half-smile, and he bows his own head, accepting the apology, before he jumps into the conversation, commenting loudly about how he’s definitely gay because, come on guys, did you see Michael B. Jordan?
Hoseok observes the male for a moment before hopping into the conversation as well, the apartment devolving into the usual chaos, with the large addition of Jeongguk. A smile tugs on his lips and his laughter isn’t restrained anymore, and Hoseok sees Yoongi watching Jeongguk talk with a strange brotherly fondness.

Glancing at the youngest, Hoseok understands why. It’s rare for Jeongguk to be so open and carefree, and it’s a nice sight to see. Hoseok doesn’t want it to end, even though he knows that it will.

He just hopes that Jeongguk really does have a cure in the works. It’d be devastating to lose the boy he and the others had become so attached to so quickly.
Chapter 20

I’m so sorry for the wait!!!! AP exams are on the way and school is hectic :(  
I hope that you like it :)  

Jackson has been acting off for a few weeks, and it’s gradually starting to worry Mark. He’s watched his boyfriend pace the living room with his phone face down on the coffee table, woken him from nightmares that leave him trembling, done everything in his power to make Jackson feel better even if he doesn’t know what’s happening.  

One day, though, it crashes down. Mark just wanted to visit the tattoo shop, knowing that Jackson’s next appointment wasn’t for two hours. But when he arrives and heads to the back room, he finds Jackson standing besides Jeongguk, who’s hunched over with his hands over his mouth as he coughs.  

A small, blue petal drifts from between Jeongguk’s fingers, and Mark’s back stiffens. He recognizes that, recognizes what’s happening, hasn’t seen it since his step-aunt. It’s been a long time but now it feels like yesterday, and he walks out the door without saying a word, returning with a bottle of water.  

Neither Jeongguk or Jackson have noticed him yet, and Mark approaches them a bit warily, clearing his throat to get their attention. Jackson looks up, and for a brief moment Mark can see his shock and fear at Jeongguk being found out, but Mark silently holds out the water.  

A few moments pass, and then Jackson takes it, uttering a soft “thank you” and giving the water to Jeongguk. As the fit dies down, Jeongguk thanks Mark as well, his voice significantly rougher than it was the last time they met. Mark smiles sadly and nods.  

“Please don’t tell anyone,” Jeongguk asks as he sips the water, trying to soothe his throat, and Mark nods solemnly.  

“I won’t. I promise.”  

A look at Jackson makes Mark realise that this is why he’s been off the last few weeks -- his eyebrows are furrowed in worry as he stares at Jeongguk, a hand resting lightly against the younger’s back. Mark locks eyes with his soulmate, and they reach a silent agreement together.  

They won’t say a word, but they’ll keep an eye on Jeongguk together.  

Mark barely knows the kid, but he knows that Jeongguk doesn’t deserve this. He’s much too innocent and kind for a fate like this one, and yet all Mark and Jackson can do is help make his pain go away temporarily while gearing up for the next attack of petals.  

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“We’ve been searching for weeks, months, even,” Lalisa groans, slamming the book before her closed. Jeongguk looks up from his spot on the couch, surrounded by papers and notebooks, pen cap
between his teeth as he underlines a section of the text. He spits out the cap, his lips lifting as Lalisa glares at him with disgust.

“We have, and your point?” Jeongguk asks, and Lalisa huffs.

“We’ve found like, nothing. A couple theories, sure, but I doubt eating the petals we’re coughing up will do anything, and all the other theories sound like some kind of satanic rituals,” Lalisa complains, flipping through the notebook placed besides her on the floor. “I don’t get it. None of it sounds right. Maybe we’re going about this all wrong.”

“Wrong how?” Jeongguk asks, getting up from the couch and wincing as his back cracks. “We’ve been looking through records of Hanahaki for a long time, we’ve searched like, everything.”

“Yeah, but, where does it come from?” Lalisa looks up at Jeongguk, whose brow furrows as he considers the question. “It seems random, but there has to be a pattern. Nothing like this is just chance. There has to be a connection of some kind -- who else do you know who had Hanahaki?”

“Uh… Joohyun from my work had a half-brother with it,” Jeongguk replies, his nose scrunching up as he tries to think. “So did my best friend when I was a kid, Sehun. That’s all the people I know, besides myself and you, of course.”

“Alright. What do we all have in common?” Lalisa asks, opening the notebook to a new page and grabbing a pen. “Well, we all had Hanahaki, obviously. Set to die by twenty-one, maybe sooner. Lived in South Korea at some point or another.”

Jeongguk frowns, thinking, before a small idea pops into his head. He waves it away at first, certain that it’s nothing, but looking back at Lalisa, her brow furrowed and a frown on her face, he figures that it’s worth a shot. Even a shot in the dark is something that they’ll go on, they need a place to start and this may be it. “Hey, didn’t you say your parents aren’t soulmates?”

“They’re not, yeah,” Lalisa replies, looking up and sending Jeongguk a curious look. “Yours aren’t either, right? Wait…”

She looks up at Jeongguk, whose face pales. They stare at each other for a few moments, silence spanning between them as puzzle pieces fall together in the air.

“Joohyun and her half-brother had different fathers but the same mother,” Jeongguk says shakily, twisting his fingers together, and Lalisa writes the information down, hands shaking. “I only ever met Sehun’s biological dad and step-mother. He never mentioned his biological mother. Oh my god.”

“None of our parents were soulmates,” Lalisa whispers, the notebook falling from her hands, and she runs a hand through her hair. “Shit. It can’t be a coincidence, not with four people, shit. Then the Hanahaki must be--”

“Some kind of genetic mutation caused by non-soulmate parents,” Jeongguk finishes, eyes wide, no longer dismissing the idea as nothing. “Oh, fuck. Oh god. A mutation of sorts, okay -- but where? The lungs?”

“Probably,” Lalisa scrambles up from her spot, grabbing her laptop from the coffee table, sitting back down next to Jeongguk. “Okay, okay. Now we have a real, solid starting point. Do you know anyone who could possibly x-ray one of us for free, and secretly? A doctor, surgeon, nurse, anything?”

“I don’t think so,” Jeongguk replies, fidgeting with his fingers. “But we really, really shouldn’t go anywhere near a hospital. We’d end up being used as lab rats.”
“Right,” Lalisa mumbles, clicking around on her computer. “And we don’t wanna do some kinda of shady business online, we’d end up with our organs stolen instead of an x-ray. Hell. We got a place to start but nowhere to go.”

“All we know now is that Hanahaki is some kind of mutation that likely takes eighteen years to develop,” Jeongguk says, gesturing to the notebook. “Can you even get rid of a mutation?”

“Usually, it’s on a genetic level, as you so kindly said earlier,” Lalisa mutters, typing something into her laptop. “Though it might have developed such a small level beyond that to create the flowers… An extra organ in the lungs, or around them, maybe? One that produces a certain kind of flowers? God, this is so fucking weird.”

“You got that right,” Jeongguk mutters, leaning over to look at the screen, frowning when he sees an array of medical x-rays in the images section, none of them from Hanahaki patients, as so few have existed in medical history. “What do we do now?”

“We adjust our target research and keep going,” Lalisa says determinedly, motivation undeterred by the new information that they’d pieced together. “We have a much better sense of what’s going on now other than we don’t have soulmates so we’re dying. We can rule out possibilities and find something that’s actually, really plausible. Medications, surgeries, something has to be out there. And we’re going to find it.”

Jeongguk purses his lips but nods. “Okay. Yeah. We can do this.”

“Hell fuckin’ yeah we can,” Lalisa says with a smile. “Now get your ass back on that couch and keep on reading. I’m not going to be the only one working here.”

“Yes, mom,” Jeongguk snarks, rolling his eyes as he gets back up to keep reading his book. Lalisa rolls her eyes and flips him off with ease.

“You can fuck right off, Jeon.”
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

it's here!!! sorry for the wait :(
also, as you can see, this story is drawing to a close! I have the next five chapters all planned out, tho updates will be iffy with exam season.

hope you like it!

twitter: xxashpuppixx

“Lisa, talk to me.”

Chaeyoung folds her arms across her chest, a scowl on her lips. Lalisa blinks up at the older girl, setting aside the notebook in her hands and taking the pen from between her lips. The room is quiet for a few moments before Chaeyoung sighs and runs a hand through her hair, the strands pushing back to show her dark roots peeking out from under the blonde dye job.

“What about?” Lalisa asks, leaning back in her chair. Chaeyoung rolls her eyes, scoffing.

“God, Lalisa. You ran away at the library, you’re closing yourself off. What’s wrong with you?”

Lalisa’s lips twist into a grimace. “Nothing. I’m fine.”

“That’s the biggest lie you’ve told since you said you were straight the first time we met,” Chaeyoung snorts, and Lalisa glares at her. Chaeyoung stares back steadily until Lalisa grumbles and looks away, twirling the pen between her fingers.

“Seriously, Lisa,” Chaeyoung says softly, leaning forwards and placing her hand gently on Lalisa’s wrist. The touch burns, burns, burns, but Lalisa can’t pull away, can’t move. She’s lost all control of her body and all she can do is stare, wide eyed, at Chaeyoung as she continues to talk.

“I love you, Jisoo loves you, Jennie loves you. Whatever’s bothering you, whatever’s wrong, we’re here for you. We’re your friends, Lisa, we want you to be happy. Please, talk to me, or to them. Lisa…”

Chaeyoung trails off, a small sigh falling from her lips. She retracts her hand, and where she was touching, Lalisa’s skin is scalded. She pulls her hand to her chest, hopes it doesn’t look weird, and tries to meet Chaeyoung’s eyes.

“I will,” Lalisa says after a few long moments. “I promise that I’ll explain myself.”

Chaeyoung nods, content. “Good. Now, I have a lecture to catch. Get some rest, okay? You’ve been working for hours.”

The concern in Chaeyoung’s eyes and tone is clear, and it makes everything burn even more.

“Okay,” Lalisa manages, and with a soft smile and a ruffle of Lalisa’s electric blue hair, Chaeyoung
The pen clatters on the desk as Lalisa’s head drops into her hands and a small sob works its way from her lips. She aches with the need to explain, to not be so distant to her friends, but she can’t. If she dies, they’ll hurt, and she can’t stand the thought of Chaeyoung or the others being hurt. Lalisa loves them all too much for that.

Loves Chaeyoung just a little bit more, but that’s a secret that Lalisa will take to the grave.

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Jeongguk slumps back against the couch, watching in amused silence as Jimin and Hoseok debate between Truth or Dare and Never Have I Ever. Both drinking games sound just as unappealing, but Jeongguk keeps his mouth shut. He’s learned to let Hoseok, Jimin, and Taehyung do their thing -- they’re stubborn as all hell.

Eventually, they come to the agreement of something they’ve called truth or worse truth, and Jeongguk already knows that this night is going to be a huge disaster and a lot of revealed secrets. But Seokjin is watching Hoseok fondly, Jeongguk’s only had one petal attack since he arrived, and everyone’s a little bit tipsy. And so, they all consent to playing the game in the end.

A couple rounds pass in minimal embarrassment, at least for Jeongguk -- he wasn’t necessarily surprised to find that Taehyung has a strange kink for chokers and collars, or that Namjoon and Yoongi have fucked in the bathrooms of almost every restaurant they’ve been to, but it’s information that he really didn’t need to know.

Other than that, it’s not terrible. Seokjin admits to having forgotten his and Hoseok’s anniversary before, Yoongi talks about his first tattoo -- a colorful butterfly on his upper thigh -- and Namjoon is persuaded into showing some horrible song composition he did when he was barely seventeen. Jeongguk will never look at his hyung the same way ever again.

“I didn’t even like girls,” Namjoon complains as the others fall into stitches of laughter over the lyrics of the song. “I just thought I had to rap like that to fit in. God, why was this brought up again?”

“Jeonggukie!” Jimin slurs slightly, and Jeongguk turns to face the shorter male. He’s obviously a little more than drunk, cheeks dusted a light pink and voice slightly higher pitched than normal. “Have you met your soulmate? If not, what gender do you want them to be?”

Jeongguk’s heart jolts in his chest, and he clears his throat as best he can with the petals beginning to creep up his throat. “I haven’t met them, no. And I’m kinda very gay, so… yeah.”

The others coo at him for some reason -- god, they’re all drunk off their fucking asses -- and then the game continues as Jeongguk quietly excuses himself to the bathroom. He notices Hoseok’s eyes following him, but does nothing. He doesn’t want to remember that someone knows his dirty secret.

In the bathroom, he coughs up petal after petal, the pain overwhelming. He just wants it to stop -- he just wants it all to stop. He’s so tired, so sick of coughing up blue and white petals until they’re splashed with red and he can’t talk for the rest of the day. He’s just so tired.

But Jeongguk takes a deep breath, hides the petals in his pockets, and squares his shoulders. He just has to act like he’s okay for a little while longer. Just until he finds the beginnings of a cure for Lalisa. Just until then.

He turns and exits the bathroom, heading back to join his six slightly drunk friends in the living room. Jeongguk needs to treasure these small moments as they last, because he never knows if he’ll
wake up in the morning.

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“Jeongguk?”

Jeongguk looks up from the books set before him, turning his gaze over to Lalisa. It’s a Sunday, a week after their discovery of the root of Hanahaki, and as per usual, Lalisa and Jeongguk are not doing their homework in favor of working on their search for a cure. Lalisa’s apartment is filled with papers and notebooks and books, on every surface in every room. They can’t keep anything in Jeongguk’s dorm -- they’re both too worried about drawing suspicion, even with Jeongguk’s roommates knowing his major.

“Do we know anyone that is a doctor by any chance? A surgeon, more specifically?” Lalisa asks, voice a little bit faint, and Jeongguk furrows his eyebrows, pushing aside the books and standing to walk over to the girl, a feat due to the stacks of books and paper packets littering the floor of Lalisa’s apartment.

“My boss, Sunye, was a surgeon for a few years before she started tattooing, why?” He inquires, leaning over the table to take a look at what’s written on the papers in Lalisa’s hands. She looks up at him, hands shaking, eyes wide, and a slow smile forms on her face.

“There’s a theoretical surgery, written by some obscure professor whose work was mostly wiped out because he dealt with a side of the system people didn’t want to see. This could save both our lives and the lives of thousands of other people if we can get it right,” Lalisa says breathlessly, holding up the papers, and Jeongguk’s eyes widen as he snatches the papers from her hands and scans over them, his mouth dropping open.

“Holy shit,” he gasps, clutching the papers tightly. “Holy shit!”

“Jeongguk, we can survive,” Lalisa whispers, eyes wide and filled with awe and hope, and Jeongguk knows that he carries the same look. “If this works, the Hanahaki isn’t going to kill us. Jeongguk, Jeongguk, we can live. We can have an actual life, finish college, get a job, have a future outside useless classes and wasted money and choking on petals, waiting to die. Oh my god, Jeongguk--”

“We might survive this,” Jeongguk says slowly, as if disbelieving of the words falling from his lips. “We might actually beat the Hanahaki. Lali, we’d be the first people to survive it in thousands and thousands of years. This - holy shit, this can save millions over time!”

“Call your boss,” Lalisa demands, standing and grabbing Jeongguk’s arm. “We have to do this. I don’t have long -- you don’t have long either -- we have to hurry, Jeongguk. Quickly, call her!”

With shaking hands, Jeongguk pulls out his cell phone and dials the number of the owner of the tattoo shop, buzzing with anxiety and nerves as the phone rings. The line clicks, and Jeongguk smiles, looking over at Lalisa with excitement brimming in his eyes.

“Noona? I need your help.”

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Sunye sits across from Jeongguk and Lalisa, papers scattered before her, an eyebrow raised as she scans the words scrawled into the notebook in her hands. Her eyes flicker up, then back down again, and finally she sets it aside with a weary sigh.
“It’s possible,” she says, but quickly holds up a hand when Jeongguk and Lalisa’s faces light up. “However! However, it’s very risky. There’s a good chance of death under the operation. This whole thing, it’s very similar to a tumor -- normally, grade ones can be removed by surgery, but later than that, it’s much more difficult, more complex. You’re going on the assumption that Hanahaki is like this, works like this. Risky, risky, risky.”

Sunye clicks her tongue, leaning back in her chair as she thinks. “We need x-rays. X-rays… my old workplace should accommodate us. I’ll make them swear to confidentiality.”

“So we won’t be used as lab rats?” Lalisa asks carefully, and Sunye’s eyes flicker to her. “God, no. Not under my watch, not ever. No, no. I’ll keep their paws off of you,” Sunye shakes her head. “Nobody will even know you’re there. Or why you’re there.”

“Good,” Jeongguk says, crossing his arms over his chest. He lifts a hand and coughs into his palm, and Sunye watches him worriedly. He grimaces as the familiar blue and white petals come into view, and Sunye’s eyes widen slightly.

“Morning glory?” She asks, her voice taking on a strange tone, and Jeongguk eyes her for a moment before nodding stiffly. Sunye looks over at Lalisa.

“What are yours?”

“Snapdragon,” Lalisa replies easily, though the corners of her eyes are pinched in a pained expression. Sunye nods slowly, looking between them, before clearing her throat and picking up her cell phone.

“Let me make a couple calls. I’ll be right back, give me a bit of time.”

Sunye stands and leaves the office, leaving Lalisa and Jeongguk behind. Lalisa exhales slowly before turning to Jeongguk with wide eyes and a bright smile.

“We have a shot,” she breathes, and Jeongguk returns her smile. It’s strangely thrilling, solving a mystery that’s been floating around for hundreds, maybe thousands of years. Even if they did have the help of a long dead man’s journal.

“We do,” he responds, and Lalisa squeals with excitement and crushes him in a hug.

“I can see my art sell! I can get into museums and exhibitions and all these things, I can do what I love for so much longer, get my degree and graduate, there’s so much we can do now!”

“Yeah,” Jeongguk grins as well. “I’m sure seeing your art sell will be amazing, and so will graduating.”

“Don’t forget yourself,” Lalisa teases, releasing Jeongguk from her tight hug. “Going around the world teaching about the downsides of soulmates, warning people and talking about your passion. We’ll be getting our diplomas together.”

Jeongguk throws his head back in a laugh. “Ah, we will, will we?”


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Two days later, they are given two hours. Two hours to take two sets of x-rays -- more than enough time. Sunye flips through the papers in her hands, glancing at the man besides her a few times. He’s wearing a long white coat, and she recognizes him easily from when she worked as a surgeon. One of the main doctors now, Shin Hyesung, the only man she trusted to know about the situation and take the x-rays.

“So, those two young college kids have the Hanahaki?” Hyesung turns to Sunye, and she rolls her eyes and snorts.

“Yeah. You’re talking like you’re fifty again, oppa. You’re only thirty-nine. Glad to see that habit hasn’t changed.”

“And you’re thirty-two,” Hyesung counters, adjusting the film that the image of the x-ray would scan onto. “Already a tattoo artist, after being a surgeon. And now you’re going back into surgery?”

“One more time, only for them,” Sunye replies, looking through the window separating them from Jeongguk and Lalisa. Lalisa is laying back on the table, preparing for the x-ray, and Jeongguk is standing besides her. They’re talking, but their words are inaudible to Sunye and Hyesung.

“You’re soft for them,” Hyesung observes. “What if this is a failure? What if you can’t save them? It would be that little girl all over again -- Lee Mina, was it?”

“Only two times worse,” Sunye murmurs, watching as Jeongguk takes a couple steps back and flashes them a thumbs up. “I’m much too attached to Jeongguk for my own good, he’s like my own kid.”

Hyesung eyes her before turning to his work, preparing the machine and taking the x-rays. A few minutes pass in silence as the x-rays are taken and developed, and when Hyesung hands Sunye the developed film, she sucks in a sharp breath.

A strange, vine-like structure is curled around Lalisa’s lungs, between her ribs, restricting her intake of air and producing the petals that she’s been coughing up. Sunye observes the strange vine from the different angles at which the x-rays were taken, mumbling under her breath, talking herself through the procedure set out in the notebook and determining if it’s doable.

Then Jeongguk switches places with Lalisa, and Hyesung takes a few more x-rays of the boy, revealing an almost identical issue in his lungs -- a strange hollow vine, producing petals, wrapped around his lungs.

“It can be removed,” Hyesung says after a few moments of observation. “It will be dangerous, difficult. But the vine is only attached to the outside of their lungs, see? Between the ribs? Easy to reach. We can theoretically cut it away and salvage their lungs, stabilizing them after that would be no issue. I’ve done lung surgery before, and grade one tumor surgery, this is no huge difference.”

“Then you’ll do it with me?” Sunye asks, turning to the older man expectantly. “We need a surgery room, equipment, anesthesia. I can pay for any bills we need to pay to use it. Do the surgery with me, oppa, I’m rusty.”

Hyesung stays quiet a few moments, looking from Sunye to the two teenagers in the x-ray room, and then he nods.

“Okay. Let’s do it.”
Yoongi worries sometimes.

He’s not one for words, not one for talking more than listening. Not one for interfering, he preferred to blend into the background peacefully and let everyone around him do their thing. He listened more than he talked, and because of that, he notices things.

He notices how Hoseok is slowly drawing into himself, how Jeongguk came out of his shell only to turn around and go right back in. He notices how Seokjin looks more stressed and worn down by the day, the glances he throws his soulmate when Hoseok isn’t paying attention.

Yoongi worries. He worries about Hoseok and Seokjin’s relationship, how it looks strained even from a distance. He worries about how Jeongguk has been looking increasingly more pale and tired, dark bags under his eyes and his phone always in his hand. He worries about how Hoseok is becoming quieter and quieter, smiling less and zoning out more.

Yoongi has always been one to worry, a fact that shocked his friends.

The most vivid thing he can remember is how Namjoon had spent almost three days in his studio without a break, and how he came home while Yoongi had the others over, looking exhausted and worn down. Yoongi had punched him square in the chest before yanking him close, refusing to let Namjoon go for the rest of the night, becoming worse than Seokjin, nagging at Namjoon to take breaks and eat more and “jesus, Joon, I know I’m bad but at least I know when to stop!”

Namjoon never spent more than a full day in the studio since then.

Jeongguk seems more fidgety this particular Saturday, Yoongi notices. He’s always messing with his rings or his hair, not paying much attention to the others and zoning out almost as bad as Hoseok has started doing. Zoning out is more of Jeongguk’s thing, but he’d been doing it less and less lately, and Yoongi is beginning to worry, worry, worry.

He curses himself sometimes, for caring so damn much. For having so many waking hours spent worrying and worrying and worrying, for always having his friends and his soulmate on his mind.

The bond between him and Namjoon buzzes with tension, and the younger of the two finally seems to take notice, making Yoongi curl into his side and rest his head against Namjoon’s chest. He can hear his soulmate’s heartbeat, and it soothes him.
But one more look at Jeongguk and the worry returns at full force. Perhaps it will never really go away.

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“Jeongguk,” Jimin drawls, his voice laced with Busan satoori. “I’m tired.”

“I can tell,” Jeongguk replies, not looking up from his laptop. “Your voice gets deeper and your accent gets thicker. Get some rest, hyung.”


“Hyung, you’re going to knock out in five minutes,” Jeongguk says with a small laugh, and Jimin squints at him, tilting his head.

“No I won’t.”

“Hyung, just go the fuck to sleep,” Jeongguk grumbles, hunching his shoulders a bit and frowning at his laptop screen. Taehyung-hyung will be home soon. He just had the late shift at the cafe today.”

“I know that,” Jimin whines, hugging a pillow to his chest. “Hey, how come you haven’t been at work for a while?”

“Haven’t been scheduled,” Jeongguk responds easily, and Jimin frowns, examining the younger for any signs of lying.

“Yeah, whatever you say.”

Silence falls and, after a few moments, Jeongguk glances over at the other bed, expecting to see Jimin glaring back at him. However, just as he’d predicted not that long ago, Jimin is knocked out, a pillow clutched between his arms, chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm. Jeongguk rolls his eyes and turns back to his screen, glancing at Jimin every few minutes to make sure that he’s still sleeping.

When Taehyung gets home, he collapses into the bed with Jimin and is asleep in moments, wrapped around his soulmate in a mess of limbs where you can’t tell where one body begins and another ends. Jeongguk’s chest aches with intense longing, a longing that he’ll never be able to compensate or make go away. His parents’ stupid decisions had doomed him to a life without love.

Sometimes, he really hates them for that. But he also knows that they didn’t know.

He’s torn. But instead of worrying over it, thinking too much and keeping himself up, Jeongguk turns back to his laptop screen. His thesis paper isn’t going to write itself, even as petals spill from between his lips into the sheets before him for him to clean up and throw away before he can fall asleep as well.

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“Jeongguk, I know that the surgery is tonight, but this paper is due at midnight, it’s currently ten thirty, and this shit is a quarter of my grade, so please stop talking.”

Jeongguk sighs, crossing his arms and leaning back, his head dangling over the edge of Jimin and Taehyung’s bed. Lalisa looks up at him from her place on his bed, quirking an eyebrow before returning her focus to her laptop.

“Honestly, Gguk. If this works, I don’t want to deal with a shot grade because the professor won’t
believe me if I tell him I had Hanahaki. So, this essay has to go in tonight before we leave.”

“Okay, okay,” Jeongguk relents, pulling his phone from his pocket and scrolling through it, opening a message from Jackson.

“Hospital room is ready, Jackson and Mark are on their way,” he reports, and Lalisa makes a sound of acknowledgement before returning her focus to the paper. Jeongguk sighs and opens his social media, scrolling through it for a few minutes before growing bored. He sets the phone aside and stares at Lalisa, the nerves starting to set in.

Everything that they’re about to do is untested and theoretical. Nothing is certain, nothing is sure. It scares the shit out of him but if it’s the only way, then he’ll let it happen. Jeongguk knows that he’s a bit shaky, but Lalisa is too absorbed in her paper to notice the way his hands shake.

Looking at her, Jeongguk purses his lips and remembers why he agreed to this entire mess in the first place. Lalisa looked so determined, so excited when she found out a way to survive. Jeongguk knows that Sunye and the others will want him to go under the surgery, but he’d rather it be done to Lalisa. He’d rather her a better shot at survival than himself; all of this was done because of her. She deserves the better chance.

Lalisa brushes a strand of blue hair behind her ear, focus never wavering from the computer. Jeongguk doesn’t know what she’s writing about, but she looks focused, passion for her major burning brightly. Jeongguk admires that about her -- she’s so passionate about everything that she does. Her major, the surgery, the hunt for the cure. Lalisa does everything at one hundred percent and Jeongguk wishes that he had the same drive that she does at times.

“And done,” Lalisa says with a sigh of relief, falling back against the pillows. “I’m grabbing food now. I’m hungry.”

“Get me chips,” Jeongguk says lazily from his spot on the bed, and Lalisa throws a pillow at him before leaving the room. A text chimes from Jeongguk’s phone -- Mark and Jackson are here. Jeongguk sends a thumbs up emoji before getting off the bed and stretching, looking around the small dorm room.

A lot has happened since he first came here. It’s weirdly sentimental, looking at the room and seeing how his small half of the room changed. Instead of blank walls he has photographs and tattoo designs taped up, along with a couple music posters. It feels more like home here than it ever did at his parents’ house. At his mother and step-father’s house.

Lalisa is taking a weirdly long amount of time, so Jeongguk gets up to check that she’s okay. Lalisa had left her laptop open when she left the bedroom, and Jeongguk glances at the opened document on his way out -- it’s the paper that’s worth a significant chunk of Lalisa’s grade for one of her main classes. She hadn’t sent it in yet -- and she’d been going on all night about how important that paper was. Did she not see the red ‘unsubmitted’ button over the assignment?

Jeongguk shrugs it off and heads to the living room to tell Lalisa that she forgot to submit the paper, but falters when he sees Jackson and Mark already standing there, waiting. He didn’t realize that Jackson’s text saying that they’re there meant that they’re in his dorm room. Lalisa is across the room pulling on her shoes with a blank expression. All thoughts of the paper leave his mind as he and Lalisa exchange a look and nod, heading out with Jackson and Mark to the hospital where the surgery will be performed.

It’s now or never.
The hospital is eerily silent as Jeongguk and Lalisa follow Jackson and Mark through the hallways to where Sunye and Hyesung are waiting for them. The hospital section that they’re using has been cleared out to make sure no prying eyes will stumble across their experiment before they’re ready to tell the world about it if it succeeds.

Jeongguk reaches over and wraps his arm around Lalisa’s, tugging her a bit closer to him. She glances at him thankfully, taking a few deep breaths. The nerves are getting to the both of them, neither sure of the outcome of what they’re about to do. This could go two ways -- the way they want it to, or completely, terribly wrong.

“You okay?” Jeongguk murmurs, and Lalisa shoots him a look.

“What even is okay right now. One of us is about to be going into a theoretical surgery,” Lalisa replies, biting her bottom lip.

“Hey, hey. We had two professionals say it’s possible, and we did a shit ton of research on it. It’s going to be okay, the surgery will get the petals out,” Jeongguk reassures her, and Lalisa takes a couple more deep breaths before nodding.

They turn another corner and see Sunye and Hyesung waiting for them, along with the workers from the tattoo shop. A couple of cameras are being held by Yifan, who hands one to Jeonghan before waving at them. Jeonghan glares at the blond before handing back the camera and shifting the binder in his hands, brushing a bit of hair away from his face.

“Hey,” Sunye greets them when Jackson, Mark, Jeongguk, and Lalisa walk up to her and Hyesung. “Are you ready?”

“Honestly? No,” Lalisa says with a small laugh, and Sunye cracks a smile before looking expectantly at Jeongguk, who just responds with a small quirk of his lips.

“Alright, we have everything ready. Which of you will be undergoing the procedure?” Hyesung asks, glancing between the two people before him and Sunye, and Lalisa and Jeongguk exchange glances.

“Lalisa is going under,” Jeongguk says after a moment, and the girl balks, glancing at Jeongguk in surprise, as if she expected him to take the chance and not offer it to her. “Her symptoms are worse. She needs this more urgently than I do.”

As if on cue, Lalisa coughs, and a few snapdragon petals fall from her lips. She wipes them away with a rueful smile before nodding at Hyesung and Sunye.

Sunye takes a breath, then turns to Lalisa and starts going through the basics of what’s going to happen when Lalisa goes with her and Hyesung. Jackson and Mark are standing off to the side, along with the other employees of the tattoo shop, who had come as soon as Jeongguk had explained the entire situation to Sunye. She’d spent several hours with Hyesung reading the papers, learning the surgery, preparing to do her best to assist Hyesung and get Lalisa through the surgery. Jeongguk looks over at the others, and all of them are staring at the group of four. After a few minutes, Lalisa turns to Jeongguk.

“Well, this is it,” she says softly, and Jeongguk nods, biting harshly on his bottom lip to prevent himself from saying something stupid or overly sentimental. “The moment of truth. Ready?”

“I should be asking you that,” Jeongguk responds with a small laugh, and Lalisa grins.
“I’m ready. See you soon, Gguk. Love you, best friend.” She flings her arms around him, holding on tight, and Jeongguk holds her close. They’ve become close friends over the last seven months, bonding over their mutual issues and the research they’d done. Jeongguk closes his eyes, burying his face into Lalisa’s shoulder. She does the same, hands clutching at his shirt, and Jeongguk exhales shakily as she slowly and reluctantly pulls away.

“Love you too, best friend,” Jeongguk says shakily, and if the others notice how his voice trembles and his eyes water, they say nothing about it.

Lalisa smiles weakly, and Jeongguk returns it. And then the girl is following Sunye and Hyesung through the doors into the prepared operating room. Yifan and Jeonghan follow, carrying a camera and several notebooks, binders, and pens, ready to take down everything that happens so that if the operation is successful, it can be used to save the lives of those without soulmates. Jackson and Mark trail in after them, but not after Jackson grabs Jeongguk in a tight hug.

As Jeongguk watches the door slam shut, a sudden jolt returns to him with the sound. Lalisa hadn’t submitted the paper she was working on for her class before they left for the hospital, and Jeongguk had forgotten to remind her – it’s after the hours when most people come, approaching midnight, and that’s when the paper is due if he remembers all of Lalisa’s ramblings correctly. If Lalisa makes it, she has to deal with a shot grade in one of her most important classes, since she won’t get home until tomorrow.

But.

But Jeongguk can make it to the dorm before midnight.

Jeongguk glances from the door to down the hallway, chewing on his lip. If he runs, and really pushes himself, he can get back to the dorm before midnight and turn in the paper for Lalisa. And that’s what he’s going to do -- he won’t let Lalisa fail just because she went into a surgery to save her life because of the Hanahaki. Honestly, no professor would accept the excuse, as none of them believe that the Hanahaki exists; this college is cruel like that.

Joohyun begins to pass by, but Jeongguk catches her arm, causing her to turn around and look at him curiously, raising an eyebrow. A moment passes, and Jeongguk opens and closes his mouth a few times before finally blurt out what he needs to say. “Tell me if she survives, please. I have something to do for her, I can’t stay here much longer. But promise me you’ll text me as soon as you know if it was a success. I’m begging you.”

“Okay. I promise,” Joohyun says slowly, eyeing him suspiciously. “But why can’t you stay? Isn’t she your closest friend?”

Jeongguk bites his lip harshly, eyes watering as the reminder of Lalisa’s possible death hangs over him again. “Yeah. Yeah, she is. She is, but…”

Joohyun raises an eyebrow, waiting for an explanation, and Jeongguk sighs.

“Lalisa has a paper due in an hour and it’s worth a quarter of her grade and she didn’t turn it in before we left,” Jeongguk explains quickly, a look of desperation and worry coming into his eyes. “I just remembered that she didn’t submit it before we came here, and it has to go in, noona, her grades are already taking blows because of the Hanahaki. Honestly, no professor would accept the excuse, as none of them believe that the Hanahaki exists; this college is cruel like that.

Joohyun’s expression morphs into one of understanding, with a bit of underlying bit of melancholy, and as she reaches a hand to ruffle Jeongguk’s hair, Jeongguk’s eyes catch on her tattoos. Blue roses,
purple roses, twined together -- *a love that lasts forever*. A tattoo done after the death of her half-brother, someone that indirectly helped Jeongguk and Lalisa crack the code as to why the Hanahaki exists.

* A love that lasts forever. *Jeongguk has so much love for the girl in the surgery room, the only person who understands what he’s going through with perfect clarity. He wants her to have the life she wants, but in order to do that, her grades have to be good. Taking a hit on the major essay would drop her grades and GPA, and Jeongguk can’t risk it, can’t let Lalisa’s future hang in the balance like that.

“Please, for the love of everything holy, *text me.*”

Joohyun nods firmly, a bit shaky as she looks at the door of the operating room, the grip on the clipboard in her hand tightening. “I will. I promise. Lalisa would really appreciate what you’re doing for her, I’m sure.”

“Thank you,” Jeongguk breathes, and watches as Joohyun enters the operating room. The door swings shut one last time, and tears prickle in Jeongguk’s eyes. He turns on his heel and heads out of the hospital, head hanging low, breaking into a run once he’s out the door.

It’s the moment of truth. In a few hours, Lalisa either walks out of the operating room without the petals in her lungs, or she leaves in a body bag. Jeongguk just hopes that a text will come through on his phone saying the former.
Chapter Notes

PLEASE READ THIS FIRST!!! MAJOR TRIGGER WARNINGS!!

I know people skip the notes a lot but this is important!! In this chapter I get a lot more in depth with the effects of Hanahaki and the outcomes and effects of the disease. That includes blood/gore, and blatant discussions about and descriptions of death. Please be aware of that!!

I also discuss hospitals and surgery. It’s not too in depth because I don’t really trust google all that much and Hanahaki isn’t really something that there’s a logical explanation for, and no real cure for (no matter how much you apply real science to it -- thank you, Courtney for helping with that!)

Please know these things going forwards; I do not want someone reading something they are not comfortable with. Thank you all for reading and supporting this story!

I love you all <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The operating room is a sterile white, cluttered with machines and trays of tools. It’s a bit intimidating, and Lalisa’s steps waver as she enters the room, with Sunye and Hyesung following along with the rest of the workers from A Touch Of Ink. Sunye touches her arm lightly, and Lalisa takes a few deep breaths before nodding firmly.

“Just change into this hospital gown,” Sunye says softly, handing over a bundle of fabric. “We set up a screen for you over there.”

Lalisa steps behind the screen, peeling off her shoes and sweatpants, pushing them to the side with her foot. After taking a few deep breaths, she sheds her hoodie and bra, tossing them aside as well and slipping the sleeves of the gown over her arms, tying the string behind her neck and around her waist. She stands there, staring blankly at her bare feet for a moment before stepping around the screen.

Most of the people in the room have chairs pulled up around the operation table, most a decent distance away with cameras besides them, the only exceptions being Hyesung and Sunye, as they were the ones who would be performing the surgery. They’ve pulled on long, light blue coats, and a box of gloves is placed on the small table besides the operating table.

Lalisa feels strangely calm as she steps over to them, bare feet against the chilled floors of the room, making her shiver a bit in the thin gown. Sunye helps her up onto the table, making sure she’s lying back comfortably before turning to Hyesung and talking quickly in medical jargon that Lalisa doesn’t have the slightest chance at understanding -- and telling from the expressions of the tattoo shop employees, they have no idea what their boss is saying either.

Much too soon, Hyesung is wheeling over a machine with a mask connected to it, and it hits Lalisa that this is really happening. After almost six or seven months of research, dozens of late nights and
all nighters, notebooks filled with ink and graphite and stress induced migraines, a cure is in their hands, and Lalisa is about to be the first Hanahaki patient in hundreds of years to attempt a treatment. This is happening -- oh god, this is happening. It’s real, they’ve really come this far, only a few more hours and Lalisa will know if they succeeded or well… if they failed, she won’t really be around to know, will she?

Lalisa exhales slowly as the mask is lowered over her face. Anesthesia, she was told when Sunye briefed her on the proceedings earlier, to keep her asleep and out of pain during the entirety of the operation. She’s nervous as all hell, dressed only in a hospital gown, laid back on the operating table with an IV drip being inserted into her arm by Sunye, who materialized at her other side at some point. Lalisa isn’t quite sure anymore -- has the anesthesia already begun kicking in?

“Just breathe deeply, and you’ll wake up before you know it.” Hyesung says softly in reassurance, and Lalisa nods, her eyes fluttering shut as anesthesia is pumped through the mask. The lights blur above her, and voices fade into a dull murmur. Drowsiness overtakes her quickly, and the world fades to black around her, leaving her vulnerable and ready for the surgery; ready to find out if all of their hard work paid off.

Sunye watches Lalisa’s eyes flutter closed. Once her breathing is even and deep, and the heart rate monitor settles into a steady pace, she nods, and Hyesung removes the mask, looking a little too calm for the situation at hand. In one corner of the room, Mark and Jackson have set up a camera, and there’s several more, positioned to catch every angle of the surgery by Yifan for future reference if performed correctly; if failed, then it would serve as a learning video, to adjust what was done and try again on Jeongguk, if he was still willing. But Sunye doesn’t think of that option -- it would mean losing Lalisa, who’s asleep on the operating table, the girl who placed her life and her trust in the hands of Sunye and Hyesung.

Sunye won’t let her down. She will not fail again.

“Cameras rolling,” Joohyun calls out after a few tense moments, a surgical mask secured over the lower half of her face. Yifan, Mark, and Jackson follow her example, tugging on the thin, white masks, Jeonghan handing Sunye and Hyesung masks before pulling on one of his own. As Hyesung adjusts his mask, he looks over at Sunye, who meets his gaze steadily as she hooks the loops over her ears and rests the edge of the mask against her nose.

“Alright,” Sunye says, her voice wavering only slightly as she steps up to the table to prepare herself to begin the surgery with Hyesung, eyes scanning over the familiar tools and equipment that she hasn’t touched since a little girl died on her care, several years ago. Hyesung follows her, and for a moment, they stand still, side by side, observing the blue haired girl whose life now rests in their hands.

“Shall we begin?” Hyesung asks, and Sunye lifts her gaze and nods determinedly, pulling on her gloves and snapping the material against her wrist as Hyesung rolls his eyes, unamused by her actions but an appreciation for her attempt to lighten the mood shining in his eyes.

“Yes. Let’s begin.”

Time passes slowly.

Joohyun bounces on the heels of her feet, biting her lower lip behind her mask in an attempt to stay silent and keep herself sane, watching Hyesung and Sunye nervously, fingers twitching, the pen in her hand threatening to fall. Her phone is in her other hand, her messages with Jeongguk opened. He
hasn’t said a word since he left the hospital to turn in Lalisa’s essay for her and salvage her grade, and Joohyun is getting steadily more worried even though she knows that she shouldn’t be.

Mark has long since closed his eyes, unable to watch as the surgery takes place, and Joohyun relates with him strongly. There’s so much… blood and other things involved in the operation, and though she works in a tattoo shop where a little bit of blood is common, and so are holes in the skin, this is extremely far out of her comfort zone. A different level that she is definitely not trained for.

It’s barely been twenty minutes according to the clock on Joohyun’s phone, but it feels more like twenty years. Yifan is standing besides Joohyun, one hand lightly resting on her lower back as a source of comfort, a steady, friendly presence. His eyebrows are furrowed as he watches the surgery move forth, and Joohyun exhales slowly, trying to count in her head, to daydream, trying anything to take her mind from what’s happening right before them.

She takes down notations when Hyesung or Sunye call them out to her, unsure of what a lot of it means but writing down everything that she can, even the words she doesn’t understand that she guesses at the spellings for. This is important, this could change the lives of many in the future, save people suffering from the Hanahaki from certain death. Joohyun cannot afford to miss a single thing that’s thrown at her.

Jackson has taken Mark’s hand long ago, rubbing circles on the back of his soulmate’s hand in a calming gesture, their intertwined hands pulled up to his lips, which graze the back of Mark’s hand every so often. He stares resolutely at the camera screens, unblinking, adjusting the angle and focus every so often, biting his lip harshly beneath his mask; possibly hard enough to draw blood, knowing the blond. Joohyun can sense his discomfort and fear from a mile away, but she knows that he’s powering through for Mark, for his soulmate, for the sake of the many suffering from Hanahaki -- and for Jeongguk.

Everything they’re doing is for Jeongguk, even if it’s Lalisa on the operating table instead of him. If it’s a success, then they can use it on Jeongguk, save his life and advance to saving the lives of others all around the world, break down the idea that the soulmate system is perfect and make the stigma around different bonds start to go away while offering a cure for them.

All of it started with Jeongguk. Joohyun will be damned if it doesn’t end with him.

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“Jeongguk isn’t here today?” Hoseok asks, walking back into the living room from the kitchen, holding a bottle of wine in his hands. Seokjin shrugs, looking over to where Jimin and Taehyung are collapsed on the couch, already a bit tipsy and stuffed with homemade food, courtesy of Seokjin.

“He wasn’t home when we left the dorm around three,” Jimin explains, looking over at Hoseok. “He said that he had a shift over text. Thought he’d be over afterwards, but I guess not.”

A flicker of worry sparks in Hoseok’s eyes, drawing a couple funny looks from Seokjin and Yoongi, but otherwise goes unnoticed. He sets the wine down on the coffee table, and everyone refills their glasses as needed, a low murmur of small talk falling over the room, a comfortable and peaceful atmosphere.

Yoongi is curled tightly into Namjoon’s side, fiddling with his phone in one hand and holding one of Namjoon’s hands in the other, his glass long abandoned on the table. Namjoon absentely threads his fingers through his soulmate’s recently dyed hair, talking quietly with Taehyung, who’s sprawled across Jimin’s body without a care in the world. The position has to be uncomfortable for Jimin and Taehyung alike, but neither seem to care or notice.
Hoseok’s eyes drift to Seokjin, who has an arm thrown around him on the couch. He feels strangely distant from his soulmate lately, despite the fact that they live together. He’s been forcing himself to keep his emotions suppressed as much as possible, not wanting his strong undercurrent of fear and worry to be picked up on, because it would certainly lead to a lot of questioning that Hoseok really, really doesn’t want to go through. Not when he swore to Jeongguk that he’d keep quiet until the cure was completed and the petals are gone.

As much as it pains him, Hoseok won’t break a close friend’s trust like that. He and Seokjin have been through hell and back together; nothing could break them apart. Nothing could ever force them to fight and break away from each other; they’d rather the pain of death than separation.

He curls closer to his soulmate at the thought, humming contently when Seokjin takes the hint and tugs Hoseok closer to his chest, heartbeat steady against Hoseok’s ear. A small smile spans over Hoseok’s lips as he fades into the conversation with ease, a pleasant buzz overriding the worry and fear as alcohol swirls in his veins and Seokjin’s happiness sings through their bond. Tonight is a good night, even if Jeongguk is absent, working a shift.

Hoseok is sure that the youngest is working on a cure, has been for a long time. There’s no need for any worry; one night of happiness and being carefree wouldn’t change anything.

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It’s the middle of summer.

It hasn’t really hit Jeongguk until now, as he rushes through the streets of Seoul, heading for the dorms. But the heat is close to unbearable as he runs, even at near midnight, especially in his usual outfit of all black clothes. He dodges around people, who more often than not give him funny looks, and street lamps, his feet pounding against the cement, ignoring the pain building in his chest with each step he takes as best as he can. The only thing on his mind is Lalisa.

Sunye told him that the chances of Lalisa surviving are more or less an even fifty-fifty. The surgery seems to have good results from the papers they recovered and deciphered, but it hasn’t been performed in decades, with outdated equipment being described and perhaps a different strain of Hanahaki being performed on. But they’re going to try. Sunye swore to do everything in her power to save Lalisa. And Jeongguk -- he’s holding her to it.

The dorm building comes into sight and Jeongguk speeds through the front door, swiping his key card at a record speed and ignoring the heavy glare from the front desk lady as he rushed past her. Is she ever not here? he wonders as he notices her nose wrinkle at the scent of smoke and antiseptic wafting from him. He takes the stairs to the fourth floor, not daring to wait for the elevator. It’s almost midnight, almost midnight. Time is running out, running out quickly. Lalisa’s grade will fall if this essay doesn’t go in. Jeongguk won’t let her deal with a bad grade after a life saving surgery that none of the professors are aware of.

He struggles with the key to the dorm room, opening the door with a heavy click. He tosses his keys onto the counter, where they usually keep their key rings, and heads for the bedroom. Taehyung and Jimin aren’t there -- still at Hoseok and Seokjin’s, presumably. Jeongguk had skipped the get together in favor of the surgery, and now, the essay on Lalisa’s laptop.

The laptop is still open, and doesn't have a password, thank god, and Jeongguk navigates through it to find the essay, ignoring the intense pain in his chest even as it worsens with every passing second and flower petals creep up his throat. Time is ticking and he knows it, but he checks over the essay quickly before clicking the button that would send the essay off to Lalisa’s professor.
His chest screams with pain, and Jeongguk crumples over, clutching the side of the bed with one hand and his chest with the other. He shouldn’t have run on broken lungs and he knows it, but the essay, the essay. He couldn’t allow Lalisa to fail her class because she forgot to turn in an essay because she was in a surgery that the professors were not aware of.

Jeongguk smiles despite the pain as he observes the green ‘submitted’ button at the top of the assignment, and then he glances at the time -- five minutes to midnight. He’d made it, just barely, he’d managed to get home and turn in the essay so that Lalisa’s grade won’t be shot when -- if, a small voice whispers in the back of his mind, but he ignores it -- she awakes from the surgery.

As he sits there, feeling a bit proud of himself, his chest clenches up with a sharp, more intense pain than ever before, and he’s launched into a harsh coughing fit. His throat is being torn apart as petal after petal leaves his lips, speckled with blood, a mess of blue and white and red littering the floor around Jeongguk. He blinks harshly as he tries to stop the coughing, trying to scoop up the petals to hide them, but there’s just so many. There’s so many of them and he can’t stop the coughing, can’t stop the steady flow of petals.

Soon, red comes more often than blue, and Jeongguk falls back against the edge of the bed, curling in on himself and clapping his free hand over his mouth, only to remove it when petals fill his mouth and he can’t breathe anymore. He spits them out, coughing weakly, glaring at the innocent, blood coated petals before another wave of petals hits him with a greater strength and he’s doubled over again.

Vaguely, he registers that this is the longest and worst attack he’s had as the clock on the laptop clicks past midnight and closer and closer to twelve fifteen. A piece of him knows it’s because he exerted his already spent, broken, petal filled lungs running from the hospital to the dorm, but it was the only way to arrive and turn in the essay on time for Lalisa; a cab or an Uber wouldn’t have arrived on time. But another, much smaller part of him wonders if maybe the Hanahaki has just caught up to him at last, if what he’s known has been coming has arrived at last.

The latter feels more likely when his chest tightens and he can barely breathe, gasping for air like a fish out of water, hands scrambling for purchase on the dorm carpet. His fingers only close around more bloodstained, wrinkled petals and the panic mounts further, until he finally feels his body settle down and he slumps against the edge of the bed in exhaustion.

Jeongguk coughs weakly, lips cracked and red, and he wipes away a few curled up, damaged petals, a bitter smile on his face. If he’s completely honest with himself, he’d seen this type of end coming a long time ago, when the first speck of color filled his vision and knocked the breath from his lungs in both fear and wonder, and again, more certainly, when his breath was stolen away when the first morning glory petal fell into his palm.

He glances at the photos decorating the wall next to his bed, photos he’d taken and developed for himself to hang up in the dead of night, using tape he stole from the teacher supply room in the art building. Photos of Sehun and him, photos of the tattoo parlor, of his roommates, of his friends and of Lalisa. Photographs of everything he had to fight for, everything that he held on for. His phone beeps, and with shaking hands, he picks it up, eyes flicking over the words on the screen, part of him expecting the worst but all of him hoping for the best, barely noticing how the clock has moved closer to one than twelve -- the longest attack he’s ever had.

Joohyun: She’s stable, strong heartbeat. No petals, the tumor is removed and they’re patching her up, air’s getting through her body. Throat’s all torn up and so’s her lungs, but they’ll heal in a few weeks. She’s going to live; good job, kid. Your miracle surgery actually worked. You and Lalisa will be heroes.
Jeongguk feels his lips quirk into a small smile, a breath of relief falling from his lungs, followed by another wave of petals. He looks back at the photos, just for a moment, his body feeling heavy. Darkness is slowly creeping up on him, bit by bit, the pain in his throat and lungs close to unbearable.

His eyelids feel heavy, but no matter how much he blinks, he can’t make himself stay completely conscious. Blackness rims his vision, drawing closer, making his line of sight smaller and smaller. Each breath is a battle, every small movement sends waves of pain crashing through him. So Jeongguk opts to not move at all, even the flutter of his eyelashes coming to a stop.

Slowly, the dark tide rises above his head, primed to crash down around him. Jeongguk stares resolutely at the photograph in the middle of the wall, one that he’d taken without anyone knowing. It was a photo of his six friends, the people that pulled him from his broken mindset into a better place, sitting together at a booth at their favorite restaurant, smiles on all their faces, unaware of the camera directed at them.

Jeongguk hopes that their smiles will remain for a long time, even as his fades away.

His lips part once more, and through the petals cascading from his lips, he chokes out two final words, nobody to hear him but himself and the cold, unlistening ears of the photographs.

“I’m sorry.”

Something feels off the moment that Jimin enters their dorm room the next morning, after having crashed at Seokjin and Hoseok’s apartment with Taehyung the night before. The air is heavy, a tang of metal hanging in the air, laced with the sweetness of flowers. A new air freshener, perhaps? Jeongguk has always been particular about scents, though this is a strange one, not one he expected the younger to like.

The strange scent of metal is much too heavy, overpowering the floral undertones. Setting down the plastic bags in his hands, Jimin glances towards where they keep their keys -- his are there, as he’d just set them down, along with Jeongguk’s; though the younger’s keys look like they’ve been thrown onto the counter rather than placed.

“Gguk?” He calls out to the silent apartment, rifling through the bags and starting to put their groceries away, as he’d stopped at the store on the way home, initially intending to only get Advil but ending up buying their weekly groceries. “I’m home! Tae went to some Sunday art class, but he’ll be home soon. I got the spicy ramen that you like, are you hungry?”

There’s no response, and Jimin turns towards where the bedroom is, a sense of unease creeping over him. Jeongguk always responded, especially to food, even back when he obviously hated interacting with them and was drawn deep into his shell. He sets down the package of ramen in his hands, toeing off his shoes and heading for the bedroom.

He knocks lightly on the door, frowning at the lack of response to the knock. “Jeongguk? Are you changing or something? I’m coming in.”

Once again, there’s no form response to his words, and Jimin pulls out his cell phone before pushing open the door, wondering if the younger is asleep, even though it’s past twelve in the afternoon. He sleeps like a rock; and honestly, Jimin’s noticed how he seems more tired, sicker. He hopes that Jeongguk is just asleep.
The scent of flowers and metal is heavier in the bedroom, and Jimin gasps. Blue and white and yellow petals litter the carpeted floor, some of them speckled with red -- scratch that, most of them coated in red. The deep blue of the dorm carpeting is almost completely covered, hidden by the petals.

“What the hell…” Jimin mutters, nudging the petals with his foot, and then his eyes trail further into the room, and his body seizes up.

In the middle of the flowers, mouth stained a scarlet red and shirt covered with bloody, crushed flowers, is Jeongguk. His chest is still, head tipped back against his bed, and with shaking hands, Jimin dials the emergency services and holds the phone to his ear, his legs feeling weaker and weaker by the second as he slowly processes the sight before him.

“Hello, this is 911, what is your emergency?” A calm voice interrupts Jimin’s slow descent into panic, and he attempts to pull himself together to respond to the woman on the other end of the line.

“My friend--” Jimin chokes out, his throat closing off as the sight before him burns painfully into his mind. ‘I just got to our dorm room, my roommate -- I don’t think, I-I don’t think that he’s breathing. He -- he’s c-covered in what looks like blood, blood and flower petals, oh god, oh god, oh my fucking god--’

“Sir, breathe, please. Can you tell me the address?”

“Blood, he-- and petals, shit, oh my god-- address, shit. Address. Um. Fuck, um. Dream Residence Hall, it’s uh, god, fourth floor, room 4112. At, um. Um. 5643 Spring Street, Dream Residence Hall. Fuck. Seoul University of the Arts, shit, fuck, I’m sorry, I’m panicking -- there’s so much blood, and flowers, oh my god. Oh god.”

“Sir, please try to stay calm. We have an ambulance on the way to where you are. You -- you said blood and petals? Flower petals? Can you elaborate on that? Is your friend allergic?”

Jimin stills at the question, a sudden sense of ice cold dread falling over him as everything falls into place like puzzle pieces, assembling into a picture that was so obvious, but as they say, hindsight is 20/20. It was something they all overlooked, something they all didn’t see no matter how much it stared them in the face, how Jeongguk seized up whenever Hanahaki was mentioned, drew into himself a bit when asked about his work on major, how he calmed a panicking Lalisa over the phone that one time, everything, everything -- they were so blind.

“Hello? Sir? Are-- are you still there? What’s happened? Sir, please stay on the line with me.”

The phone slips from Jimin’s hand and falls into the bed of flower petals on the floor as he crumbles to his knees and screams, voice ripping from his throat and into the air, the air that smells so strongly of petals and metal and death.

Chapter End Notes

.........I'm sorry I love you don't hate mE

twitter: xxashpuppixx
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

MAJOR TRIGGER WARNING AHEAD!! PLEASE BE CAUTIOUS ABOUT THAT!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Everything feels hazy.

Jimin hasn’t moved from where he’d collapsed to the floor, not even flinching as a medical team bursts through the door of the dorm and loads Jeongguk onto a stretcher, a low hum of voices hovering over the dorm room. Someone’s speaking to him, but he can’t lift his head, can’t even wipe the tears away from his eyes, the sight of Jeongguk surrounded by bloody petals burned into his eyelids every time that he blinks.

A surge of worry and confusion rips through him, and Jimin knows that Taehyung is on his way, close to the dorm building. His grief and panic must have been so strong, so sudden, that his soulmate up and left his class to come find him. The man is still speaking -- a police officer, Jimin registers on some level in his brain, but he can’t make himself speak. Can’t move his lips, can’t move at all.

Then he recognizes Taehyung’s presence in the dorm, and blindly reaches for his soulmate, collapsing into Taehyung’s chest when he falls to his knees besides Jimin. The voices around him are still indistinguishable, so Jimin blocks them all out.

Taehyung speaks instead, voice rumbling in his chest by Jimin’s ear, a reassuring sound that Jimin slowly sinks into, trying to soothe his trembling by latching onto the calmness and reassurance flowing through his soulmate bond with Taehyung.

The paramedics load Jeongguk onto a stretcher and carry him out the door, the rush of chatter and noise following after them. A long few moments pass before Taehyung loops an arm around Jimin’s waist and hauls him to his feet.

Jimin leans heavily into Taehyung’s side, still shaking, but manages to walk with his soulmate’s assistance.

“C’mon, we’re going with Jeongguk to the hospital,” Taehyung whispers into Jimin’s ear, and Jimin nods shakily, leaning even more into Taehyung’s side, trying to block out the image of the bedroom and Jeongguk to no avail.

Taehyung frowns, worried, but says not a word as he and Jimin leave the dormitory through the chaos of other students waking and seeing the commotion. As they climb into the ambulance, Taehyung pulls out his phone.

“I’m calling hyungs,” he explains softly, and Jimin nods, leaning his head against Taehyung’s shoulders, refusing to look at Jeongguk’s body before them and the flashing lights around them.

Taehyung can do nothing but hold him as they speed through the streets of Seoul, one hand holding
his phone and the other, his soulmate.

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“What do you mean, Jeongguk’s in the hospital?”

Hoseok’s head snaps up when those words leave his soulmate’s mouth, ringing through the air of the apartment, heavy and loaded with implications.

“Petals? Taehyung, are you sure Jimin was -- the carpet was covered in petals? The fuck?”

Every word is another blow, another shock, another jolt of realization. The pen slips from Hoseok’s fingers and clatters on the table besides the notebook spread before him, the words and numbers scribbled in neat lines forgotten.

No, no. Jeongguk said that he was working on a cure -- he promised that he would be okay, that he’d pull through. And now he’s in the hospital? There has to be some mistake, maybe it’s a different Jeongguk. It’s not that uncommon of a name. Yeah. It’s not their Jeongguk -- it’s someone else. Named Jeongguk. Who knows Jimin and Taehyung.

And is coughing up petals.

“Yeah. Okay. Hoseok and I are on our way. We’ll be there soon.”

A click is heard, and Hoseok stares lifelessly at the paper before him, every stroke seeming more and more useless and futile. Then Seokjin appears in the doorway, a worried look pinned on his face and shoes already on.

“Come on, Seokie. Jeongguk’s in the hospital, it sounds bad. We have to go.”

Hoseok nods jerkily, pushing himself up with unsteady hands, wobbling a bit on his feet. Seokjin shoots him a worried look, and this time, Hoseok’s smile doesn’t seem to convince him that his soulmate is okay.

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It’s a voicemail.

Namjoon blinks in utter confusion at the notification, wondering why in hell Taehyung of all people would leave him a voice message. Usually, the kid would call and call and call until you picked up; no matter the time of day or what you were doing. It could be three in the morning or the middle of class; it didn’t matter to the eccentric junior. You don’t get voicemail from Taehyung -- you get a slew of ever ending notifications and ringtones.

Unsure, a bit shaky, Namjoon presses the voicemail and holds the phone to his ear, worrying his bottom lip between his teeth.

“Namjoon-hyung--”

There’s a sudden rush of noise, shouting, car wheels and brakes. Are those sirens? It sounds chaotic on Taehyung’s end of the line, and worry works its way into Namjoon’s head, more so than when he saw the voicemail waiting for him.

“It’s Jeongguk -- shh, Jiminnie, it’s okay. It’s okay, I’m here, hold my hand, yeah? -- Um, um… Jeongguk’s in the hospital.”
Namjoon freezes, eyes wide, staring ahead, uncomprehending. Jeongguk? In the hospital? Had all his smoking and drinking caught up to him? A small, evil part of him thinks Jeongguk deserves a lesson for all his bad habits, but his worry and care for his friend stomps it out as quickly as it came. Someone being in the hospital is not a time to laugh about karma.

“Listen, I can’t -- hey! I'm his brother and this is my soulmate, let us through -- I can’t explain much right now, I’m kind of -- the fuck you mean I’m lying? My name’s Jeon Taehyung! I have ID! This is my soulmate! Let us through, we need to be with him -- kind of busy. Just come, hurry -- hey! You! Hands off my soulmate, you fucker--”

The call cuts abruptly, leaving behind a strange, unsettling silence, and Namjoon is left staring at the sidewalk before him, wondering what the fuck he just listened to. But one thing he knows -- Jeongguk is in the hospital.

Well, two things he knows.

Namjoon dials Yoongi’s number with shaky hands as he hails a cab, praying that his soulmate would pick up -- and if not, sense Namjoon’s intense distress and worry, and call back anyways.

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Yoongi’s reworking a song when a file beeps through on his email.

The professors know him as a bit of a genius, someone who can sell his works to major companies and artists, and when they find a particularly good gem among their students, they send it his way for his opinion and critique, as someone who produces professionally and knows what sells better than they do.

He swears he’s not bragging, that he’s not conceited or arrogant, but every new song that comes through gives him the rush of pride, of knowing that he hasn’t even graduated and yet he’s made it, in a sense.

This professor teaches a lot of kids in particular, and she rarely, if ever, sends Yoongi tracks. Nothing seems up to her standards of worthy of sending it along -- so getting a message from her, well. This song must really be something.

Yoongi saves his progress on the song he’s been working on -- he’s stuck, there’s a hole, he’ll get review from Namjoon later on -- and clicks on the file after reading through the message attached to the email.

Yoongi raises an eyebrow at the message the professor sent, lips moving of their own accord as he reads through it.

“Dear Yoongi, I know I rarely send you tracks, blah blah, this student is only in a music minor, which is impressive considering this that and the other, don’t care… the track is emotional and well rounded, different from the student’s usual style. His singing is usually more breathy and flowing, yet this seems more raw and heartfelt. I enjoyed it very much, and I hope that you do as well. Best regards, Professor Song.”

The attached mp3 file is titled ‘tell me about forever -- jjk,’ and without much of a second thought, Yoongi opens it and presses play.

And shit, shit -- he knows this voice, heard it rarely but enough to tell who’s behind the rasp of the vocals, the care placed into the notes and the words. Yoongi sits in shock through the song the first time through, then clears his throat and focuses on making actual feedback, pressing play again.
Technically, the song is stunning. Maybe slowed down a bit in one part, a half beat more of a linger in another, but other than that, well. Yoongi’s impressed; he didn’t know that Jeongguk possessed this level of skill with producing and singing.

Then he listens for lyrics, and his brow furrows.

The song is emotional. It feels, weirdly, like some kind of farwell -- it gives Yoongi 2NE1 ‘Goodbye’ or Wiz Khalifa ‘See You Again’ vibes. Slow, a bit soft, sorrowful and regretful. Haunting in a strange sense.

But why would Jeongguk write a song like this? What goodbye would he have to make? His past is a mystery to Yoongi -- hell, to everyone -- so perhaps it isn’t otherworldly to assume that he’s singing about someone he knew before college, but. The emotion seems too… raw, too current for that. Like a song written in the midst of a depressive spell or an intense moment of grief.

Yoongi isn’t sure what to do with himself, and then his phone rings. He reaches for it idly, slipping the headphones from his ears, pressing accept without much of a second thought. It’s Namjoon, most likely -- asking where he is. It’s lunchtime, just about.

“Yoongi?”

No, the call is not about lunch. Yoongi can tell in an instant, and his spine goes rigid with sudden fear.

“...Joon?”

“Jeongguk’s in the hospital.”

Yoongi glares at his computer screen as he gets up.

You little piece of shit. This better not be goodbye, you dick.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

The moment Jackson wakes up to a call from Joohyun, he knows that something has gone wrong.

He slips out of bed, careful not to wake Mark, accepting the call and stepping onto the small balcony of the apartment, shutting the sliding door behind him.

“Joohyun, what’s wrong?”

Joohyun laughs, shaky and high pitched, and Jackson’s heart hits the ground at the sound.

“Jeongguk hasn’t come back yet. Remember how I told you he left to turn in Lalisa’s essay? Yeah, that was almost -- what time is it -- eight hours ago now. Do you… know where his dorm is?”

Jackson frowns, pursing his lips, trying to think. Jeongguk’s address, his dorm building -- nothing. He draws a blank.

“No, I’m sorry, I don’t know where it is. Eight hours, you said?”

Joohyun mumbles a soft curse. “Yeah. Yeah. Lalisa’s still out -- should be for another two or three hours. But Jeongguk isn’t here. And he should be. He said he’d come back.”

“Jeongguk doesn’t break promises.”
The words sound dry, forced, fake. Jackson knows that Jeongguk never makes promises, never says things that he can’t go through with. And yet, he said he’d be back and he isn’t. Jackson can only hope that Jeongguk is safe and asleep in his dorm room, planning to go see Lalisa when she wakes.

“Anyways, yeah. Let me know when Lalisa’s awake, okay? I’ve got a soulmate to cuddle.”

Joohyun is silent for a long moment.

“Something isn’t right.”

Jackson exhales. He needs a smoke; badly. Yet he can’t fathom the idea of smoking without Jeongguk anymore. Dammit. That kid has him wrapped around his pinky finger and they aren’t even soulmates.

“I know.”

“Something probably went wrong with jeongguk.”

Jackson’s heart twists.

“I know.”

“He might be—”

“No.”

Joohyun falls silent. Then after a long moment, she speaks again.

“I’ll text when Lalisa’s awake. Let me know if you hear from Jeongguk.”

“Ohkay. Bye.”

“Bye.”

The call drops, and Jackson’s head falls into his hands, his cell held loosely between his fingers, threatening to fall.

If something happened to Jeongguk -- he honest to fuck doesn’t know what the hell he would do.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

White. White walls, white ceilings, white bed sheets. White hospital gown; white coats on the shoulders of the figures in the room.

Pain bursts to life in Lalisa’s chest, and she gasps, yanked out of her hazy reverie and thrown into something all too familiar, and for a fleeting moment, she wonders if she’s about to die. Immediately, someone is above her, reassuring her in soft words.

“Hey, hey. Lalisa, it’s Sunye. You’re okay, you’re okay, it was a success. You’re okay.”

Lalisa peels her eyes open, taking slow, measured breaths, meeting Sunye’s eyes. A few moments pass, and with it the pain, and suddenly, Lalisa’s chest is the lightest it’s been in months. Uncomprehending, she looks from Sunye to the man across the room -- Hyesung -- and sensing her confusion, Hyesung smiles.

“We did it, Lalisa. You’re Hanahaki free. First human in decades, maybe centuries, to survive.”
“Oh my god, oh my god,” Lalisa breathes, sinking into the uncomfortable hospital bed before jolting up again. “Where’s Jeongguk? When’s his surgery?”

Sunye and Hyesung exchange uncomfortable looks, and Lalisa’s heart plummets.

“He went back to the dorms to turn in an essay for you,” a new voice says, and Lalisa looks over to see one of the tattoo shop employees -- Joohyun. She’s fiddling with her phone, a worried look etched onto her face. “But that was just after you went into surgery. It’s almost noon now, and he hasn’t said a word or returned here. And, well, nobody here knows where his dorm is. Except you.”

“What? Not one of you knows where Jeongguk’s dorm is?” Lalisa asks in shock, looking from Joohyun to Sunye. “Not a single person?”

“Nobody in the hospital when you went under surgery knew where Jeongguk lives,” Sunye confirms. “He could’ve given an address, but we wouldn’t have been able to figure out which building, which floor, which room before midnight. And he was very determined to get your essay turned in.”

“What essay -- wait,” Lalisa pauses, her eyes widening. “Shit! My end of year essay? Oh god, that’s a quarter of my grade! I forgot to turn that in?”

“We know how much it’s weighted, Jeongguk told us that before he bolted the fuck out of here to get it turned in for you,” Joohyun says with a small laugh. “Stubborn, stupid boy. You’ve got a good friend in him, Lalisa.”

“Yeah, I do. But… he hasn’t responded to anything?” Lalisa asks, and Joohyun shakes her head.

“He read my message telling him that you were stable and going to survive,” she says, thumbing through her phone, presumably looking through her messages with Jeongguk. “But he read nothing after that. He dropped off not long after that message went through; we’re hoping he just crashed for a few hours from exerting himself by running.”

“Hoping?” Lalisa echoes, looking to Hyesung and Sunye. “Hoping? What else could it be?”

Hyesung coughs uncomfortably. “Well, going off the x-rays we took last week and reviewed while you were unconscious, his Hanahaki was seemingly a lot worse than yours, even though he told us the opposite. If he exerted himself too much, ran too far and pushed his lungs, well… It’s possible that the Hanahaki may have hit him hard and resulted in…”

“Don’t you fucking dare to finish that sentence,” Lalisa interrupts, her voice like ice, despite the waver in her words. “No. No, Jeongguk will not die because of an essay. It’s not fucking worth that. Nothing is.”

Hyesung winces. “We really can’t say anything or do anything now -- it’s been hours with no reply.”

“No,” Lalisa repeats, shaking her head furiously. “No, fuck you. Thanks for saving my life, but Jeongguk’s better not have ended. Where is he?”

“Probably his dorm room,” Joohyun replies, her voice quiet and unsure. “It’s the only place--”

She’s cut off by a sudden commotion of noise outside the hospital room, shouting and the clatter of wheels, and Hyesung looks at Sunye, then Lalisa, and then rushes out the door, tugging on his white jacket that was laying on the back of the chair he was seated in moments before. A long silence follows, accompanied only by rushed words and panicked yelling -- in voices all too familiar, because Lalisa has heard them with Jeongguk before.
Lalisa pushes herself up shakily, ignoring Sunye and Joohyun’s attempts to make her remain lying down. She walks over to the door, pushing through, eyes widening when she recognizes the two men arguing with Hyesung before a closed door -- Jimin and Taehyung, Jeongguk’s roommates. Lalisa stays still in shock for a moment before leaving the room and walking over to them, grabbing Taehyung’s shoulder roughly, causing him to break off and look at her.

“Where is he?” She demands heatedly, and Taehyung’s brow furrows.

“I’m sorry--?”

“Where is Jeongguk?” She repeats, her tone as if she’s talking to a five year old, and Taehyung winces heavily before his gaze goes to the door of the hospital room across from Lalisa’s. Lalisa takes a step towards it, but a voice makes her stop.

“Don’t.”

She turns, an eyebrow raised, and looks at Jimin, who’s trembling, holding onto Taehyung’s arm for support, his eyes downcast. He looks incredibly small and weak, engulfed in a much too big for him hoodie, hands quaking and his grip tight on his soulmate’s arm, his knuckles white.

“Excuse me--”

“I don’t want you to see him,” Jimin whispers, and a flare of anger sparks in Lalisa’s chest.

“Fuck you,” she spits out, not caring when Taehyung’s expression turns murderous. “I spent six months doing research with Jeongguk to find a surgery which just saved my life and can save his too. If I want to see him, I damn well can and will. Why do you think you have the right to stop me?”

“Because Jeongguk just died, and seeing it wouldn’t be good for you” Taehyung hisses through gritted teeth, and Lalisa’s world stutters to a stop. “He just died and we don’t fucking know why but we do know that you can’t see him like that!”

“No,” Lalisa shakes her head aggressively. “No, no. No. He went to turn in an essay for me, he’s getting the Hanahaki surgery tonight, it worked on me and removed the petals, it’ll work on him too. He’s not dead. He can’t be. You’re lying.”

“Jeongguk had the Hanahaki?” Jimin asks weakly, and Lalisa’s eye twitches.

“No fucking shit,” she growls, patience worn thin. “Now, where is he? Hyesung and Sunye can do the surgery now if they need to, where is he?”

The door opens, and a doctor emerges, holding a clipboard with a grim look on his face. Lalisa bites her bottom lip as the doctor begins speaking.

“Park-sshi and Kim-sshi, I’m sorry,” the doctor says, his face and voice radiating a professional, detached sort of pity. “Jeon-sshi died at around one in the morning based on our calculations. I apologize. There is nothing we can do at this point.”

“No,” Lalisa barges into the conversation, her eyebrows knitted. “No, not possible. No.”

“Who--”
“No, no. He was going to get the surgery. He’s not dead. He can’t be,” Lalisa babbles, pushing past Jimin and Taehyung. The doctor tries to stop her, but she pins him with a deadly glare and he backs off. Lalisa jerks open the door of the room, allowing it to slam harshly behind her as she steps inside.

Jeongguk is lying on the bed -- but there are no wires connected to him like there were to Lalisa. No tubes. Nothing. Not even a heart rate monitor, which stands powered off beside the bed. Lalisa laughs, a bit high pitched and hysterical, and approaches him.

“Gguk. Hey. Wake up, it worked,” she says, pushing at his shoulder and wincing when her hand comes away with specks of red. His shirt is covered in blood, and so is his mouth, his pants, his eyes are shut, there’s some petals clinging to him --

Lalisa’s breath stutters, and she grabs weakly at Jeongguk’s wrist, feeling for a pulse, but finds nothing. Her hand grips Jeongguk’s wrist tighter, more firm, slow realization trickling through her.

“No,” she murmurs, her grip loosening slowly on Jeongguk’s wrist, and his arm falls limply back to his side; Lalisa wishes, hopes, pray for it to move, yet Jeongguk remains completely still. Not even the smallest hint of life left in his body. “No. No!”

Lalisa screams, the noise ripping through her already damaged throat, her weakened knees giving out as she collapses to the ground besides the bed, her shoulders shaking with the force of her sobs.

“No, no. You did not die because of my stupid fucking essay -- no, no, this is my fault, shit, this is all my fault, no. This can’t be happening, it can’t -- Jeongguk, please. Wake up. I’m begging, this has to be a dream. Wake up!”

There’s no response.

Screaming and sobbing fills the room again; nobody outside has the heart to go inside, even as tears stream silently down their cheeks, the stone faced doctor’s cool facade shattering into a look of genuine pity. None dare to interrupt, not when the girl behind the door is lost in the midst more grief than any of them could ever even attempt to imagine.

Chapter End Notes

y'all I'm??

for those who might get on me for not tagging character death, as I'm aware, the "chose not to use archive warnings" thing allows me to kill off characters w/o tagging it so I don't spoil the ending? I mentioned that on my twitter (xxashpuppixx go follow me plz) after posting the previous chapter.

((EDIT 1: I realize I was dumb about that, I was too caught up in my own head with my own logic. I guess my process was that authors who publish books don't warn their readers about the deaths of characters in their books, so why would I? which was dumb, I'm sorry to anyone that this story affected in a negative way. it was never my intention; I just wasn't thinking properly.))

((EDIT 2: sorry I'm being annoying but I... I don't know. I wanted to make sure I understood the tags of this website correctly so I can work appropriately in the future, and well. By the AO3 guidelines: "The meaning of "choose not to use Archive
warnings" or equivalent text: The fanwork may or may not contain any of the subject matter on the Archive list. Users who wish to avoid specific elements entirely should not access fanworks marked with "choose not to use Archive warnings." A creator can select both "choose not to use Archive warnings" and one of the Archive warnings in order to warn for some but not all of the Archive warnings."

I'm still apologizing to those who were negatively impacted by my work, as I never meant to harm anyone, but for those getting on me about not tagging properly and being a bit rude about it: I did nothing wrong, by all means. I am entitled to not placing the "major character death" tag in the tags if I so desire. And I didn't add the tag to keep the ending a twist and get across my point and the emotion that I wanted to convey.))

anyways um,,, I'm sorry if any of that seems rude, I never meant for it to be. I just want to make sure everyone understands why I did what I did.

thank you so much for reading I love you all <3
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

IM BACK IM SORRY I WAS BUSY AND AHHHH

im gonna cry its almost over this story is my baby it's like watching my child go to
college ;-; please love and support him he's a smol precious story who just wants some
love I love this story so much omg it's like midnight and I just wrote 3k words in an
hour gods help me ok enjoy I'll shut up

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The letter seemed unassuming at first.

Addressed to Shin Jungwon, from a hospital in Seoul. He’d assumed that it was some long lost
relative, or perhaps some kind of update on an old friend. An old friend who he hasn’t seen in three
weeks, who’s been stubborn and stayed in Seoul when Busan had more treatment options at lower
prices… He hadn’t noticed that the hospital the letter came from was a different one until it was
opened.

‘Shin Jungwon-sshi, we regret to inform you that your son, Jeon Jeongguk, has passed away due to
complications with his lungs which forced him to cough up flower petals…’

Jungwon didn’t know what to do with himself, with the letter. He hasn’t seen Jeongguk since he was
a young teenager, reckless and scared and bruised, hasn’t spoken with the boy’s mother, Jiyoung, in
almost nineteen years now. To hear nothing since Jeongguk’s sudden visit almost five years ago
now, and then suddenly be hit with the news that the son he lost to a man who was Jiyoung’s
soulmate is dead…

Jungwon leaves for Seoul that night, nothing but a backpack on his back and grief lingering in his
mind. He hasn’t seen Jiyoung in nineteen years, but there’s always a first time for everything.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Taehyung doesn’t really know what to say when the others arrive.

Yoongi and Namjoon came first, panting and wide eyed, followed closely by Hoseok and Seokjin.
Hoseok’s expression was blank and dead, while Seokjin seemed frantic and scared. Taehyung can
only stare at them with empty eyes, holding Jimin close to his chest as they wait for the girl who
 barged into Jeongguk’s hospital room to reappear.

Slowly, the door opens, and the blue haired girl comes out, eyes rimmed red and mouth drawn into a
thin line. Tear tracks are visible on her cheeks, and she seems shaken and completely, utterly blank.

“Who…?” Yoongi begins to ask, but a single look from the girl has his mouth snapping shut. A door
across the hallway opens, and two people clad in white coats appear; a man and a woman, both with
equally grief filled expressions.

“How…” The woman asks, and the girl who came from the hospital room behind Taehyung and
Jimin turns to her and promptly bursts into tears again. Silence falls over the hallway, filled only by
the shuddering sobs coming from the blue haired girl — Lalisa.

“It’s not fair.” Lalisa wails as the woman in the white coat walks over to her and wraps an arm around her shoulders. “He just went to- he just went to turn in my essay. If I hadn’t forgotten it like the idiot I am, then he’d — he’d still be alive. Fuck, this is all my fault, my fault, I should be dead, not him!”

“Wait, he left the hospital to turn in your essay?” Taehyung asks, and Lalisa turns to him with wide, tear filled eyes.

“Yes, he did, I hate him so much he’s an idiot, he shouldn’t have done that, I shouldn’t have forgotten, I—”

“Lalisa. Stop saying it’s your fault,” the woman murmurs. “It’s not. It’s nobody’s fault but the universe’s. Nobody here made him go turn in the essay, nobody here made him have the Hanahaki and be reckless. It’s nobody’s fault when the word decided to fuck him over.”

“Who’s him?” Seokjin asks in a small voice, scared to hear the answer. “It’s not Jeongguk, is it?”

The silence answers his question.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Jiyoung and Jungwon met when they were in college.

They had the same major in business, had similar class sets and saw each other around frequently. They weren’t soulmates, so at first, nothing developed but a friendship. Shared notes and study days, coffee before classes and movie nights out with groups of friends.

Taboo, the world whispered to them the first time they kissed. Wrong. Unnatural.

But they ignored it, and shouted their happiness from the rooftops. Even without the world in color, they loved each other. They loved and they loved but nothing happy ever seems to last.

Jiyoung got pregnant, not terribly long after they graduated college. It didn’t prove to hold them back or hold them down; they had an apartment with extra space, prepared themselves for the responsibility, had stable income.

When Jeongguk was born, everything was at peace. Jungwon and Jiyoung were happy, even with the world in shades of black and white and grey. They had a beautiful son, a good home, stable income. They had each other, and it was all the ever needed, even as the world around them whispered and pointed.

It didn’t take long for it all to fall apart after one fateful encounter in a coffee shop.

Jiyoung only wanted to get coffee. She didn’t want to meet her soulmate, have the world burst in to splendid color, have her soul and heart go “ah, there you are.” She had a child, a man that she loved, knowledge of an engagement ring in his underwear drawer. But her soulmate… oh, her soulmate.

The universe wouldn’t let her live in peace anymore.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

The hospital room is tense.

The bed had been rolled out, the body sent off to a morgue. All that’s left is an air of grief and
disbelief, a room filled with people who knew Jeongguk and never expected this.

Joohyun is off to the side, speaking in quiet tones on the phone, tears falling down her cheeks in a steady rhythm. Sunye is besides her, one hand on her shoulder and the other hanging limply at her side, eyes unfocused. Hyesung stands behind her, leaning against the wall, one arm wrapped around Lalisa.

None of the soulmate couples in the room have let go of each other since the news was broken. Occasionally, someone new will enter; another employee from A Touch Of Ink, another person that Jimin and Taehyung didn’t know. Another person that Yoongi recognizes from the shop when he went in to visit. Someone else from Jeongguk’s life. Someone else that Jeongguk put on a facade for. Someone else caught deep in his web of lies.

The hours drag by painfully slow as they all wait for Jeongguk’s parents — the ones who will be making all final decisions about the situation. The room is suffocated in silence, broken by sobs and sniffles.

The world has shattered around them, but outside the room, life moves on.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Jeon Haejoon.

That’s the name Jiyoung gives to Jungwon as she collapses on the couch that afternoon, worn out and shaken. Jungwon blinks owlishly up at her from where he is on the floor, Jeongguk settled on his lap.

Jiyoung wants to laugh about how mismatched their outfits are and how bright everything has become. But this, all this — is no laughing matter.

The breakup is messy, and leaves too many things said and unsaid. Jiyoung takes Jeongguk with her; Haejoon isn’t pleased that his soulmate has a child, that she had a child without him, but he learns to deal with it as time passes.

Jungwon moves from Busan to Daegu, to clear his mind out. Jiyoung never hears from him again; and he never hears from her. Jiyoung has Haejoon, and after only a year, Jungwon meets Eunjae. A sweet girl, nice and kind, but even with the colors in his vision, he knows that she isn’t Jiyoung, isn’t his first love that he never stopped loving. Can’t replace the son he had, can’t compensate for what he’s lost.

When the car crash happens, and Eunjae’s life is taken by a drunk driver, Jungwon hates himself for feeling relieved.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Three adults enter the room, and the atmosphere becomes tenser than it ever was before.

A man and a woman, holding hands, the woman looking devastated and her husband passive. A flicker of rage dances across Lalisa’s face before it dies away, the girl too drained to cling to any emotion but numb grief. The other is a man, with a backpack on his back, hair sticking up all over the place. A loose jacket is thrown over his shoulders, and the look on his face couldn’t be described as anything but pain.

“Hanahaki?” The man standing alone asks, and Hyesung squeezes Lalisa’s shoulder once more before stepping forwards.
“Yes. You are…?”

“Jeongguk’s father,” the man replies, twisting his fingers together nervously. “Shin Jungwon.”

“I am Doctor Shin Hyesung,” Hyesung introduces, his lips twitching slightly at their matching last
names but saying nothing. “I was one of the surgeons your son and this young woman came to when
they found a way to eliminate petals from the lungs of a Hanahaki patient.”

“I don’t understand then, why is Jeongguk dead?” The man with Jeongguk’s mother Jiyoung asks,
and a shudder of grief and despair runs through the room.

“You are?” Hyesung asks, his voice calm and face a perfectly crafted picture of detached interest.

“Jeon Haejoon,” the man responds. “Jiyoung’s husband, Jeongguk’s step-father.”

“Well, Jeon-sshi, Jeongguk insisted that Lalisa go under the procedure first. It worked on her, but
partway through her operation, he left the hospital to turn in an essay she’d forgotten to submit and
passed away in his dorm room.”

Jiyoung makes a sound of shock and grief, but Haejoon doesn’t budge an inch to soothe his
soulmate’s distress, instead staring at Hyesung with a blank expression; not even the smallest trace of
grief in his eyes or lips. Behind him, Lalisa is trembling; with anger or grief, nobody can tell.
Joohyun walks over and wraps an arm around the younger, who exhales heavily and relaxes into the
other girl’s side, her gaze directed at Haejoon.

Jiyoung is silent as tears begin dripping down her cheeks, lost under the weight of grief that nobody
in the room could ever hope to understand. Haejoon still does nothing, glare piercing through
Hyesung, whose eyes flick between the man and his distraught wife, unsure of what to do or say.

“Jiyoung?”

The woman turns at her name, and makes eye contact with the man she hasn’t seen in nearly twenty
years -- Jungwon. Jungwon exhales shakily, then walks forwards and bites his lip, unsure.

“In Busan. There’s an empty plot next to… next to Sehun. It’s what he would want.”

Jiyoung understands, knows what he’s talking about. She releases Haejoon’s hand and flings herself
at her first love, at the man who fathered the boy who passed away choking on flowers. He opens his
arms to her willingly, allows his heart to break more and more and more as Jiyoung sobs, mourning
the loss of their son.

“Yes,” she says at last, voice shaking and heavy with tears. “Next to Sehun. It’s what our
Jeonggukie would want.”

“It is,” Jungwon says, eyes blank as he meets Hyesung’s sympathetic gaze across the room. “It is.”

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Jeongguk hates Haejoon.

He’s a kid; he says that he hates many things at ten years old -- cartoon villains and vegetables and
school -- but when he says that he hates Haejoon, he really, truly hates Haejoon. His mother doesn’t
take him seriously when he says that Haejoon is a bad person; she scolds him for disrespecting her
soulmate and his father.
The only person who listens and believes is Sehun. Sehun is three years older than Jeongguk, a teenager in middle school already; but he’s also Jeongguk’s next door neighbor and best friend. Sehun’s room window faces Jeongguk’s, and they talk through notepads held against the windows and blinking flashlights.

Sehun listens to Jeongguk when he tries to explain why he doesn’t like Haejoon. When he says that it feels wrong to call Haejoon his father, when he comes over with a new scrape or bruise that comes from a questionable source. Sehun keeps himself composed, does his best to give Jeongguk little pieces of advice and patches him up when he gets hurt.

But more than he wants to help, he wants Jeongguk to not be hurt in the first place. Sehun watches and listens, perceptive as he is. He’s heard that teenagers like sticking their noses where they don’t belong, and he can’t blame whoever said that. His nose does not belong in the familial matters of the Jeon family, but that’s exactly where it is.

Jeongguk has Sehun, Sehun has Jeongguk, and no matter how much Jeongguk hates Haejoon, Sehun makes it all bearable.

~~~~~~~~~~~~

There’s a small graveyard in Busan.

Small, and the black gate is rusting, the plants are overgrown. But there’s room for one more plot, one more stone. The plan is set; Jiyoun and Jungwon didn’t have to talk much to know where they want their son to be -- next to Sehun, one of the only early friends he had in life.

There’s a small graveyard in Busan.

It’s three hours away, a hassle of a trip when it’s thought about, but Lalisa makes a silent promise to herself to visit as much as she can when she knows it’s where he will be, leaving small things by the grave. A polaroid photo, a poster about some event or another from campus. Never flowers; if she goes and sees any, she swears that she’ll burn them into ashes.

There’s a small graveyard in Busan.

It won’t be rusty and overgrown for long; a path will carve its way into the grass, leading from the gate to the newest stone in the back, where a young man lies beneath the ground. It won’t feel small when so many people visit and leave little trinkets, when the town sees the same faces over and over as they visit and visit and visit. Nobody has the mind to tell them it’s a bit unhealthy, to see the same gravestone so much; nobody has the heart to break theirs all over again.

~~~~~~~~~~~~

Thirteen finds Jeongguk being there when Sehun learns to drive a car and can suddenly take them anywhere they want to go. It’s ever the more useful in the dead of night, when Jeongguk’s aching all over from another bad encounter with Haejoon and wants to get away for a little while.

There’s a small graveyard that the two like to visit. Some people would find it creepy, but the two like going down there and paying their respects to the people long forgotten under layers of vines and dust, stones weathered with age. It’s calming, peaceful, everything that Jeongguk needs after another bad night, bad day, bad afternoon.

Sehun never minds the amount of money he spends on gas. It’s worth it to see Jeongguk smile after he’s had a rough time. He puts off thinking about when he leaves for college, because he’s scared of what will happen when he’s gone and he doesn’t want to find out something terrible happened when
he’s too far away to be there in five minutes.

College looms in the distance, but Sehun focuses on the now. He focuses on the now because something is happening to Jeongguk right now, Haejoon is a terrible person right now. He doubts that it will change, that Haejoon will one day wake up and flip his personality, but Sehun can’t worry about future wounds because he has to help Jeongguk patch up the ones from now.

He never minds helping Jeongguk heal, because the younger doesn’t deserve any of it. Sehun doesn’t know why Haejoon is such a horrible person to Jeongguk, but it doesn’t really matter the reason when it’s happening. What matters is figuring out ways to stop it, ways to minimize the damage and heal what’s left behind. Being away at college means taking away that ability, and it’s a terrifying prospect.

Sehun doesn’t want to leave Jeongguk alone. He wants him to know that, no matter what, Sehun is there for him.

Lalisa knows she’s glaring, knows that the hatred is coming off her in waves, knows that everyone around her is giving her strange looks as she bores holes into the side of Haejoon’s head with her eyes. But she can’t find it in herself to care, because she hates that man with a burning passion, wants him gone, wants him out of this hospital room and as far away from Jeongguk and anyone associated with him as possible.

Because that man -- oh, the stories she’s heard about that man. Jeongguk was usually drunk, either off alcohol or lack of sleep when he talked about him. Haejoon believed that Jeongguk’s major in soulmate studies was a waste of money; hated him because he was the child of his soulmate and some man he’d never met until today.

Lalisa saw the scars hidden by ink, the way Jeongguk had to train himself not to flinch when someone made a sudden movement. The way he still did sometimes, when he wasn’t paying attention. She saw the way he closed up when family was the topic of discussion, avoided it altogether unless he initiated the talk.

She didn’t have to meet Haejoon to know she hated him; and now that she’s met him, she can safely say that she hates him more than ever before. The bastard didn’t comfort his wife when she was grieving over the death of her son; didn’t look even the slightest bit sad or upset over the news that Jeongguk had passed away. She hates him, she hates him, she knows that Jeongguk hated him.

She tears her gaze away from Haejoon, forcing herself to look anywhere else but at him. She accidentally meets the gaze of one of Jeongguk’s friends; Yoongi, she believed, the one who gave Jeongguk an idea for his song project for his minor.

Yoongi and the man besides him -- his soulmate Namjoon, she presumes -- look devastated. Yoongi has a haunted look in his eyes, leaning heavily against Namjoon. When he realizes that his eyes have met Lalisa’s, he offers her a thin, empathetic smile. Namjoon looks to her and tilts his head; an invitation to walk over to them and the other four.

With slow, reluctant steps, she leaves Joohyun and approaches the six men she’d heard quite a lot about from Jeongguk.

“He never shut up about you,” she blurs out when she reaches them, and the six smile in a strange, bitter way.
“If he trusted us a bit more, I’m sure he’d have never shut up about you,” Jimin says softly, still leaning heavily against Taehyung.

Lalisa’s mouth twists with pain. “He just didn’t want you to worry.”

“We know,” Yoongi says in a soft voice. “But it doesn’t mean that it stops hurting.”

A breath of a smile tugs at Lalisa’s lips. “No, I suppose that it doesn’t.”

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

“Haejoon isn’t my real dad.”

Sehun glances up from his textbooks, still not used to the shock of color as he looks over at his best friend, an eyebrow raised.

“Come again?”

“Haejoon is mom’s soulmate, yeah, but he isn’t my dad,” Jeongguk elaborates, and Sehun frowns, closing the book before him.

“Okay?” Sehun raises an eyebrow, and Jeongguk huffs.

“Haejoon is an asshole because he’s not my dad. He screamed it at me last time, before he threw a book at me,” Jeongguk says, and the fact that the sentence is so matter of fact breaks Sehun’s heart a little bit more. “Well, more like he said he’s glad that he didn’t father a fuck up like me, but it’s close enough. So I asked mom, and she told me that he’s not my dad.”

Sehun nods slowly, following the story that Jeongguk is spinning off. A fire is slowly building in his best friend’s eyes, and he doesn’t know what to think of it.

“I want to find my real dad, I managed to get his name from mom. Will you help me find him?”

Jeongguk’s eyes burn with passion, with hope, and Sehun knows that this means the world to Jeongguk, that finding his real father would put his mind at rest and allow him to get through the last few years of hell living under the same roof as Haejoon.

Besides, Sehun could never deny Jeongguk anything. He has nothing more left to lose, anyways, with the death sentence hanging over his head.

“Of course, Ggukie. Let’s find your dad.”

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Namjoon hates how his soulmate studies professor has quieted down about Hanahaki after learning that one of his students died from it. He wants the man to admit that he’s wrong, but no, he completely ignores the topic. The class isn’t the same anyways, not with Jeongguk sitting besides him, muttering sarcastic comments under his breath.

Nothing is really the same now. The group had unanimously adopted Lalisa, taking her under their wings, sticking together through an unbearably hard time. The seven of them had visited Busan together when the funeral was held, and go every so often to stop by the grave. He knows that Lalisa would wither away without their help, blaming herself for Jeongguk’s death and retracting into herself.

But so much is happening. Jeongguk’s death impacted so many more people than he probably
thought it would, and Namjoon’s head is spinning. The world is still in motion, no matter how much
he wishes that it would stop, and he knows that the others feel the same.

There had been a fight, when it was discovered that Hoseok knew about the Hanahaki. Yoongi had
been nearly impossible to hold back and pull away, and even now, Namjoon is still scared at the
amount of pure rage that had screamed through their bond when the news was broken.

Their group wasn’t really the same for a while after that, but their agreement to help Lalisa forced
them to reconcile and think rationally. Hoseok had been forced into keeping it a secret and found out
by accident; he didn’t deserve their anger. Yoongi had been the hardest to convince, but Namjoon
knew his soulmate inside and out, and managed to get him to do so and gradually return to normal
around Hoseok.

A huge press conference is on the way; one where Lalisa, Hyesung, and Sunye will talk about the
Hanahaki and the procedure to cure it, along with their speculations of why it happens. It’s going to
be long, it’s going to be intense, and it’s not far away.

So much has happened in so little time, and Namjoon just wants the world to pause. Nobody can
handle it all right now; it’s only a matter of time before someone breaks.

But he knows, they all know, that when someone does break down, they’ll be there for each other.
They’ll never again allow someone to suffer in silence, never again allow someone to wither away
when they could find a way to help.

They fucked up once. They won’t let it happen ever again.

Fifteen, and Jeongguk is holding a train ticket to Daegu. Fifteen, and he’s got nothing but a small bag
on his back and a small bit of cash in his pocket. Fifteen, and Jeongguk knows why he hates
Haejoon, why no other guy his age has bruises and scars, why Sehun looked so shocked when he
told him how much Haejoon put him down and yelled at him.

Haejoon -- Haejoon is his mother’s soulmate, yes. But Haejoon is not his father.

His father is in Daegu, somewhere; he managed to get that small piece of information out of his
mother before devising his plan. Sehun will say that Jeongguk is sleeping over with him; his parents
are out that night so nobody will question it. Meanwhile, Jeongguk will skip school and jump on a
train to Daegu, riddled with nerves and hoping, praying that this stupid scheme will work.

As Busan falls into the distance in the train windows, Jeongguk settles back and leans against the
cool window. The car he chose is completely empty; good for him, since he already got strange
looks from the conductor as he boarded and showed his ticket. No more adults to look and watch
and judge.

The trip flies by, the sky lightens, and suddenly, Jeongguk is alone on a train platform in an
unfamiliar city. He doesn’t really know where he’s going; he searched the city records for his father’s
name, found where he worked through luck. It really didn’t take too much to track down the man;
the internet is a powerful thing.

The GPS on his phone loads up the address of the building as Jeongguk takes his first steps into the
new city, earbuds shoved into his ears and Troye Sivan playing. He messages Sehun, letting his best
friend know that he arrived safely before listening to Siri’s directions to the correct building.

The office building is tall, reaching into the sky. Jeongguk is intimidated for a long moment before he
works up the courage to go inside, and the desk lady looks up at him, a sceptical look crossing her face when she sees his youth and his confusion laid out plainly for the world to see.

“May I help you?” She asks as he approaches the desk, an eyebrow raised. Jeongguk takes a deep breath.

“Yeah, my name’s Shin Jeongguk. I’m here to surprise my dad with lunch. Can you direct me to his office?” He asks smoothly, the lie practiced in his bedroom and on the train car. The lady’s expression softens, and she hands him a visitor’s pass.

“Take the elevator to the fifth floor; his office is number 5217.”

“Thank you so much!” Jeongguk chirps happily, placing a bright smile on his face as he walks to the elevators, gets on, and hits the button for the fifth floor. His nerves raise higher with each floor that passes, and once he arrives at the floor, he looks for room 5217, feeling extremely out of place and nervous.

When he finds it, he takes a few deep breaths before pressing the little doorbell before the office. A few long moments pass, and Jeongguk wrings his hands together; a nervous habit he’d picked up not too long ago.

The door opens, and Jeongguk looks up into the eyes of a man that looks so much like him that it’s painful. A small smile spans Jeongguk’s face as he holds his hand out to the man whose blood runs through Jeongguk’s veins.

“Hello. I’m your son, Jeongguk. Remember me?”

Four years had passed since that day when Jeongguk found the truth and pursued it. Now, he knows all that there was to be known, but he’d never see the man he spent days and weeks searching for again.

The fresh dirt and new stone is the only indication that something has changed in the small graveyard in Busan. Before it stands a man, dressed in black, hands shoved in his pockets as he struggles to hold back tears, before he exhales and breathes a sentence into the wind, hoping that it would reach Jeongguk, wherever he is now.

“Goodbye, Jeongguk, my son. I’ll always remember you.”

Chapter End Notes

Twitter: xxashpuppixx
Chapter Notes

dr. this is the ending of this story please allow me to be sad and emotional for a little while ;;

holy shit y'all this is 60k words!! my goal was like, 20k when I started out and now we're here ;; this is an actual novel goddamn. I started this in January, it's now July. It's been seven months of uploading this; almost a year of planning. I put so much work and love and research into this piece, it's not even funny.

like? I tried to rationalize Hanahaki with a biology major friend of mine, I ranted to my friends about issues I was having with writer's block, I worked during lunch at school and during class and on weekends and even when I was at work, scribbling scenes on spare receipt paper and my arms. I threw the pitch for the story at a writer's club I'm in, worked out some of the more major scenes with some help.

y'all I had this chapter right here, big number 26, written since December. yes, I had this shit ready before I even published chapter one, because I had an ending in mind and goddammit I was going to get there. and here we are -- the finale, the big hurrah. chapter number two-six, number twenty-six, the final frontier.

I'm legit crying as I write this right now. I worked so fucking HARD on this story, I breathed it, dreamed it, lived it. Hours and hours and sleepless nights put into this work, you guys have no idea how much this means to me; to finally be releasing the final puzzle piece of my work into the world. This is 134 pages on a google doc, formatted. This is 60k words. this story is my baby, and he's going off to college.

please give him some love ;-) he's a precious little story who has done no wrong ;-) and love his brother story when I get back into the swing of it -- because you damn well KNOW I have another big one on the way.

yes, this story is over. yes, I'm crying over it being finished. yes, I'm going to miss working on it.

but there's always something new on the way.

THANK ALL OF YOU FOR READING AND SUPPORTING AND LOVING THIS STORY LIKE GODDAMN THERE'S SO MANY OF YOU BUT I LOVE YOU ALL <3 <3 <3 <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Name: Jeongguk Jeon

Major: Soulmate Studies (with minor in Music Production)

Final project description: senior thesis essay on the topic of soulmates; more specifically, an aspect of the system that few talk about or have a general knowledge of.
Thesis statement: Despite popular belief that the soulmate system has no imperfections, the system that the world lives under has countless flaws that many gloss over and have forgotten about.

Introduction: …?

Body: …?

Conclusion: …

What do I think about the soulmate system?

The cafe is noisy and filled to the brim with people, but Lalisa feels alone in the crowd. Her chest no longer aches with every movement and her cough hasn’t returned, Snapdragon petals no longer clogging her lungs and throat, and yet despite her guarantee of life, she still wishes that she wasn’t the one to go under the operation.

Jeongguk died while she was on the operating table undergoing the theoretical surgery that ended up working and saving her life. If only he had gone under instead, if only she realized how much worse his Hanahaki was, if only she hadn’t forgotten to submit that stupid essay which caused him to leave the hospital -- maybe he’d be alive and sitting across from her drinking coffee and eating pastries, teasing her for worrying too much about the huge international press conference tomorrow and trying to set her up with a dozen different girls who are single that he thinks would suit her.

Maybe they both would have lived, and he would have been there to speak in front of the crowd of scientists and world leaders when the new, certain way to save lives from being ended by the Hanahaki is revealed and explained. If only Lalisa had just turned in that stupid essay, then Jeongguk wouldn’t have left the hospital and run to his dorm to turn it in for her. The A that she was given on the essay would never be worth the price tag it came with. Never.

Lalisa exhales, eyes trailing down to the cup in her hands, tears brimming in her eyes. She refuses to let them fall, however; she’s cried enough during long, sleepless nights and torturous days. Guilt consumes her every hour of the day, and even though Jeongguk’s friends have been nothing but kind to her, she still feels responsible for his death, sometimes wishes that they’d yell and scream and blame her, blame her just like she blames herself, hate her and ignore her and stop being so kind and sweet and stop inviting her for dinner and making sure she eats -- why can’t they just hate her as much as she hates herself? It would make it all so much easier.

If only she wasn’t so selfish, so forgetful, and he so selfless, so responsible, Jeongguk would still be alive.

I personally think that it is an awful system that can destroy people’s lives without any trace of remorse.

Half of the dorm room has been cleaned out, photographs and posters peeled down from the walls and knickknacks taken off the wardrobe and desk. The bed has been stripped of the sheets and everything that screamed Jeongguk has been removed, leaving behind nothing but a painfully empty space and bittersweet memories. The carpet had been removed and replaced, as it was covered with too many bloodstains to clean completely; the scent of air fresheners hangs heavy in the air.

It doesn’t feel right to walk into the bedroom and see only half of it covered in dirty clothes and various discarded belongings; Jimin and Taehyung are so used to seeing the entire bedroom looking like a complete and total wreck and smelling just slightly like cigarette smoke and whiskey, a
remnant of Jeongguk’s long lasting habits and job. But only the overbearing scent of pine air fresheners and fake happiness fills the air now, and half of the room is completely untouched and bare, and it feels so wrong. So, so wrong.

Jimin folds his arms across his torso, staring blankly at the empty half of the bedroom, leaning back against the wall. During the last few months he knew Jeongguk, he’d learned the other was from Busan, and he’d adapted to speaking in Busan satoori with the younger male. His habit of slipping into the dialect when he faces the other half of the room hasn’t yet faded, probably never will until they move out of the dorms; but now, it’s more painful than anything else, because he knows that the familiar accent and dialect will never again be spoken in the low, raspy voice of the younger man from Busan.

Taehyung sits besides him, staring listlessly at a blank document on his laptop. Over the days he’d gone through every interaction he had with Jeongguk in his mind, wondering where he fucked up, where it was obvious Jeongguk was suffering but he hadn’t noticed, hadn’t asked, hadn’t pushed. Hell, he lived in the same dorm as him, always close by; how was he so blind? How did he never see any petals, hear and coughing? He was so blind, and now -- now Jeongguk is gone.

Nothing feels quite right anymore; the room is too quiet, too empty, too strange without the presence of the boy who moved in a little less than two years ago and created a space for himself in their dorm and their lives. Nothing will ever feel quite right ever again.

To be fair, I have seen the numerous success stories, such as my roommates and my friends. However, I have also seen living horror stories and tragedies; I have even been put through and lived some myself.

Saturday nights just aren’t the same anymore. Seokjin always sets out seven places at the table before Hoseok walks in and freezes, his lips turning downwards before whispering, “we only need six.” Heavy silence always follows the statement, and Seokjin will slowly pick up the extra setting and put it away, heart heavy in his chest.

There’s always a little too much food, a little too much alcohol, and nobody comments on it when Seokjin wraps up the leftovers and puts them away with a trembling lower lip and a calm expression threatening to pull apart at the seams at any given moment. Nobody says anything when the couch seems too empty without the black haired boy sitting at the end of it, conversations falling flat and eyes being drawn again and again towards the empty space that nobody ever has the courage to fill.

The nights always end the same ways now. Everyone gets a little too drunk and a little too loose lipped, and stories spill into the air and tears fall down cheeks. Recollections of Jeongguk and every small sign that they missed being realized, ending with someone pulling out their phone and playing the song Jeongguk had composed for his final project for his music production minor. His raspy voice fills the apartment and everything falls silent, nothing but the sound of Jeongguk’s voice hanging in the air of the apartment. Time stops for a moment as Jeongguk’s voice sings out everything he never said directly to them, and nobody leaves the apartment with dry eyes.

From my parents, who were not soulmates, to my best friend when I was sixteen dying of the Hanahaki, I have seen a lot of bad in this system that the rest of the world swears by.

Hoseok picked up smoking not long after Jeongguk died.

It was hard to cope, at first, after Jeongguk’s body was found and his secret was known to everyone. The others were pissed at him – understandably so, and even Seokjin was upset until one night when he came home to find Hoseok curled up on their bed, sobbing his eyes out. At first, he’d been unsure, unsteady, torn between sitting down and walking away. But Hoseok’s head raised and their
eyes met, and Seokjin couldn’t walk away. Their bond screamed with pain, and Seokjin had no second thoughts about sitting down besides Hoseok as he cried, his presence which was usually calming appearing to do nothing for his distraught soulmate.

“I knew -- I fucking knew about it all, and I said nothing because he begged me not to, because I was foolish and trusted him!” Hoseok screams, clutching at his hair, pulling at the strands in anguish. Seokjin flutters at his side, unsure of how to calm Hoseok. Once upon a time, he knew everything -- but now he feels like he knows nothing, nothing at all, because he was so blind, so fucking blind.

“I knew that he could die, I knew that he probably would, but he promised he was working on the cure, that he knew what to do, that he’d survive. I’m such a fucking -- a fucking idiot. Fuck.”

Hoseok chokes on another sob and curls his arms tightly around his knees, clutching them to his chest. Slowly, carefully, Seokjin wraps an arm around his boyfriend, his soulmate, pulling him close. Hoseok sobs, burying his face into Seokjin’s shoulder, seeking comfort. Silence falls over them, only broken by Hoseok’s muffled cries.

The next day, Seokjin finds two unopened packs of cigarettes in the trash, along with a beaten up lighter. He smiles, prepares breakfast, and wakes his boyfriend with a soft kiss and breakfast in bed.

It’s not the same, it’s not magically okay now. It will never be the same; it may never be okay. But eventually, eventually, they will heal.

As for me, well. I was born without a soulmate, at the fault of my parents being two people who are not soulmates, and I am dying because of it; coughing up flower petals as a result of the Hanahaki disease, something that I have seen and heard professors and doctors alike dismiss while I suffer right under their noses.

The tattoo shop is quiet -- too quiet. Everything feels too surreal; all of them had expected Jeongguk to go under the operation the next day if it was a success, and go under even if it wasn’t in a second, last ditch attempt, not be found dead in his dorm room with bloodstained petals on his lips and clothes. Sunye had led Lalisa into the operating room with a small light of hope and the determination that she could save both of them; but one of them died, died on her watch, just like that little girl so many years ago. Nothing feels right anymore, and the front desk stays empty; the only evidence that customers get that the bright, youthful boy who manned the desk is gone, gone forever.

Each of them now have a small tattoo on their ring fingers; the initials JJG, in remembrance of Jeongguk, written in a delicate font; a font that Jeongguk was partial to when getting any tattoos that had words in them. The tattoos were all done by Jackson as he held back tears, his grip miraculously steady on the buzzing tattoo machine as the rest of his body trembled with grief and tears fell down his cheeks.

A Touch of Ink doesn’t feel like home to them anymore. A member of their little family was gone, never to walk through the door again with the scent of smoke clinging to him or dark circles under his eyes that he explained were from working on a song for his minor. No more large history books on the desk, bookmarked with colorful post it notes and with an open notebook besides them. No more small talk with the sweet, young kid at the desk, or practicing new ideas on his skin, wherever they could manage to find empty space among the many swirling lines of ink already decorating his skin.

Sunye closed down the shop for a week after Jeongguk’s death, to give herself and the others time to grieve and recuperate. Nobody had the energy or the motivation to work, and once the situation was explained to the clients whose appointments had to be cancelled, they easily rescheduled and offered
their condolences with sad smiles and glances towards the front desk. Some of them sent flowers.

Sunye threw them right into the trash can with a bitter smile. She’d never look at flowers in the same way again.

*My question to the world is, why am I being punished because of something I cannot control, my voice silenced and my condition dismissed by all but one who suffers the same as me? I did not choose my parents, it was not at my hand that they had me. So why am I the one that is dying while they are out there in the world surviving just fine?*

Jeongguk’s song file is sitting on the desktop of Yoongi’s computer, waiting to be opened again. The cursor hovers over the small icon, fingers trembling in the mouse as Yoongi stares blankly at the file, the name of the piece of audio. He’s memorized the song, committed Jeongguk’s raspy pleas to memory, knows every note and chord and instrument like the back of his hand. He could replicate the song solely from thinking about it, open up a random music program and whip out the basic melody in a flash.

But he could never, never replicate the emotion charged into the music, the sound of Jeongguk’s voice, the meaning behind the words sang into the microphone and placed to the music Jeongguk had created with a certain intention.

Music is Yoongi’s passion, Yoongi’s *life*, and just from the one track on his computer, he can see and hear just how much Jeongguk loved music as well. Every note was played with care, every word sung with emotion and the song dripped with passion and longing. Jeongguk poured his soul into this song for them, this song meant to tell them everything he didn’t -- couldn’t -- say when he was alive.

Yoongi chokes back another sob. He’s cried enough for several lifetimes, cried more in the last month than he has in the last twenty-three years of his life. All because of the song sitting on his computer that haunts him with the recollection of the boy who sang it, the boy who gained back his passion because of Yoongi’s music but lost it all over again when the Hanahaki ripped him away from them.

*Due to this, and many times in recorded history that the system has screwed people over, I believe that the system is broken and horrific, not always leading somewhere good. For my proof and sources, I have several garbage bags of bloody flower petals that can be donated to science, if they want them. I will have no use for them when I’m dead.*

Soulmates have always been seen by the world as a wonderful thing, someone that everyone is excited to meet, looking out for the person that would give them their colors, the person they were destined to be with. But destiny -- destiny is a complete load of bullshit, and it’s painfully obvious to those who knew Jeongguk before his death.

They watched a young, broken, passionate boy wither away before their eyes, putting others above himself and his life on the line until his very last moment. They watched someone who they would give the world for be pulled away from them, all to save the grade of a girl he’d known for not even a year, because he wanted her to have a better shot at an uncertain future more than he wanted himself to be safe and certain of survival.

Jeongguk had been selfless all the way to the end, something that nobody realized until they saw it staring them straight in the face. Jimin’s frantic call to the emergency services followed by their encounter with a recently out of surgery Lalisa and Jeongguk’s co-workers broke apart the web of lies Jeongguk had spun for them all to fall into, a web that he created to help anyone but himself, because he never really saw himself surviving until the very end. And the knowledge that he was so
ready to die, from the day he turned eighteen to the last hour before the Hanahaki took him away, broke the hearts of everyone who knew him.

Lalisa had been handed the false hope that the surgery would be done on both of them, not expecting Jeongguk to leave the hospital just to turn in an essay and save her grade, thinking of her fifty percent chance of survival before he even considered himself and the effects on him. Hoseok had been told by Jeongguk himself that he had a cure and would survive. His other friends were never told that he suffered from Hanahaki, some had suspicions but never acted upon them.

All they saw ahead of Jeongguk was a bright future, one where Jeongguk no longer smoked or drank until he blacked out, one where Jeongguk went on and continued at the top of his class all the way to graduation, went into the real world and studied soulmates more and more, helped people who needed it and taught the public about the sides of the system that many ignored and dismissed.

But that future had been ripped away in just half an hour. Instead of living to see what he’d helped accomplish, he was the ultimate sacrifice to get it done. And no matter how much Taehyung, Jimin, Namjoon, Hoseok, Yoongi, and Seokjin hope, no matter how much Lalisa sits besides his gravestone and waits with watering eyes, no matter how long the desk job at A Touch of Ink stays empty, Jeongguk isn’t coming back.

*If everything that I have suffered through and everything that I have watched others suffer through has taught me anything about this system that people glorify and swear by, it is just this one thing:*

*There is no such thing as a truly happy ending.*

Soft notes drift through the studio, the computer left on as a figure sleeps away on the couch at the edge of the room, a jacket thrown over his shoulders. The glow of the computer screen washes the small room with a dim light, casting shadows against the walls. One of the shadows moves, reaching for the keys of the computer.

The mouse moves slowly, and a file opens. The current song stops abruptly, and a hollow melody floats through the air, filling the space in the studio. The man on the couch shifts and turns over, but doesn’t wake. A soft, breathy voice begins to sing softly, the shadow at the computer swaying in the chair for a moment before vanishing.

“Listen, please listen to me
I’m wasting away from this world
I’m not going to last long
Won’t be much more time before I’m gone.”

Across the city, a phone screen lights up. The woman asleep on the bed doesn’t stir, the soft glow of the phone screen a beacon of light in the darkness of the room. The phone unlocks, and a ghostly hand navigates the screen to the voice recording app. The same, haunting melody rises as the red light blinks, capturing every sound drifting through the small bedroom.

“So, tell me about forever
And how beautiful life is on earth
Tell me about forever
As it is the one thing I won’t see.”

A small dorm room fills with chilled air as the window rises, a vague wisp of light trailing in through the opened window, seeming hesitant and unsteady. A light breeze pushes papers from one of the
desks, sending them sprawling on the floor, but neither occupant of the room stirs, asleep in each other’s arms, dried tears on their cheeks, shifting occasionally in their sleep. The ray of light pauses before them, reaching out as if to touch them, before shying away. A pen drifts, and words are scrawled onto one of the papers.

“Vines creeping upwards
Breath stolen from my lungs
My soul is being stolen away
Or did I ever have one in the first place?”

The apartment is dark, blinds drawn shut and door locked tightly, windows secured as well. The curtains rise and fall gently, riding on an invisible wind, which allows a feather light presence to step gracefully into the room. Photos on the wall ruffle and jump, startled by the strange presence, but relax again as a soft voice hushes them with gentle touches. An old recording device perks up as the buttons on the stand are fiddled with, and then one of the tapes is rolling, capturing the soft melody drifting towards the microphone.

“So, tell me about forever
And how beautiful life is on earth
Tell me about forever
As it is the one thing I won’t see.”

Only one light blinks in the shop, a failing lightbulb on its last legs. The dull buzz of a tattoo machine fills the air, smoke hanging heavily over the occupants, lit cigarettes in several hands and empty glass bottles littering the floor and desk. The sketches and pictures on the walls flutter lightly, despite the lack of an open doorway or window, and the tattoo machine stops buzzing. The one holding it blinks and looks up, seeing nothing but his equally confused co-workers, and then the radio, old and abandoned in the corner of the small shop, crackles to life, drawing their attention.

“You’re so carefree
You live so happily
I envy your freedom
It will never be for me.”

Half finished papers and notes are scattered across the desk and floor, philosophy textbooks and thick spined books thrown every which way. A man lays his head atop the mess, not caring as blue pen streaks his cheek and lines from his notebooks imprint themselves on his face. An old iPod on the edge of the desk powers up, a sudden, new white light, and the man looks over, blinking slowly in confusion, as a melody drifts from the small, long dead speakers.

“So, tell me about forever
And how beautiful life is on earth
Tell me about forever
As it is the one thing I won’t see.”

Busan sea salt heavily scents the air of the tiny apartment. The sheets of the bed ruffle as the breeze drifts across it, as if fingers were trailing over the sheets once more, picking up dust and blowing it away. Dust clouds the air as a gust blows the layers away from an old record player nestled in the far corner of the room, and the needle moves on its own, dragging over one of the old vinyls, yet the song that plays doesn’t match the label on the disc.

“So, tell me about forever
And how beautiful life is on earth
Tell me about forever
As it is the one thing I won’t see.

Atop one of the biggest buildings in Seoul, a shadowy figure solidifies, staring out at the city, all its bright lights and its splendor. A hand wrapped in darkness reaches out, fingers splaying and blocking out some of the lights, one eye squinting closed and observing the sight. The arm drops with a soft sigh, and the figure’s mouth opens one last time before it dissolves into the shadows again with a final glance at the clock.

“Tell me about forever,
As it is the one thing I won’t see.”

The clock strikes midnight on September first.

~FIN~

Flower Meanings & Uses

**Morning Glory**
*Jeongguk Jeon*

Convolvulus Major are more commonly known as the Morning Glory, Ipomoea Purpurea, or Bindweed. They are a part of the Convolvulus genus, which comprises of between 200 and 250 different species. These flowers are typically funnel shaped and can be found in yellow, white, blue, red, pink, and purple. The flowers grow on vines, which are distinguishable by their heart shaped leaves, typically between four and five inches across, but some can grow up to eight inches; they are also considered an invasive species in some parts of the world. These flowers are said to mean *dead hope, eternal sleep, or helplessness.*

Other members of the Convolvulus genus have similar meanings to the Convolvulus Major. A simple Convolvulus flower means *bonds.* A pink blossom from the Convolvulus category means *worth sustained by affection.* Convolvulus Minor means *uncertainty,* while blue blooms of the category, more often called Night Convolvulus, mean *repose or night.*

**Snapdragon**
*Lalisa Manoban*

Antirrhinum Majus, better known as Snapdragon or Dragon Flower, is a part of the Antirrhineae genus. The name came from the flower’s resemblance to a dragon’s mouth opening and closing when the petals moved in the wind. They grow better in colder weather and low light, and are classified into three different height categories -- midget (6-8 inches), medium (15-30 inches), and large (30-48 inches). The flowers come in purple, orange, red, pink, white, peach, violet, and yellow hues, and some Snapdragons are bicolor, having two colors on the flowers.

Snapdragons are commonly said to mean *graciousness* and *deception,* but due to the fact that they grow in harsh and unlikely environments, they’ve also adopted the meaning of *strength* and can refer to one’s ability to overcome all problems and issues in their life. In mythology, they are often used for concealment and sometimes a ward against evil; in Victorian times, the flower could be sent as an apology or between lovers to symbolize love and lust. A more in depth meaning for Snapdragon flowers would be *grace under pressure* or *strength in hard times.*
Lily

Sehun Oh

Lilium flowers are more commonly known as Lily flowers. They can grow up to between 2 and 6 feet tall, and come in an array of colors; white, orange, red, pink, purple, and yellow, or even a combination of said colors. Some Lily flowers can have a mix of two or more colors on their petals. Lilies are often gifted on anniversaries, and are commonly used during funerals.

Lily flowers are most commonly said to mean humility and devotion. Peruvian Lilies, or Alstroemeria, represent friendship and devotion. White Stargazer Lilies mean sympathy, while Pink Stargazers mean wealth and prosperity. Red lilies mean passion, yellow lilies mean thankfulness, good health, and desire for enjoyment, and Tiger Lilies, commonly colored orange, mean confidence, pride, and wealth. Lily of the Valley symbolizes sweetness and purity of heart. Lilium Candidum, the specific scientific name for the flowers that Sehun coughed up, are often seen at funerals and said to symbolize that the soul of the departed has received restored innocence after death.

Chapter End Notes

the end.

thank you. I love you all.

~scene fades to black~
twitter: xxashpuppixx

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