my will is yours

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by orphan_account

Summary

Jeongguk is cursed with perfect obedience; he can never disobey a direct order. It's a living hell until he meets Min Yoongi.

(Ella Enchanted!AU)
Chapter 1

“Jeongguk, come out.” A fist bangs on the pantry door.

Jeongguk doesn't move. Perhaps if he is quiet enough, his aunt will give up and look elsewhere.

“I know you're in there. I saw you come into the kitchen.”

Jeongguk shifts, hiding himself behind one of the enormous wholesale sacks of rice. He doesn't want to come out and greet guests and play the tragic half-orphan. He doesn't want to be shown off and photographed and published in news articles. He doesn't want his father's insincere comfort.

He wants his mother, but she's gone now, and Jeongguk doesn't want to sit around at her funeral party and cry. He wants to be alone.

“I'm not a child,” Jeongguk thinks petulantly. He's eleven, too old to be counted at. He's a little scared of his aunt, though, so he moves further behind the rice. She's not a blood relation, just his father's brother's widow, but ever since his mother fell ill she's been around to help run things. Jeongguk doesn't like her very much. She generally means well, but she's short-tempered and bossy.

There's also the fact that his aunt isn't human, either; she's a fairy, which frankly terrifies Jeongguk.

“Ten,” she says from outside. Jeongguk balls his hands into fists. He's not coming out.

“Nine. Eight. I'm serious, Jeongguk.”

Jeongguk doesn't move.

“Seven. Six.”
He bites his lip.

“Five. Four. Three. Two. Last chance!”

Jeongguk remains silent. He locked the door from the inside and he's holding the key. She's not getting in.

“One! Fine, have it your way.”

Then Jeongguk's eyes are blown wide because the doorknob is glowing an unearthly green, and then it's turning and the door is pushing open to reveal his slightly-frazzled aunt. Jeongguk whimpers, shaking. He's afraid.

“You naughty boy,” his aunt says, oblivious to his terror. “Really, you have to pick today of all days to misbehave? Why are you such a stubborn child?”

“I-I want Hoseok,” Jeongguk protests as she approaches, drawing back.

“Don't be silly. He's busy helping the staff. Your father needs you.”

“No!” Jeongguk screams, wrapping his hands around the rice bag as his aunt tries to drag him out of the closet by his feet. “Leave me alone!”

Grunting, his aunt pulls him into the light of the kitchen, rice and all. If she was frustrated earlier, she's furious now.

“Jeon Jeongguk,” she says, voice low and dangerous as she looms over him, her hands on her hips. “It is not the time for a tantrum. Stop it, now.”

Jeongguk's lips tremble. He hesitates, still slightly scared of her, but his defiance isn't quite gone. “No,” he says, and that does it.
“Damn it,” his aunt groans. “Fine. This is for the best.”

And then she's reaching for Jeongguk, wrapping her hands around his small shoulders. There's a frightening purple flash and Jeongguk is hot all over for a second.

When it dies down, Jeongguk has let go of the rice, trembling. “W-what are you doing?” he asks.

“Making you obedient,” his aunt says, frowning. “You'll thank me eventually. Now run along and find your father.”

Jeongguk is going to refuse again, protest that he's not going anywhere till Hoseok comes to soothe him, but to his utter horror, his body is moving without his permission. He walks to the door of the kitchen before he manages to stop himself, but it has him sweating, nausea setting into his stomach the longer he waits. He can only hold it for a few moments before he moves again, setting off down the hall as relief bleeds into his muscles.

Jeongguk doesn't understand what's happening, but he's making a beeline for the drawing room, barely pausing as he enters. He doesn't know why, but he has to find his father, urgently.

The room is a sea of guests, and they descend upon him as he enters.

“Poor darling,” one woman coos, patting his shoulder. He vaguely recognizes her as one of his father's coworkers. “What a tragic loss.”

“He's so young,” says another sympathetically. “Do you want a cookie, dear?”

“Where's my dad?” Jeongguk asks, not because he wants to know but because he somehow has to.

“Sweet boy!” another woman exclaims. “Of course he wants his father. I can take you to him, he's just over by the refreshments. Don't worry.”

The tension in his body relaxes as he draws near to his father and dissipates entirely as he grips at the sleeve of his suit. “Dad,” he says, and like magic, the sensation is gone. Jeongguk is free.
“Jeongguk?” His father turns from cutting a slice of cake. “Good god, have you been playing in the yard?”

Jeongguk glances down at his suit and realizes that he's dusty from the pantry floor. “No,” he says honestly.

Leaning towards him, his father hisses, “I brought you up to be better behaved than this. You're embarrassing us.” With sharp movements, he brushes at Jeongguk's clothing, swatting the marks off until he looks presentable. “There. You're coming with me. Smile.”

Immediately Jeongguk's face melts into a bright grin. He can't help it.

His father shakes his head, frustrated. “Don't look so delighted! This is a funeral! Just act appropriate.”

The smile disappears. Jeongguk is really worried now, so worried that he just lets his father pull him along by his sleeve. He barely registers anyone else until his father is pinching his arm.

“Jeongguk,” he urges. “Say hello. This is one of my new business partners, Mr. Kim.”

“Hello,” Jeongguk says flatly, because for some reason he has to.

“Hi there, young man,” his father's guest says. “How are you holding up?”

Terribly, Jeongguk thinks, but he stubbornly says nothing.

His father reaches the end of his patience. “Great sakes, Jeongguk, you're impossible. Run along and make yourself useful until you can display a better attitude.”

Jeongguk has no problem following that order. As he leaves, he hears Mr. Kim telling his father, *he's just a child. It must be hard on him.*
Jeongguk runs from the room and down the hall, slipping into the dining hall where he knows he'll find Hoseok clearing the lunch dishes.

“Jeongguk,” Hoseok says, surprised, as he enters the room. He sets down a tray of dirty plates just in time for Jeongguk to barrel into his arms with a broken sob. “What's going on?”

He kneels, holding Jeongguk's face between his hands and brushing his tears away with his thumb. “Is the funeral too much for you?”

Jeongguk nods, clinging to Hoseok's shirt.

“Oh, Jeongguk.” Hoseok's lips press into a thin line, concerned. “It'll be okay. Stop crying, sweet.”

Jeongguk’s tears cut off immediately with a choked gasp. It wasn't voluntary. He looks up at Hoseok, eyes round with fear. Something's wrong. He knows it is, ever since his aunt did that weird thing.

*What are you doing?*

*Making you obedient.*

Jeongguk isn't stupid. The truth dawns on him.

“H-hoseok,” he whimpers. “My aunt… she… she made me obedient.”


Lip trembling, Jeongguk shakes his head. “N-no, you don't understand, she used magic and now I'm obedient.”

Hoseok looks worried. “She shouldn't be doing magic on you. What do you mean, obedient?”
“I mean, I have to do everything I'm told,” Jeongguk said. He tugs on Hoseok's sleeve, anxious. “I can't _not_ do it. I'm scared.”

Suddenly Hoseok understands. “Are you sure?”

“T-talk me to do something,” Jeongguk says. “I'll try not to.”

Hoseok looks like he's debating it for a minute, but his eyebrows set in a firm line. “Touch your toes.”

Jeongguk tries not to. He really does, his face screwing up and turning red with the painful effort of ignoring the pull. It only takes about five seconds before he breaks down and touches his toes.

Hoseok steps back, rubs the bridge of his nose like he's trying to figure out what to do. “Okay. Come with me.”

Hiding himself behind Hoseok's tall frame, Jeongguk follows him into the hall, up the stairs, down the corridors to his aunt's room. He trusts that Hoseok is going to fix it, knows that Hoseok can stand up to his aunt.

To Jeongguk, Hoseok falls somewhere in between a parent, a brother, and a best friend. He's technically his father's live-in assistant but he's often also taken on the role of Jeongguk's nanny whenever his mother wasn't available.

He's powerful, too; he's got some witch blood, though that's a secret between Jeongguk and his mother. Magic people don't like to expose themselves, unless they're Jeongguk's aunt.

“How dare you curse Jeongguk!” Hoseok is seething. “It's completely unethical. Have you no conscience?”

“Hyunju,” Hoseok calls, banging on her door. Jeongguk cowers behind his legs.

The door swings open. “Can I help you?” Jeongguk's aunt says, obviously irritated.

“How dare you curse Jeongguk!” Hoseok is seething. “It's completely unethical. Have you no conscience?”
“It's not a curse,” she insists. “It's a blessing. He's an impudent child and it will help him know his place.”

“He's not impudent,” Hoseok fumes. “He's an eleven year old who just lost his mother, for fuck's sake!”

“Well, let his good behavior be a comfort to her departed soul,” Hyunju huffs. “I'm not changing it.”

“Yes you are, this instant.”

His aunt's eyes narrow, her patience at an end. “I came from my extremely busy life to this home to nurse my late husband's sister-in-law and I've gotten nothing in return so far except complaints, tantrums, and complete ingratitude.” She snorts. “It's clear my talents aren't appreciated. I've had enough. I'm leaving.”

“Don't you dare,” Hoseok says, rushing to grab her wrist. “You're not going anywhere until--”

“Goodbye,” she says, vanishing in a puff of orange smoke.

Jeongguk and Hoseok stare into the empty space she had occupied. She was gone, and, knowing her, not likely to return for the years it took to calm her temper.

“Y-you can take it off, right, Hoseok?” Jeongguk whispers after a moment. “You're going to make it better. Right?”

Hoseok looks pained. He kneels in front of Jeongguk. “I'm sorry,” he says. “The only magic that can undo a curse comes from the person who cast it.”

Jeongguk's chin wobbles. “There's some other way, then?”

“I don't know.” Hoseok takes his hand, squeezes it. “I don't know. Maybe she cast a spell that only lasts till morning. Let's hope for that.”
“Okay,” Jeongguk says, but he's frightened.

For the rest of the day, Jeongguk hides in his room, safe from the prying eyes of his father, the funeral guests, anybody. He goes to bed early, hoping, praying, that Hoseok is right, and that the spell will dissipate by the time he wakes up.

Jeongguk hardly sleeps. When he finally wakes up, the first thing he does is seek out Hoseok.

“Tell me to do something,” he says, catching Hoseok's arm as he's walking out of his father's office.

Hoseok looks both ways down the hall and pulls him into the empty office. He bites his lip, worried. “Give me a hug.”

Jeongguk hugs him, and then he cries.

“It'll be okay,” Hoseok says into his hair, patting his back. “We'll take care of you. Don't cry.”

Jeongguk stops crying.

“I mean, cry if you want,” Hoseok amends, mortified. “Shit. I'll need to be more careful.”

Distraught, Jeongguk chokes on a sob.

Later, when he's calmed down, he and Hoseok make a promise never to tell Jeongguk's father.
Jeongguk's father is nothing like his mother was. Whereas she was prudent and fun-loving, Jeongguk's father is serious, no-nonsense, and hungry. He snatches power and money and connections wherever he can.

Jeongguk knows as well as Hoseok does that if his father learned about the curse he wouldn't hesitate to exploit it. They can't take that chance.

Adjusting to life in the wake of the funeral is doubly awful. Jeongguk isn't quite sure how to function without his mother and has no idea what to do about the curse. He's lost two things in one blow; his comfort and his freedom. Part of it is thanks to his aunt.

How he hates her.

They try ordering the curse to stop working, but that seems to be the only order Jeongguk won't follow.

Slowly, Jeongguk learns the limits of his obedience. He must obey any direct order—he never can delay more than a minute or two before eventually his muscles simply give in. He can avoid any orders phrased as questions, though; he can choose whether or not he wants to respond when their cook says, “will you help me carry that platter, pumpkin?”

He finds that there are ways of subverting orders. Hoseok gives them mindlessly sometimes, little things like “eat up” and “come here.” If Jeongguk knows it's an accident, he'll say, “do I have to?” and Hoseok will amend his mistake.

But even precautions can't save him from everything.

Jeongguk is tutored at home instead of school—his father insists the education is better—so he doesn't have many friends his age. However, a few months later, his father hires a new cleaning lady and with her comes her fourteen-year-old daughter, Haejin.

Jeongguk is shy of her at first, but after a few weeks they grow comfortable with each other. When Haejin isn't at school, they hang out and play board games or soccer in Jeongguk's backyard.
“Your life is pretty boring,” Haejin tells him one day. “You just sit at home all day and hang out with your servants.”

“I'm not bored,” Jeongguk says, surprised. “I like it here.”

“I don't mean that.” Haejin flips her hair, yawning. “I mean you're boring. Don't you have any interesting hobbies? Anything special about you at all?”

“I do,” Jeongguk retorts, and then immediately draws a blank. “I... I like drawing.”

Haejin makes a face. “Everyone likes drawing. That's basic.”

Jeongguk's face falls—that's not true, is it? He's not boring. Then he thinks of something. “I'm cursed,” he blurts.

“Really?” Haejin's eyes widen in interest before she schools her features. “You must be lying. There's no way someone like you has gotten close to a magical creature.”

“No, really,” Jeongguk insists, eager to please. “I'm cursed with obedience.”

“Prove it, then.”

“Tell me to do something,” Jeongguk says. “I'll have to do it.”

Haejin orders him to do a cartwheel, which he executes perfectly. “See?” he says.

“How do I know you're not pretending?”

“I'm not!” Jeongguk's lower lip juts out.

“Hmm.” Haejin looks him over. “Then... I order you to steal that statue.” She points over the fence
to his neighbor's garden at a decorative stone carving of an angel.

“No, that's bad,” Jeongguk gasps, immediately resisting, but Haejin simply sits back, watching.

Jeongguk really doesn't want to do it—he likes the neighbor lady; she's sweet and gives him peppermints every once in a while—but he can't hold out forever. Teary, he starts off toward the fence, struggling to climb over it. He scrapes his ribs hard as he clamors over, but eventually he makes it, grabs the statue—careful not to step on any flowers—and returns over the fence.

“I did it,” he tells Haejin forlornly as he stands in front of her holding the statue.

She nods lightly, as if she's pleased. “Well. I guess that's kind of cool.”

Jeongguk tries to vault himself over the fence again to return the statue, but he finds that he can't. The curse won't let him. He realizes with dread that the statue has to stay stolen if it's going to honor the order.

“Jeongguk,” Haejin calls from the lawnchair. “Go get me a snack from the kitchen. And a glass of lemonade.”

By the end of the afternoon, Jeongguk really regrets telling Haejin about his curse. She stops playing with him, instead simply ordering him around—everything from “go fetch my jacket” to “play checkers with me, but you have to lose.”

He comes to Hoseok that night in tears.

“You shouldn't have told her,” Hoseok scolds him, handing him a tissue. “That's dangerous.”

Jeongguk realizes that now. “I wish I hadn't.”

The corners of Hoseok's mouth turn down. “I'm going to give you an order, Jeongguk. I'm sorry, but it's for your own good.” He looks sad. “Never tell anyone about your curse.”
“I won't want to,” Jeongguk insists, but he doesn't protest. He might as well stay safe.

The next day, Hoseok arranges for Haejin's mother to take a position elsewhere and hires a new servant. It turns out that half-witches can be very persuasive.

Jeongguk doesn't tell anyone else about the curse. He can't, of course. But he wouldn't want to.

When Jeongguk is twelve his father decides it's time for him to start joining his social circle. He tells Jeongguk that he's going to accompany him to a dinner event, and Jeongguk has no choice.

That's why Jeongguk is sitting here in the party hall of a private resort, fiddling with his tie—he doesn't like the way it cinches around his neck.

It's a party of sorts, hosted by the one of Jeongguk's father's business partners, the Min Corporation. His father isn't associated with any companies; he's a middle-man specializing in dealings with foreign nations and magical cultures, but he makes any and all connections he can. Right now he's talking with the woman on his left. Flirting, really, because his hand is resting on her shoulder far longer than is appropriate for a friendly touch.

Jeongguk tries not to look.

It's all supposed to be a birthday party for the company heir. Prince Min Yoongi, they call him jokingly, but it's not too far from the truth. They boy is on track to inherit a corporate empire large enough to qualify as a small kingdom. Despite the party being for him, Jeongguk hasn't caught sight of the birthday boy yet, though to be fair they aren't sitting very close to the “important” tables.

Jeongguk feels suffocated by the crowd of people and the stiflingly formal atmosphere and his stupid suit. “I have to go to the bathroom,” he tells his father, who simply waves him off.
He doesn't know where the restrooms are but he doesn't stop to ask anyone, content to wander around rather than expedite his return to the table. Making his way to the edge of the vast dining hall, he slips out of one of the doors.

Jeongguk meanders down one of the hallways, stopping to admire a bouquet of flowers, a pretty table, the view from one of the windows. After a few minutes, he finds a flight of stairs and makes his way up them, eager to explore and rid himself of the sensation of too many people in one place.

The stairs lead to another hallway. There are less doors on this one, Jeongguk wonders what they might be. It's apparently empty, and Jeongguk's footsteps echo on the carpeted floor as he makes his way toward the large, ornate window at the end of the corridor.

It's a beautiful window, the edges shaped with lacy cut glass and the sill furnished with a plush window seat. Jeongguk sinks down onto it, pressing his hands to the cold glass as he peers outside. It's peaceful here. Jeongguk entertains the idea of hiding out by this window for the rest of the event.

Jeongguk jumps when he hears a door opening nearby, spinning around to find himself face to face with another person.

It's a boy, also dressed for the event. He must be around Jeongguk's age, perhaps a little older. He looks as surprised to see Jeongguk as Jeongguk is to see him.

"Hello," the stranger says.

Jeongguk is paralyzed for a second, then hops down from the seat. “Hi. Sorry to intrude.” He's nervous—he doesn't actually know if he's allowed in this part of the building—but the other boy is shaking his head.

“No, it's okay. Are you escaping the party?”

“Yeah,” Jeongguk admits. “Are you?”

The boy's lips twist into a wry smile. “Maybe. It's all kind of suffocating.”
Jeongguk gives him a sympathetic look. “Is it your first? It is for me.”

“Nah. I get dragged to these all the time.” The boy moves closer, plopping down on the cushions. “I don’t see people my age, usually. It’s a nice surprise.”

Jeongguk thinks about that. The boy is right, he’d only seen adults at the party. He wrinkles his nose. “That’s no fun.”

“No,” the stranger agrees. “It's not.” He tilts his head. “What's your name?”

“Jeon Jeongguk.”

The boy's eyebrows shoot up. “Jeon Suyoung's son?”

“You knew my mom?”

They stare at each other.

“I did,” the boy says finally. “She was nice. I haven't met very many people who could make my father laugh during a contract meeting.”

He must be the son of one of Jeongguk's father's business partners, then. Jeongguk blinks, thinking. “That sounds like her.”

“One of the times I met her, she was taking notes furiously on this legal pad while the meeting was going on. When I got up to get a cup of water, I caught a glimpse of the paper. She'd done an excellent caricature of my uncle—she even got the wart on his nose.”

Jeongguk stares for a second, then chortles, holding his stomach. “Oh my god,” he gasps. “She did like to do that. She taught me how to draw, too.”
“She was a great woman,” the boy says solemnly. “The world is a worse place without her.”


They’re quiet for a moment, as if out of respect for the dead. Then the other boy speaks up. “Are you hungry? I know one of the cooks. We could sneak down to the kitchens, steal a snack, and go bowling.”

Jeongguk's eyes go wide. “There's a bowling alley here?”

“Yep, at the west side of the resort.”

“Are we allowed to use it?”

He shrugs. “Why not?”

Jeongguk hesitates. He's rarely rebellious, but something about this boy's attitude is contagious.

“I'm in.”

He follows as they traipse down the stairs, through a tiny corridor and into a back entrance of the kitchen. The cook seems to recognize this boy, smiling and patting him on the head. He scoops several spoonfuls of what look like gourmet tater tots into a cardboard carton and shoos them on their way.

The bowling alley is deserted but fully functional, so the two of them kick off their shoes and remove their blazers and ties. They fiddle around with the little kiosk until they get the scoreboard to work correctly.

Jeongguk learns that he's pretty good at bowling. The other boy is terrible. Jeongguk practically destroys him. They talk a lot of crap at each other but none of it is mean-spirited; in the end neither of them care who wins or who loses because it's simply sheer fun. They eat the fancy tater tots and throw bowling balls and thoroughly enjoy themselves.
When Jeongguk throws his sixth strike, the other boy flops across the bench dramatically. “I'm done for. I can't beat you. You should have warned me that you're practically Olympic level.”

Jeongguk laughs, high and pleased. “You're really not that bad,” he says.

“You say as you beat me by 100 points.”

“Don't feel bad. I just have an affinity for picking stuff up.”

His new friend sits up. “You mean to tell me you've never bowled before,” he says in disbelief.

“Nope…”

“Lies.”

“It's true,” Jeongguk insists. “I don't really get to go out and play much.”

“Really? Your dad never drove you out to the bowling alley and promised he was going to show you his famed 'lethal strike tactic'? I thought that was basically a dad requirement.”

Jeongguk can't imagine his father doing anything of the sort. “Uh. No.”

“Well.” The boy has a strange expression on his face. “You're a prodigy. Congratulations.”

“Thanks.”

After a while they decide they've stayed away from the party long enough, so they clean up and put everything away and sneak back to the dining hall. They part ways at the door.
“I had fun. Thanks,” Jeongguk says.

The other boy waves happily. “See you around,” he says.

Jeongguk makes his way back to his father's table. He's ten steps inside when he realizes that he's actually the world's dumbest creature and he never even asked for the boy's name.

He turns around to ask, but he's disappeared, just like that.

It's a shame.

Jeongguk's father is furious. He pulls him aside once he returns and shakes him. “Where have you been? It's been almost two hours!”

“Just... around,” Jeongguk replies meekly. He feels small. Afraid.

“Damn it,” his father curses. “Can't you do anything properly? Stay right with me for the rest of the night.”

Jeongguk wants to scream. Now he has no choice.

It seems that he arrived at an opportune moment, because the conversation dies down as they return to their seats. Someone approaches the podium at the front of the hall; a middle aged woman. She's tall and well-dressed.

“Hello everyone,” she says. “Thank you for coming tonight to celebrate my eldest son's birthday. As this party is in honor of him, I'd like to have him say a few words. Please welcome the birthday boy, Min Yoongi!”

Jeongguk leans forward in his seat. He may not be enjoying himself, but he has to admit that he's curious about the mysterious Min heir.

He watches, along with everyone else in the room, as Min Yoongi walks up into the little stage and
to the microphone.

Except Jeongguk can barely believe his eyes.

It's his new friend. The boy he met in the hallway.

He just went bowling with Min Yoongi.

Jeongguk gapes until his father hisses shut your mouth, you look like a fish in his ear. He blinks, trying to register what Yoongi is saying, but he only catches the typical “thank you for the birthday wishes” and “have a good night.” Everything feels like a blur. Can it really have happened?

He doesn't know what to think.

Hoseok picks Jeongguk up instead of his father driving him home—apparently he had 'private business' to attend to. From the way his hand was resting on the thigh of the lady he had been talking to earlier, Jeongguk understands exactly what kind business he means. He tries not to think about it.

“How was the party?” Hoseok asks him in the car.


Three days later, Jeongguk's father brings the same woman to dinner. Jeongguk is forced to dress nicely and call her “Ms. Jung.” She brings her son Hunchul with her; her husband is deceased, just like Jeongguk's mother.
Jeongguk feels uncomfortable with where this is going.

He doesn't particularly like Ms. Jung. She's too shallow, simpering, clinging to his father's arm. Jeongguk doesn't like the way her hands are all over everyone, the way she pulls him into a hug the moment she walks in the door. She smells suffocatingly of perfume and Jeongguk feels like choking.

If he dislikes her, though, her son is an entirely different story. Jeongguk knows from the moment that he sets eyes on Hunchul that he's cruel.

When they sit down to dinner, Ms. Jung sits on his father's left and Jeongguk sits next to Hunchul on his right. Hunchul is just one year older, but he's a lot taller. Jeongguk makes a point of not looking at him the entire meal.

Ms. Jung exclaims over everything from how cute Jeongguk is to the flowers on the table to the expensive carpeting. Jeongguk finds he doesn't have much of an appetite.

“Jeongguk, I'm sure you'd like to show Hunchul around, wouldn't you?” his father suggests after dinner.

“Not really,” Jeongguk mumbles, because he has the freedom to refuse.

“Jeongguk.” His father's eyes narrow. “Run along and take Hunchul with you.”

Well, he saw that coming. Painfully obedient, he leads Hunchul out of the room and into the front hallway. “This is the entrance,” Jeongguk says dryly. He steps into the main corridor. “Here's the hallway.”

Hunchul raises an eyebrow, amused. “Do you do everything everyone tells you to do?”

“No,” Jeongguk lies. He doesn't like Hunchul's tone of voice.

“Really? Because you seem kinda like a pushover to me. You look like the kind of kid people would shut into lockers at school.”
Do kids really do that? Jeongguk is suddenly grateful to be home-schooled. “Leave me alone,” he says, wanting to storm off but unable to due to his father's stupid directions.

“Pansy.” Hunchul grins and elbows him in the ribs. “You got any video games?”

“No,” Jeongguk says, frowning. “I play outside. Or I read.”

“Jesus, what are you, eight? Do you play dress up in your room or something?” Hunchul snorts. “What kind of man are you?”

Jeongguk closes his eyes and sighs. He can't wait until Hunchul goes home.

Instead, he grits his teeth and suggests they watch a movie on the living room TV because the less he has to talk to Hunchul, the better.

Hunchul picks something gory that Jeongguk hates, but he closes his eyes during the scary parts and makes it through the whole thing because he has no choice.

Hunchul is right. He's a pushover, and there's not a thing he can do to change that.

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Jeongguk loves going shopping with Hoseok. He doesn't get out of the house much, so even grocery shopping feels like a treat. Often, Hoseok will take him out to see a movie or to get ice cream, too. Those are some of Jeongguk's favorite days.

Today they're stopped at a bookstore. Hoseok told Jeongguk he can pick out a new book, his gift, and Jeongguk is delighted. He's perusing the books on magical creatures—magic fascinates him, partly because of the hope that he'll discover something to help him and partly because it's just so interesting—when he pushes a book aside and sees a pair of eyes peeking through the shelf from the
Jeongguk recognizes those eyes, and if their delighted expression is anything to go by, they recognize him, too.

“Min Yoongi?”


Jeongguk is a little stunned, but he returns Yoongi’s smile.

Footsteps patter along in the other aisle, and then Yoongi rounds the corner. “What are you doing here?” he asks.

“I could ask you the same thing,” Jeongguk says. “I'm here with my father's assistant. He's looking for a new cookbook.”

Yoongi laughs. “Me too, sort of. My father is publishing a book on his business strategies in the spring and I'm here waiting while his agent sets up a signing event.”

Jeongguk gives him a wan smile. “Hey,” he says suddenly. “How come you didn't tell me who you were?”

“You didn't ask,” Yoongi shrugs.

That's fair. Jeongguk blushes slightly. “Yeah, but… still. You could have mentioned it.”

Sighing, Yoongi rubs at his temple. “I didn't think it would matter. And people… tend to treat me differently when they know my name.”

“I wouldn't,” Jeongguk says honestly.
“Yeah.” Yoongi smiles at him. “I believe you.”

Jeongguk steps to the end of the aisle, craning his neck to spot Hoseok in the cooking section. He still looks busy. “Wanna do something while we wait?”

“Why not?” Yoongi’s eyes are bright.

“Follow me,” Jeongguk says. He makes his way to the reference section and pulls out a fat dictionary. There's no one around, so he plops down on the floor, gesturing for Yoongi to copy him. He does.

“I'm going to tell you a word,” Jeongguk says. “And then I'm going to read three definitions. You have to guess which one is right.”

Yoongi raises his eyebrows, amused. “Okay.”


Yoongi licks his lips, deliberating. “Three?”


Yoongi narrows his eyes playfully. “You're just asking for it,” he says. “Fine.” He flips around for a minute, then stares at the page, a grin tugging at his lips. “Spaghettification. One, making pasta. Two, eating spaghetti till you projectile vomit. Three, getting ripped apart in a black hole.”

“Three,” Jeongguk says, doubling over in laughter. “You stink at this! Your definitions have to be better than that.”

Yoongi smacks his foot, laughing. “It's my first time!”
“It was my first time bowling and I still beat you,” Jeongguk points out. “I'll give you another turn. Try again.”

By the time that Hoseok comes looking for Jeongguk, the two of them are dissolved in giggles over the world “winebibbler.” They’ve both forgotten to keep score. Jeongguk has no idea who won.

When he and Yoongi say goodbye to each other Jeongguk realizes he forgot to pick a book. It's okay, though. There's always next time.

Months pass. Jeongguk turns thirteen. He and Hoseok celebrate with a mini cake in the kitchen and Hoseok surprises him with a book of fairytales. It's a small party, but Jeongguk is happy.

Later that day, Jeongguk's father calls him into his office.

“Ah, Jeongguk,” he says as he enters. “Come sit.” He gestures to the chair in front of his desk.

Jeongguk does, of course. His father looks him over. He reaches over to grasp Jeongguk's chin, turning his face from side to side, examining. It's immensely uncomfortable but what can Jeongguk do, really?

“You look like your mother,” he says finally. “She was gorgeous.”

Jeongguk's stomach churns. Not for the first time, he wonders why someone like his mother chose to marry this man.

“You've got my jaw, though,” he muses, letting go of Jeongguk's face.
Jeongguk holds his tongue and waits for his father to get to the point.

Folding his hands, Jeongguk's father sits back in his chair. "I'm going away," he says. "For business. I won't be back for almost six months."

*Good*, Jeongguk thinks.

“I don't want you to stay here all the time anymore. It's not good for you to be alone.”

Vaguely, Jeongguk wonders why his father is just having that thought now. "I'm happy as I am now."

“Yes, yes,” his father waves him off. “You want me to think you humble. But I've made a plan.”

“A plan?” Jeongguk's stomach cools with dread.

“Yes. Hunchul's mother has raved about the boarding school that Hunchul attends. I've looked into it, and it looks adequate enough. I want you to attend there at the start of the term.”

Jeongguk's eyes widen in horror. “Father, no!”

“It will be an adjustment,” his father continues as if he hasn't heard him. “Nonetheless it will be good for you. Perhaps you will learn better manners.”

“Father,” Jeongguk tries again. “I'm happy with my tutor now. Isn't that cheaper?”

“It's sweet of you to suggest it, but paying a tutor to live here is actually more expensive than tuition.” His father taps his fingers on the desk impatiently. “You're old enough to be off on your own now.”

“I don't want to,” Jeongguk says. His fingers curl into fists underneath the desk.
“No? Well.” His father smiles. It's a cruel smile. “I don't care. You're attending that school whether you want to or not.”

“I won't,” Jeongguk says weakly.

His father sighs, long and irritated. “This is exactly why you're going. This attitude cannot stay.” He points to the door. “Ms. Jung will pick you up on Tuesday at nine in the morning. You may leave now.”

Jeongguk goes, seething.

“Can't you stop him?” he asks Hoseok as soon as he tracks him down.

“No, I can't,” Hoseok says. “I wish I could. I'm sorry.”

Jeongguk is angry, suddenly. “What is the good of you being magic if you never even use it?” he bursts out. “What am I going to do when I have to go? What am I going to do a-all by my...” His anger is gone as quickly as it came. He bursts into tears.

“Shh,” Hoseok says, winding his arms around him and stroking his back. “It will be okay. Maybe you'll make a friend.”

“I don't want a friend,” Jeongguk chokes into his chest. “I just want to be home, with you. You are my friend.”

Now that Jeongguk is thirteen, he decides he's old enough to be by himself for a while. He takes his bike the next day and bikes his way downtown to the aquarium. It's a huge building—owned by Yoongi's family's company—but it's free and open to the public. Jeongguk locks his bike securely to the rack outside and wanders in.

Jeongguk loves the aquarium. It's like a living art museum where the paintings are flashing glass walls full of coral and trailing plants and fish. This will be his last time here for a long time, so he wanders from tank to tank, silently telling each fish goodbye.

In the twilight zone exhibit, in the darkness, in front of a tank of angler fish, Jeongguk tears up. He figures it's okay, because no one can see him.

When he steps back from the tank after a long time, he slams straight into someone.

“Sorry,” he says, ready to slink away in humiliation, but the person grabs his wrist.

“Jeongguk?”

It's Yoongi, of all people. Or maybe not “of all people,” because his family owns this building. Still, it's a shock.

“Hi,” Jeongguk says, trying hard not to sound like he was crying.

“Are you okay?” Yoongi peers hard at him in the strange colored light that's leaking from the tanks. “You seem upset.”

“I'm leaving,” Jeongguk blurts out.

“Huh?”

“I'm going away to school. It's my father's idea.” Jeongguk doesn't know why he's telling Yoongi all this. He's just there at the wrong time and suddenly everything is spilling out before Jeongguk can stop it.
“Oh.” Yoongi sounds disappointed. Jeongguk wonders if he's imagining it. “When?”

“Tomorrow.”

There's a heavy pause. “I wish you weren't,” Yoongi says. “I won't be able to run into you anymore.”

Jeongguk chokes out a laugh. “Yeah. Guess you'll have to write me letters or something.”

“I will,” Yoongi says. “If you want.”

Jeongguk does want. “I'm sorry. I didn't even say hi. How are you?”

“Happy to see you,” Yoongi says. “Sad you're going. I'm losing a friend.”

Jeongguk's heart leaps at the insinuation that Yoongi thinks of him as a friend.

“Do you like the aquarium?” Yoongi asks. “It's one of my favorite places. I come here a lot.”

“Yes,” Jeongguk says, wondering how he hasn't seen Yoongi here before. “Me too.”

“Do you like the dolphins?”

“Yes.” His happiness is returning, slowly but surely.

“Want to come with me to see the dolphin show? There's one in five minutes. Maybe it will help you stop thinking about tomorrow.”

“Maybe,” Jeongguk agrees. He rubs at his itchy eyes. “Hey. Were you serious about writing letters?”
“Only if you write back.”

Jeongguk smiles at that.

Yoongi looks at his watch, then gives Jeongguk a gentle push toward the door. “Hurry. We'll be late if we don't get going.”

I don't want to lose this, Jeongguk thinks. And then he stops thinking about it for a while, because the dolphins are beautiful.

At least he has until tomorrow.

Hoseok helps him pack, somehow fitting far more into Jeongguk's suitcase than should be possible. Jeongguk suspects magic. He draws it out as long as possible, dreading the end, because that means he has to go to bed and then wake up. And when he wakes up he has to leave.

He briefly thinks about running away, but he knows he couldn't. He's not brave enough for that.

Eventually they do finish packing, and his suitcase is zipped up and sitting by the door.

Hoseok sits on the edge of his bed. “I have something for you.”

Jeongguk perks up. “Really?”
Hoseok reaches into his pocket and pulls out a heavy silver ring. It's pretty, but masculine at the same time.

“I love it,” Jeongguk says. He lets Hoseok slip it on.

“When you're in trouble, turn it three times.”

“What does it do?” Jeongguk asks, curious.

“You'll see.” Hoseok winks. “Don't worry, Gguk. You'll be okay.”

Even though he's thirteen he lets Hoseok tuck him in and wish him goodnight.

Jeongguk doesn't want to sleep, but the stress of the last few days has gotten to him, and he can't keep his eyes open.

Eventually, he drifts off.

He dreams of dolphins.
Jeongguk's father has a present for him at breakfast—his first phone.

“It's got my contact, and Hoseok's,” he says stiffly. “You're old enough to need one, I suppose.”

Nothing can lift Jeongguk's heavy mood, but admittedly it is nice to have a phone. He can text Hoseok when he gets lonely. Jeongguk half-wishes he'd had it the day before; then he could have asked for Yoongi's number.

Hunchul and his mother show up promptly at nine. Ms. Jung kisses his father's cheek and they load Jeongguk's stuff into the car.

Ms. Jung isn't coming, she's brought her chauffeur to drive them to the school. Jeongguk guesses that she's planning to stay with his father for a while.

The goodbyes are quick—his father pats him uncomfortably on the back, Hoseok gives him a fast, tight, hug and tells him to blow everyone out of the water.

And then they're off.

The school is about two hours away but Jeongguk knows it's going to feel like three years when he's stuck in the backseat with Hunchul. He's not wrong.

About fifteen minutes in, Hunchul gets bored of doing whatever he's doing with his phone and starts pestering Jeongguk, who's trying his best to read his new book and ignore Hunchul's existence.

“Hey,” Hunchul says, poking at him. “I'm talking to you. Pay attention to me.”

An order. Jeongguk looks up and gives him the most unamused stare he can until Hunchul breaks eye contact, muttering, “Stop that.”

“What are you reading?” Hunchul rudely pulls the book from his hands.

“Hey! Give that back!”

“What the hell,” Hunchul says, studying it. “Fairytales?”

“I said, give that back!” Jeongguk is practically glaring holes into Hunchul’s skull, but he just laughs.

“God, what a pansy. What else did you bring, a fucking tutu and wings?” Hunchul tosses the book back at Jeongguk, then grabs his backpack.

“Don't touch that!” Jeongguk smacks his arm.

“Why not?” Hunchul raises his eyebrows. “Sit still, princess, no need to get your panties in a twist. I'm just looking.”

Jeongguk can't move. His shoulders shake in anger. “Stop,” he says, his teeth clenched.

Ignoring him, Hunchul unzips the bag and empties it out. It's not much—just a few more novels, his phone charger, a spare jacket, and a deck of cards.

Hunchul leaves all that on the seat between them and pulls out the last item—Jeongguk's sketchbook.

Jeongguk’s stomach sinks. That notebook is personal; a diary of drawings. He really, really doesn't want Hunchul to look through it.

“Stop,” he repeats weakly, but he can't do anything as Hunchul opens the cover.

“What's this?” Hunchul says curiously, flipping through. “Your drawings?” Jeongguk doesn't know how good his sketches are—will he recognize them? He hopes not.
Hunchul stops at one. “This your mom?”

It is. Jeongguk drew her sitting at one of the windows, staring blissfully outside. She did that often when she got sick, because she couldn't run or play tennis or work in her garden anymore.

He says nothing.

Hunchul eyes him, but he keeps turning pages. Jeongguk hates it. That notebook is so intimate, a window into his thoughts and desires, and it's dirtied by Hunchul's gaze.

“Wait,” Hunchul says. He's stopped again.

When Jeongguk sees what drawing it is, his heart stops too.

“Why did you draw Min Yoongi?”

Jeongguk swallows. He still doesn't answer.

“What the fuck do you have to do with him? He's, like, a celebrity. You have a crush on him or something?”

No, Jeongguk doesn't. He draws the things that are important to him, like the family of rabbits he found nesting in their backyard or his mother's garden or the lady who gave him a free cookie when he was shopping with Hoseok. Yoongi became his friend, so he's part of Jeongguk's heart.

He doesn't even try to explain it to Hunchul, though, because he knows he wouldn't understand a word of it.

Hunchul gets tired of his silence. “Fine, you can pick up your stuff and read your damn book,” he says, tossing the bag aside. Wordlessly, Jeongguk puts everything away and goes back to ignoring Hunchul.
He was right. The trip feels like three years.

Since Jeongguk has never gone to a real school, he's not sure what to expect. The first thing that strikes him as they pull up to the entrance is how big it is. It's a snooty prep school, that much he knows, but it's really the size of a small university.

Even if it's just a lack of anything to compare it to, Jeongguk is intimidated by the sheer size of the campus—or perhaps, more accurately, the number of students that must attend such a large school.

Hunchul's chauffeur helps them to unload their things, although Jeongguk doesn't really need it—he's just got his backpack and the one suitcase—and walks them into the main building to what appears to be some sort of administrative office.

The secretary recognizes Hunchul by name when they walk in. Jeongguk wonders if it's because he overestimated the student body or because Hunchul has a frequent reason to be dealing with school authority. The latter wouldn't really surprise him.

There's a painting on the wall of a gryphon—it fascinates Jeongguk as he's never seen one himself—so the secretary has to clear her throat twice in order to get his attention.

“You're Jeon Jeongguk?” She peers down her nose at him, not unfriendly, just detached.

He nods, remembering where he is. He's in a school—his new school. His new home. His nervousness catches up with him suddenly.

“You're in Sejeong Hall,” she drawls. A few seconds of rummaging has her handing him a sheet. “Here's your information. It has your schedule, room number, and door codes.”

“Thanks,” Jeongguk stutters out. He glances behind him, but Hunchul has left after checking in and the chauffeur is nowhere to be seen. His courage stutters.

The secretary tucks back a smile and slaps another sheet on the counter between them. It's a campus map, albeit simple.
“You're here,” she tells him, circling the center building with a purple pen. “Good luck.”

Feeling rather like he's been thrown into a river and told to swim, Jeongguk exits the building.

It's a pleasant fall day. As much as Jeongguk hates that he has to be here, he has to admit that the school is pretty. The neatly-trimmed lawns are fresh and green; clear weather reveals a blue sky and it's still mildly warm, as if autumn has returned in body but not in spirit.

Jeongguk studies the map and decides that he needs to go left from here, so he sets off across one of the paths, rolling his suitcase along behind him. The campus seems deserted; Jeongguk wonders if everyone is in class. It's nicer than he expected, though—peaceful. The autumn sun is warm on his skin.

It isn't as hard to locate his dormitory as he had feared. The door code works properly, thank goodness, and he manages to find a stairwell to take him to the third floor. He lugs his suitcase up all of the flights, pausing afterward to catch his breath, and makes his way down the hall until he reaches the correct dorm.

Jeongguk hesitates before entering. Should he knock? Is there even anyone there right now? He's unsure, so he raps on the door—just three tentative taps. There's no answer.

Jeongguk bites his lip and keys in the code. The doorknob turns.

No one is inside as he pokes his head in, so he drags his luggage after him and lets the door swing closed.

It's a small room, but it's neat. He has a roommate, if the second bed and sports posters are anything to go by. The side of the room closest to him is bare, so Jeongguk assumes it must be his. He drops his stuff on the bed and checks the clock that hangs over the doorway. It's only noon, and according to the sheet he was given, it's lunch break. Afternoon classes don't start for an hour and a half.

Not in the mood to unpack yet, Jeongguk crosses the room to the window. The view isn't spectacular; it's slightly cut off by the corner of what Jeongguk thinks might be a gymnasium, but he can see part of the landscape in the distance. It's good enough for him.

Jeongguk is startled when the door swings open again to reveal another boy.
They blink at each other.

“Hi,” the stranger says. “Are you my roommate?”

Jeongguk nods hesitantly. “Hi. I'm Jeon Jeongguk.”

“Park Jimin,” the boy says. He's short—shorter than Jeongguk himself, and sort of pretty, but he looks strong, muscular. Combined with the posters and trophies that stud his side of the room, Jeongguk guesses that he might be an athlete. “Nice to meet you. What grade are you in?” Jimin enters the room, dropping his bag on his desk chair.

“Eighth.”

“We're the same grade, then.” Jimin smiles at him, it's surprisingly pleasant. It strikes Jeongguk suddenly that Jimin has an accent, his syllables less clear and clipped than the standard city dialect.

Jeongguk doesn't know whether it's the knowledge that Jimin might be an outsider, too, or the fact that his pronunciation makes his voice sound round and sweet that has him relaxing, the anxious tension bleeding out of his shoulders.

The two make small talk; Jeongguk learns that Jimin is from a city really far south. The conversation peters out after that, a little awkward, but Jeongguk thinks that maybe, in time, the two of them might get along.

It doesn't take Jeongguk long to learn that he hates school.
Learning with his tutor was nothing like learning with twenty other thirteen-year-olds. It's not that Jeongguk isn't smart, but working one-on-one allowed him to slow down when he needed to and speed up when he understood the material. The frustration and stress of working at the pace of a whole class is more than he had anticipated.

Even worse is the element of discipline. Jeongguk's tutor at home was meek and never told Jeongguk to do anything; Hoseok had made sure of that when he'd hired him.

The teachers at the academy are different. They throw orders right and left whether or not the students are misbehaving. Jeongguk feels like he's being pulled ten different ways.

“Write neatly!”

“Stop talking and listen!”

“Finish it by tomorrow!”

“Start on your project early!”

“No, that's the wrong formula, Jeongguk, start your problem over again.”

It's difficult at first because he doesn't know what he's doing. He's constantly being forced to do things he doesn't understand and it feels awful.

Thanks to the curse, though, he works hard and follows directions. As the months pass, Jeongguk becomes one of his grade's top students. He's happy that he's doing well, even if he feels like a puppet.

The only class he actually likes is art class. No one tells him what to do in art class; his teacher just says, “let's start with shading!” and Jeongguk tries it all on his own. He gets a whole hour of time to draw every day and it's the best part of his new life.

Jeongguk’s social life settles in less smoothly.
It's mostly Hunchul's fault. Hunchul is popular—Jeongguk supposes it has something to do with flaunting his wealth and being good at sports, though he can't understand why anyone likes him.

Hunchul ensures that Jeongguk is the odd one out from the start. He tells all his friends that Jeongguk is a pansy and a pushover, and they tell their friends, and pretty soon Jeongguk hears snickering when he walks down hallways or has to do a math problem on the board.

It really sucks, but Jeongguk doesn't mind all too much because he has Jimin.

Hunchul and his friends make fun of Jimin for being small and talking differently. It drives him and Jeongguk together, as if they're both stranded on a little island afloat in a great big sea.

Jeongguk doesn't bond with Jimin instantaneously, mostly because he doesn't grow close to anyone without a generous dose of time. As the months pass, though, they find themselves talking late at night. Jimin likes to tell stories about his little brother and the restaurant his family runs back at home. Jeongguk tells Jimin about Hoseok and the aquarium and the rabbit family that lives in his backyard. He doesn't tell him about Min Yoongi, because he's afraid of receiving the same reaction from Jimin as he did from Hunchul.

He also doesn't talk about his mother, not yet, but thinks that someday soon he might.

By Christmas time, Jeongguk realizes that Jimin is the best friend he's ever had, Hoseok aside. He says as much, and Jimin tells him he's a giant cheeseball.

Jeongguk misses Hoseok a lot. He texts him regularly for updates on the bunny family and his mother's garden and life at home in general. The replies and occasional goofy selfies he receives help him to get through week by week.

At Jimin's urging Jeongguk joins the school soccer team. He picks up on the team play quickly. It's nice to have a way to release energy, and it's fun to spend time with a friend.

Jeongguk wouldn't say he's necessarily happy at school, but he's content. He has one friend, and he's afloat. The world spins on its axis, the sun rises and falls, and it's okay.
Jeongguk manages to completely avoid Hunchul for about three months until his luck runs out.

He's changing in the locker room after soccer practice in the very back corner, away from all the other boys. Usually Jimin is there but today Jimin is outside talking to their coach and Jeongguk is all alone.

It's that fact that makes Jeongguk nervous as he sees Hunchul and his friends approaching. He moves faster than normal, rushing to pull on his sweatpants as quickly as he can.


Jeongguk refuses to acknowledge him. He pulls on his shirt and start shoving his sweaty soccer uniform into a bag.

Hunchul's eyebrows knot together when he doesn't get a response. “Hey! I'm talking to you!”

One of his friends, a big, burly guy, makes eye contact with Hunchul. Some sort of unspoken signal passes between them, and then he's moving forward, clutching at the shoulders of Jeongguk's shirt and shoving him back against the lockers. “No need to be cocky, squirt. Answer him.”

“Don't touch me,” Jeongguk spits. His face scrunches up, and then he adds, “Jimin's outside,” because of the stupid curse.

“You think you're all that because you're good at soccer?” Hunchul says. Jeongguk wants to laugh in his face. He's jealous, he knows, jealous because Jeongguk is better than he is and the coach likes him more. “Well I have news for you, Jeongguk. You're still a pansy.”

“Get your hands off me,” Jeongguk says, shoving at the boy who's holding him against the locker.
He doesn't budge, so Jeongguk kicks at his shin, hard, and finally he lets go with a cry of pain. “Go away,” he repeats. He shoulders his bag, scooting past the two of them to go find Jimin and get out of there.

He can practically hear Hunchul seething behind him. “Go fuck yourself, Jeon Jeongguk!” he yells, and Jeongguk freezes. Shit. What kind of order is that? The pull of the curse rumbles in the pit of his stomach, and for the first time in a long while, Jeongguk is legitimately afraid.

He has no idea what's about to happen to him.

Suddenly he feels a hand on his shoulder, and he turns. Jeongguk has never been more relieved to see anyone in his life than he is to see Park Jimin.

“Don't listen to him,” Jimin says, and Jeongguk almost sobs in relief. Thank God. “You go fuck yourself, Hunchul!” he yells back, dragging Jeongguk out of the locker room.

That night, as the two of them lay in the darkness, Jeongguk thinks for the first time that he wants to tell someone about his curse. He would tell Jimin, if he could, because he knows that Jimin would be nothing but helpful.

But it doesn't matter what Jeongguk wants, because he can't say a thing.

Jimin comes home with Jeongguk during winter vacation. When Jeongguk found out that he was planning to stay at school the whole time, he called Hoseok and pestered him until he consented to let him come. Jeongguk is elated; he's never brought a friend home before. He can't show Jimin the backyard rabbits or the garden, because it's too cold and everything is dormant, but they play cards in front of a roaring fire, and Hoseok makes them hot cocoa. It's the kind of day that Jeongguk knows will always stay a happy memory.
The break streams by fast like white water rapids, and before they know it, it's the night before they have to return to school.

Jimin squeezes into Jeongguk's bed with him. They turn out the lights and get a flashlight and turn it on under the covers so they can tell each other ghost stories. That doesn't last long, though—Jimin scares too easily—so eventually they fall to just talking.

“Do you believe in magic?” Jimin asks him, staring at the dark ceiling.

“Believe in it?” Jeongguk asks, incredulous. “Of course. You don't?”

“We-ell,” Jimin says, drawing out the word thoughtfully. “I dunno. I've never met anyone magic before. It's really, really rare where I come from. I guess a lot of people in my hometown think it's a myth, or that it's weird.”

“It's definitely real,” Jeongguk insists. He can hardly believe there's anyone who doesn't know that. Sure, fairies and witches and elves and trolls aren't that common anymore, but they're very much real. Of all people, Jeongguk would know. “Of course it is. I don't know why we don't study it in school, actually.”

Jimin rolls onto his side, facing Jeongguk. “You sound positive. Have you seen magic before?”

Yes, Jeongguk wants to say, but he bites his tongue. He can't tell Jimin about his curse, or Hoseok, and he's not really sure he wants to talk about his aunt. “I just… my father does business with magical creatures,” he says finally. “They're just as real as you and me.”


Jeongguk's heart is pounding. His secret is weighing on him, heavy, like a lead blanket. He wants to confide in Jimin, but he can't. Instead he says, “Wanna hear about the time that my mother made friends with a mermaid?”

Jimin shifts. “Your mom?” Jeongguk knows he must have questions—he's never mentioned his mother, and Jimin has obviously noticed that no one lives with Jeongguk except for Hoseok and his father.
“Yeah.” He pauses. “She passed away a couple years ago. She was great.”

Jimin is silent for a moment. He reaches for Jeongguk's hand and squeezes it. “Tell me about her. And the mermaid.”

Jeongguk smiles in the darkness. He takes a deep breath, and tells the story.

Jeongguk gets a letter from Yoongi in January. He's surprised, but not in a bad way.

_I wanted to write to you sooner_, it says, _but you never told me where to send my letters to before you left that day._

Jeongguk feels a little bad. He'd been distracted by the dolphins.

_It took me forever to get a hold of your father's assistant, and even then he wouldn't give me your address for the longest time. He kept asking what I wanted to do with it, like I was some kind of creep or something._

That sounds like Hoseok. Jeongguk can just imagine him staring down Yoongi in the front hallway, which leads to the realization that Yoongi might have gone all the way to Jeongguk's house to get his mailing address. The thought makes his cheeks warm because, wow, that's sweet of him.

Yoongi writes about having to take business training classes, even at this age, and being forced to shadow his uncle on the weekends. He also tells Jeongguk about his younger brother, Taehyung—Jeongguk hadn't even known that Yoongi had a brother—and about how they had to take golf lessons together and Yoongi _hated_ it.
I wish you hadn't gone to school so far away, Yoongi had said. You're fun to hang out with and everyone else is boring.

It makes Jeongguk smile. He sits down right then and there to write Yoongi back. He tells him all about school, how they have really bad stew but the entire student body lives for the monthly ice cream night. He tells him about Jimin and soccer and art class.

Stay strong, he writes. If you die because of boredom while golfing at least it will be a good news story.

The next reply arrives promptly a week later.

This letter saved a life, Yoongi writes. I was thinking about throwing my clubs at Taehyung if he made one more joke about my aim. You better keep writing to me if you want him to survive.

“Whatcha reading?” Jimin asks from behind him. He's adding a new poster to his wall collection.

“A letter from a friend,” Jeongguk says absentmindedly.

“What friend?”

“Someone from home. You don't know him.”


Do you want my phone number? Jeongguk asks when he writes back. In case letters are too slow for you.

Sure, Yoongi replies. As long as you don't stop writing too. There's something special about having a pen pal.

Jeongguk thinks so, too.
Jeongguk doesn't quite know how it happens but one Friday evening he's working alone in a classroom, using the space for peace and quiet to finish a project with his teacher's permission, and the next minute Hunchul is storming inside and cornering him.

It's dark outside and only half the classroom's lights are switched on so it's dim, shadowy. Jeongguk can hear his heart hammering in his chest as he looks up into Hunchul's face.

“You're hiding something,” Hunchul says.

“I'm not hiding anything,” Jeongguk replies. His chest clenches all the same. “Also, I'm busy.”

Hunchul doesn't bat an eyelash. “I know I'm not wrong. There's something weird about our school's perfect Golden Boy. Maybe everyone else is in love with you and your perfect grades and your soccer skills, but I know better. There's something weird about you.”

What 'everyone else?' No one besides Hunchul spares Jeongguk a second glance. He's delusional, Jeongguk thinks. “It's not my fault if I'm doing my best.”

“It's more than that. You're not normal, Jeongguk. It's weird, you're like… a pushover. Too easy.”

Jeongguk’s breath hitches. Hunchul doesn't know, right? It's impossible. There's no way he knows.

“I'm sorry to rain on your parade,” Jeongguk tells him, careful to control his voice, “but I have work to do.”

Hunchul eyes him, suspicious. “It's not over yet. I'm going to make you crack, Jeongguk, and when I
do, everyone's going to see through your fake perfection. Just wait.”

Jeongguk stares after him as he goes. He doesn't get it. Hunchul is far more popular than he is. No one even likes Jeongguk, besides Jimin! They all put up with him, sure, but no one approaches him.

He wonders, suddenly, how much hate Hunchul is harboring in his heart that he's so hung up on every little thing Jeongguk does. It's some strange, motiveless anger. Jeongguk doesn't understand it, but it terrifies him.

Jeongguk's motivation to do his presentation is gone. He wants to go home. Still, he can't, since his teacher had told the class to finish it that night. That's why Jeongguk is stuck finishing it while everyone else gets to procrastinate till the end of the weekend.

He feels, as he often does, that life is unfair.

Jimin has to stay for the summer term instead of going home—“my parents are really, really hung up on education,” he tells Jeongguk with a grimace—so Jeongguk does too. Most of the students are gone, so everything is quieter than usual. They have less homework, and overall it's pleasant.

There is one person who's less happy about it, though.

*Why aren't you coming home?* Yoongi writes. *I was going to take you golfing so you could see how awful it is.*

Jeongguk feels bad, but then he thinks about Jimin stuck at the academy alone for three months and knows that he couldn't have made any other choice.

In mid-June, he and Jimin are both working on math homework in one of the private study rooms
“Hey,” Jimin says, setting his pencil down. “You ever thought about dating?”

Jeongguk splutters, almost dropping his own pen. “Not really,” he says after a minute. He's flustered that he's embarrassed which just makes him more embarrassed.

“Aww,” Jimin says, reaching over to pinch his cheek. Jeongguk slaps his hand. “So cute. Really, though, not at all? There's plenty of girls who are dying to go out with you, you know.”

Jeongguk frowns, confused. “No, there aren't. What are you talking about?”

“Don't be modest! Everyone knows that you practically have your own fan club.”

“That's such a lie,” Jeongguk says. “No one even notices me besides you and Hunchul.”

“You can't seriously think that.” Jimin studies his face, then laughs. “Oh my god. Wait, you really don't know?”

The utter confusion on Jeongguk's face must speak for him, because Jimin sighs. “I can't believe you don't know you're popular. I have girls coming up to me basically every day asking if I can set them up with you; apparently being the star of the soccer team is hot.”

Jeongguk reddens. It's hard to believe—Jimin is probably exaggerating a bit. “You're good at soccer, too!”

“Not as good as you.” Jimin shrugs. “Besides, I don't want their attention. I'm gay.”

Jeongguk's eyes widen. “Really? How come you never told me?”

“It never came up?” Jimin is unperturbed. “I don't want to date anyone here, anyway. I'm waiting for the one.”
Jeongguk’s totally distracted from his homework now. He leans forward, curious. “How did you know? That you're gay, I mean.”

Jimin purses his lips, sitting back. “I don't know. I just figured out that I found boys a lot more attractive than girls. I guess you could say I have a type.”

“What is it?” Jeongguk is fascinated.

“Right now?” Jimin thinks. “Hmm. I went through a big G-Dragon phase. I mean, I love his rap. But right now I'm kinda into Min Yoongi.”

What?

“Don't look at me like that!” Jimin protests, and Jeongguk realizes he's staring. “It's not weird.”

Jeongguk tries to find the words. “Min Yoongi?”

“Yeah! He's, like, one of the hottest teen idols right now. Don't you know that?”

Jeongguk absolutely, definitely does not know that. He can hardly believe his eyes as Jimin shows him his lock screen because holy shit that's actually Yoongi.

“I mean, I know half the country is in love with him,” Jimin says. “Ever since he had a minor role in that one drama last year he's been modeling and stuff. Plus he's super smart, and he's going to inherit a big company. What more can you ask than hot and rich?”

“He's hot?” Jeongguk asks, head spinning.

“Have you seen him?” Jimin demands. “His face is flawless.”

Jeongguk’s mouth opens and closes without words coming out. He doesn't quite know what to say.
“He's older than us,” is what he eventually says.

“Just by two years!” Jimin insists. “That won't matter in the long run.”

“You sound like you're going to marry him,” Jeongguk says.

“I would if I could,” Jimin says solemnly. “He's so cool.”

Jeongguk can hardly believe his ears. He can't reconcile the Yoongi he knows with the person that Jimin describes. Yoongi might be handsome, but Jeongguk has never really thought about it before. He's been too busy laughing over Yoongi's ongoing battle with his golf clubs.

He has no idea how to tell Jimin that he knows Yoongi. Thankfully, he doesn't have to, because Jimin is changing the subject to what the two of them should do when they finish studying.

It's weird, though. Jeongguk feels like he's seen Yoongi in a whole different light. He doesn't quite know how to feel about that.

Summer oozes by and melts into fall. Jimin and Jeongguk stay roommates. Things are much the same as they've always been.

Jeongguk has, for the most part, made peace with his curse. It's inconvenient, of course, but he's learned to protect himself and work around it—he follows directions, avoids bossy people when he can, talking his way around orders he won't do. It doesn't quite drain him the way it used to.

Life chugs on through fall and winter and spring. Jeongguk goes home for the next summer, excited to see Yoongi, but to his dismay, Yoongi's father sends him abroad to one of their foreign branches for the whole vacation. They're still writing letters, and though they text every once in a while, they
both like writing better.

Jeongguk goes back to school. He still loves art class more than anything; he keeps his sketchbook underneath his pillow so that no one can find it. He thinks now that maybe he wants to be an artist.

Another year floats by. A few girls confess to him, taking him by surprise. Maybe Jimin wasn't exaggerating as much as Jeongguk had thought. He rejects them all kindly; he's not interested in dating.

Jimin is still his rock. Jeongguk isn't really bullied anymore, aside from Hunchul making snide jabs when he can, but Jeongguk knows he couldn't survive here without his best friend. It would be so lonely.

Jeongguk's father keeps minimal contact with him, but between what he gathers from Hoseok and his father's cryptic remarks, he gathers that the business isn't going well. He wonders sometimes why his father is still paying his expensive tuition.

Jeongguk is sixteen now. He's going into eleventh grade, but he's already the captain of the soccer team. He knows it drives Hunchul nuts. Jeongguk isn't all that sorry.

He's barely even surprised when Hunchul finds a time when he's alone after practice to pester him.

"Jeongguk," Hunchul says. The locker room is empty aside from the two of them, since it had been their turn to stay behind and clean up equipment.

Jeongguk sighs. "What do you want?" He's changed, his bag in hand, and he's ready to leave.

"I figured it out." Hunchul looks gleeful, almost dangerously so, but Jeongguk doesn't have time for this, he has a science test the next day.

Unamused, he raises his eyebrows.

"I figured it out," Hunchul repeats, obviously irritated at the lack of reaction. "Your secret."
“Yeah, yeah,” Jeongguk says. Hunchul never shuts up about this. He turns to leave.

“I'm serious,” Hunchul says. “I've got it now. You're obedient.”

The words are like a bucket of icy water, crashing over Jeongguk's mind and paralyzing him in place. His eyes are wide, comically so, as he turns back to face the other boy.

Hunchul's cruel smile has returned. He's in his element now that he has Jeongguk's attention. “I told you I'd do it. I've been watching you, observing. I'm right, aren't I? You're an obedient little kid. You have do everything anyone tells you. Everything.”

“That's a lie,” Jeongguk says. He can feel his shoulders quaking and he knows it's obvious that he's lying but he can't help it. He's genuinely terrified.

“Oh, but it's not,” Hunchul says gleefully. “It's too true. You'll do anything you're told, won't you? It's like you're a slut for following directions. Cute, really.” He steps toward Jeongguk, predatory.

No, Jeongguk thinks. No one is supposed to know. Especially not Hunchul. He hopes his eyes don't reveal his fear.

“I knew there was something,” Hunchul continued. “You can't be everyone's golden boy forever, can you? The cat's out of the bag, and I'm going to break you bit by bit, Jeon Jeongguk.”

Jeongguk shivers. “Leave me alone,” he says, weaker than he intends it to be.

“Why should I?” Hunchul smirks, reaching over to pet Jeongguk's hair. He shies away. “I'm not the one who has to follow orders. That's you.”

Jeongguk chances a glance at Hunchul's expression, and his blood runs cold.

“In fact, I have my first one now.” Hunchul shoves a packet into Jeongguk's hands and pats him on the back. “Do my English homework for me. I'll expect it tomorrow morning before class.”
Jeongguk’s fist tightens around the paper as Hunchul walks out of the locker room. He wants nothing more than to rip the thing to shreds and flush it down the toilet.

But he can't, because he's Jeon Jeongguk, and Hunchul is right.

Jeongguk half-expects Hunchul to tell the whole school about his curse, but to his (surprise? relief?) Hunchul keeps it to himself.

The orders are mild enough at first. Homework, money, occasionally food. But soon Hunchul gets bored of that, and that's when things start turning ugly.

Hunchul starts with his grades. It's not “do my homework” anymore, it's “do my homework and don't do your own.”

“I'm disappointed in you,” Jeongguk's teacher tells him when he keeps him after class. “I can't understand it. You've been a model student for so long, and then suddenly you don't turn in three assignments in a row?”

“I'm sorry,” Jeongguk says. “It won't happen again.” He has no idea if he can keep that promise or not.

Soccer comes next. One too many orders from Hunchul telling him to play sloppy at practice has him in a serious conversation with the soccer coach.

“I just don't know what's gotten into you,” his coach laments. “You're never like this. If you don't start upping your game, we might have to change captains.”
That hurts. He considers strangling Hunchul, but in the end he thinks that might make it worse.

Everything up to this point is uncomfortable—awful, even—but bearable. Jeongguk can take this much. After all, he's become a master of endurance.

It only becomes unbearable when Hunchul goes after what matters most.

“I don't like your friendship with Park Jimin,” he says finally. It's been about a month since Hunchul figured out his secret, and he's stuck in the locker room again long after practice has ended, giving Hunchul a back massage. It's revolting, and Jeongguk is trying not to think about it.

“I didn't ask,” Jeongguk says, digging in extra hard with his thumb. He hopes it hurts.

“Feisty,” Hunchul laughs. “Well. I still don't like it. I have another order for you.”

Jeongguk doesn't want to hear it, but what choice does he have?

“I'm sick of the way you two are joined at the hip. Stop being friends with him.”

Jeongguk chokes on air. “Take that back,” he demands.

“I'm not going to. Stop massaging,” Hunchul orders. He stands, stretching. “That's all for tonight. Thanks, Jeongguk.”

Jeongguk doesn't move from the spot. “You've got to take it back.” He swallow, hard. “Please, Hunchul.” He can't lose Jimin. He can't.

“Begging? Interesting.” Hunchul pats his shoulder. “It's cute, but I'm not changing my mind. Your friendship is over. Run along, now.”

The walk back to his dorm room is the longest walk of Jeongguk's life. His mind is racing, trying desperately to think his way around this situation. He knows, deep down, that no amount of begging will make Hunchul take the order back—he enjoys watching Jeongguk suffer too much.
Jeongguk stops halfway to his dorm, pacing back and forth. He can pretend he's gone mute. Right? Then he won't talk to Jimin anymore and still follow the order.

Except that Jimin will never believe that. Even if he does, they'll just find other ways to communicate — make up hand signals or morse code with their earlobes or something else ridiculous and fun and they'll still be friends. It won't count.

Jeongguk can't imagine how much Jimin will hurt if he suddenly tells him that they aren't friends and treats him like a stranger. It would break him.

Jeongguk can't do that.

He makes his way to the back of the dorm, hiding between the dumpsters, and thinks. He sits there for an hour at least, doing his absolute best to find a solution, but there is none.

He can't even tell Jimin about the curse.

Frustrated, Jeongguk cries into his hands, tears spilling through his fingers and smearing all over his face. He lets it out, all of his frustration and pain, and then he sits there for a while, breathing in the darkness.

There's only one answer.

It's late enough that Jimin is asleep when he enters the room. He looks peaceful, happy. Jeongguk hates what he's about to do to that expression.

He packs quickly, leaving most of his things. He can't take his whole suitcase, so he picks a change of clothes, his money, his phone charger, and his sketchbook.

Jeongguk hesitates, then pulls the bundle of Yoongi's letters from his desk drawer and tucks them into his bag too.
“Bye,” he whispers to Jimin's sleeping form. “You're still the best friend I've ever had.”

Shouldering his bag, Jeongguk sneaks out of the dormitory and sets off to the nearest bus station.
Jeongguk's school is slightly out of the way and it takes about an hour of precarious roadside walking for him to reach the bus stop. He's trying hard to think about his goal and not his current situation, but the longer he walks alone in the dark, the more difficult it is to fight off his fear.

He wishes he could have just called Hoseok and explained the whole situation, asked him to negate the order—but when he picked up the phone, he found he wasn't able to make the call. The curse was stopping it, he realized, because trying to reverse the command was still an act of friendship.

Jeongguk has no option left but to break the curse.

Though he doesn't know exactly where he's going, he knows the general direction. He's on his way to find his aunt, who lives somewhere in the foothills of the eastern mountain range. When he gets there, he's going to convince her to reverse the spell.

Finally reaching the stop, Jeongguk sinks onto the bench, exhausted. He's in the outskirts of the nearest town, and it's a quiet enough area that the stop is deserted at this time of night. He wants close his eyes and maybe drift off, but he can't do that, not yet.

He's being weighing the option of calling Hoseok, but he knows that he would ask too many questions. There's a high possibility that he would order Jeongguk not to go, and he can't let that happen.

No. He'll have to find a different way. Jeongguk makes a decision, opening up to his father's contact. He presses the button and makes the call.

Please pick up.

“What are you doing up at this hour?” is the first thing his father says when he answers.

“Hi Dad. I just finished studying, I have a big test tomorrow,” Jeongguk lies. The hand that isn’t holding the phone rests in his lap, curling and uncurling to try and combat his nerves.
“I see.” There's a rustling sound, as though his father is shifting the phone from one hand to the other. “What do you need?”

“I have to interview a relative for a project.” Jeongguk's foot taps nervously against the pavement. “I want to write to my aunt. Do you have her address?”

“Hmm. Yes, it's in my phone. I'll text you. Is that all?”

“Yeah.”

“All right. Bye.”

The call cuts out Jeongguk lets out a shaky breath. One obstacle down.

His phone buzzes in his hand, lighting up with a text from his dad; Jeongguk sees the beginning of the address in the notification window.

He pulls up the bus schedule. The town he needs to get to is several hours from where he is by train, and he needs to take the bus to a larger city to get to the train station. There are no buses running that far till morning, though.

Next challenge: where to sleep?

It's not as if Jeongguk has the money for a hotel room in his pocket. He pushes himself to his feet, wandering down the sidewalk. He can sleep outside, right? Are there laws about that? Jeongguk has no idea; it's not like he's ever expected to be in this situation.

There's a tiny park about two blocks away, just a picnic table and two benches and a playground. It's deserted.

Jeongguk swallows. He's afraid, but he can get through this. He can do it.

Tucking himself underneath one of the benches, Jeongguk flips onto his stomach, clutching his bag
underneath his head—he's not taking any chances of it getting stolen—and spreading his jacket over
himself as best as he can. He closes his eyes and wills himself to sleep.

He can't.

Whenever he tries to clear his mind, panic sets in. He really has no idea what he's doing or where
he's going and Jeongguk has done very little on his own, ever. He feels small and scared in a world
that suddenly appears far bigger than it ever has before.

But then he squares his jaw; clutches his bag a little harder. He's going to fix this once and for all.
He's strong. He can do it.

Jeongguk doesn't sleep all that much between midnight and dawn. He dozes off a few times, woken
once by a stray cat and another time by two shadowy figures making a drug deal, but it's better than
nothing.

When the sun comes up, Jeongguk crawls out from underneath the bench, not well-rested but far
more determined than the night before.

He sets off for the bus station.

Somehow Jeongguk manages to get on the bus, get off at the correct stop, and find his way to the
train station. He watches everyone else in line buy tickets and pays for his own without too much
trouble.

He receives a text from Jimin as he gets on the train. With a heavy heart, he deletes the message and
blocks Jimin's number. He doesn't think he can handle hearing from him right now when he can't
respond.
Jeongguk settles in on the train, heading east, his bag clutched between his hands and his eyes glued to the passing countryside.

He can feel the woman across the aisle staring at him. She's been giving him strange looks since he sat down, and Jeongguk suspects that it's because he looks too young to be traveling on his own.

When she finally speaks up and says, “Shouldn't you be in school, young man?” he's not surprised.

“We're on break, ma'am,” he says politely. “It's a private school. Our schedule is different.”

It's a lie, but she seems to take his word for it, the skeptical purse of her lips fading away. “Where are you going?” she demands.

Jeongguk humors her, sharing the name of the town that his father texted to him.

The woman frowns. “Is that where you live?”

Jeongguk blinks. His first thought is to say yes, but then he fears that she'll begin to ask questions about the area that he obviously won't be able to answer. “No; I'll be visiting my aunt.”

“Hmm,” she says. She folds the magazine in her hands, rolling and unrolling the corner. “You'd best watch yourself. It's a strange area, that.”


“Well, it's all gossip.” She shrugs, adjusting her purse on her lap. “But you never know what kind of truths are hiding underneath. There's weird accounts of magic in that area, rumors about fairies and gremlins and even demons.”

Jeongguk finds himself shuddering at the last word. It's good news, really, because it means he must be on the right track, but the thought of meeting a demon frightens him.
He wishes he wasn't alone.

Thanking the woman for the heads-up, Jeongguk pulls his bag against his chest, pressing his cheek against the window of the train. It's early December, and Jeongguk realizes suddenly that it's started to snow in the last few minutes.

The first snow of the year.

It feels like a gift from the world to him, a reminder that there is still goodness and purity and love. Jeongguk hopes it's a sign that he's going to succeed.

He takes out his phone, even though he's trying to save battery, and snaps a photograph. It's blurry, of course, but he wants to save this moment for whenever he feels he can't go on.

Outside, the world rushes onward, serene under the quiet of the snowfall. Jeongguk watches and waits.

It's late afternoon when the train arrives at Jeongguk's destination. This is the furthest the line goes, and Jeongguk only sees one other person exiting at the same station as he does.

He steps onto the platform and zips his jacket up—it's so much colder here than it was at school—before scanning the horizon. He's not entirely sure what to do next. His plan ended at arriving in the town, but now that he's here, he realizes that he doesn't actually know how to get to the exact address.

When he pulls out his phone to check the map, he realizes with no small amount of panic that his carrier doesn't cover this area—he's got no phone service.
Shit.

Jeongguk finds a bench and sits down, forcing himself to stay calm. He's come all this way and he's not going to let something as small as cell service break him. He's going to be okay. He's going to make it.

After a few deep breaths, Jeongguk decides his best bet is to find something to eat and hope that he can get directions, too.

The town is small, consisting of perhaps two intersections and no other buildings as far as he can see. Behind the development, there's nothing but snowy foothills. Beyond, the land melts into a thick forest that cloaks the base of the mountains.

As he walks down one of the streets Jeongguk sees what looks like a convenience and grocery store. It's hardly fancy; the only thing giving away the building's purpose is a crude paper sign reading “FOOD” that's been taped against the window, but it's good enough for him, so he ventures inside.

The story is as small as the town. It consists just a couple of shady-looking shelves of food and a middle aged man reclining behind the counter, smoking a cigarette while reading the newspaper.

Jeongguk wrinkles his nose at the smell of smoke, picking out a couple of wrapped sausages before making his way up to the register.

“Excuse me,” he says, sliding his purchase across the counter. “Could… could you give me some directions, too?”

The man sets his newspaper aside, looking him up and down. Jeongguk thinks it must be glaringly obvious that he's not from around here.

“Sure,” he says finally, punching some numbers into the ancient cash register. “But it'll cost you.” He looks down his nose at Jeongguk; his eyebrows are thick and angry and frankly Jeongguk is frightened.

“Cost?” Jeongguk repeats. He fingers his pocket, worried. He's only got a little money left, not much besides the cost of his return ticket. He doesn't want to spend more than he is now.
“Yeah, kid. You want information, you pay up.”

Jeongguk hesitates. He needs to know, but he doesn't want to risk being stranded here just because he got ripped off by some convenience store employee. “Actually, never mind,” he says, flustered, pulling out a few bills to pay for the sausages. “I, um, figured it out.”

The man's eyes follow him all the way out the door.

Outside, Jeongguk peels the wrapping off of one sausage and tries to think while he chews. God, he's so hungry. He hadn't even realized till now how long he's gone without eating. The first sausage disappears in a few bites, so Jeongguk leaves the others in his pocket for later.

He shuffles down the road, his hands stuffed into his jacket pockets for warmth. He passes a woman and her two children and thinks about asking them for help, but he chickens out. They've rounded the corner before he works up the courage. After another minute, he passes an elderly man, and then a teenage girl, but both times he's too shy.

This won't do, Jeongguk thinks, frustrated with himself. He vows to talk to the next person he sees.

He's on the outskirts of the tiny town when he meets the next person. The stranger is middle aged—perhaps forty—and he's sitting on the edge of the sidewalk, staring into space. Jeongguk thinks he might be drunk, but he's not going to back down a fourth time.

“Hello?” he says, approaching the man. He gets a grunt in response, so he launches into a hurried explanation. “I need to find my aunt's house,” he stammers, pulling his phone from his pocket. “She lives… um… on River Lane? I think? Do you know how to get there?”

The man's eyes fix on Jeongguk, although not entirely focused. “River,” he repeats.

“Yes, that's it,” Jeongguk agrees, hopeful.

“Hmm.” The man grunts again, scratching his head. He points down the road toward the distant woods. “There. Turn right at the well.”
“Toward the woods?” Jeongguk asks, just to be sure.

“Mmm. Right at the well,” the man repeats. His head lolls to one side and Jeongguk steps back, spooked.

“Uh, thanks. I really appreciate it. Have a good night.” He hurries off, not wanting to stick around a potential drunkard.

Jeongguk feels better now that he has directions, a lot more confident that he can reach his aunt’s house. Perhaps he can even get there before dark, depending on how far the well is.

Snow continues to fall around Jeongguk as he walks, soft and cold. As he leaves town, there's a strange atmosphere to the world: hushed, like the landscape is holding its breath. It's beautiful in a way that sends heavy shivers down Jeongguk's back.

The woods are further away than he had perceived, however, and the sun is starting to set as he reaches the edge.

Jeongguk hesitates at the mouth of the forest. He hasn't found a well yet, but it's getting dark, and the woods are sort of spooky. His knees shake at the thought of walking through by himself.

Then he thinks of Jimin, thinks of how happy he'll be when Jeongguk is rid of the curse, and he finds the strength to go on. He switches on the flashlight on his phone and sets off, gritting his teeth to the cold.

Jeongguk doesn't know how long he's been walking anymore. He's eaten the last of his sausages, his fingers are so numb that he can barely move them and he has to force himself not to jump every time a squirrel runs across his path. It's pitch black and he's seen no sign of a well yet.

He's just beginning to wonder if he should turn around and try to find somewhere to sleep back in town when his phone dies and the light switches off.

Jeongguk goes stiff with fear. Shit. Shit.
He turns around, looking every which way, but he can't see a thing.

Closing his eyes, he counts to ten and forces himself to keep breathing. In. Out. In. Out.

When he opens them again, his eyes have begun to adjust to the dark. He can just make out the path around him, but another wave of panic hits him as he realizes that in his distress he's disoriented himself. He has no idea which way leads back to town.

Jeongguk sinks into the snow and buries his face in his knees. He's freezing, half-starved, and completely alone. He's going to die here in the middle of nowhere with nobody around, and no one will even miss him.

Jeongguk doesn't know how long he sits there before there's a commotion. “Hey!” a voice yells nearby and Jeongguk nearly jumps out of his skin. He has no time to react before a bright light switches on, practically blinding him.

“What is it, Joon?” Another voice joins the first. Jeongguk shields his eyes, trying to adjust. He edges backwards, wondering if he should run now.

“It's a boy. I think he's lost.” Jeongguk can make out two tall figures now; one of them steps toward him and he lets out an ear-splitting shriek.

“Careful, you're scaring him!” The second person—they're both men, from what Jeongguk can make out of their half-shadowed faces—catches the arm of the first. “Are you okay?”

The question is directed toward him, and Jeongguk can't detect any malice in it. Hesitantly, he pulls himself to his feet, brushing the snow from his pants. “I-I'm l-l-lost,” he croaks, his teeth chattering.

“Oh, you poor thing! Joon, give him your coat, he's so cold he can hardly talk.”

Immediately, the first man—the taller of the two—pulls off his puffy winter parka and holds it out. “Here.”
Jeongguk tries to shake his head, but the man practically forces it into his arms, leaving him no choice but to take it and wrap it around himself. It helps some, though he's still mind-numbingly cold.

“Do you have somewhere to go?” The second man asks, voice full of concern.

“I… I don't know,” Jeongguk manages.

“Good. You're coming with us.” Words like that should set off warning bells in Jeongguk's head, but he's so cold and exhausted and the man truly seems to be worried about him. He lets himself be herded over the nearest hill and across a tiny footbridge into the yard of a tiny cottage. The windows are bright and Jeongguk can see a fire inside. It looks incredibly cozy.

Before he knows it, he's inside, seated on a couch by the fire and wrapped in an impossibly warm blanket. The first man is adding another log to the fire while the second disappears for a few minutes, returning with a pair of hot water bottles.

“Put these under your armpits,” he commands, and Jeongguk complies before the curse can even start to force him.

“Good. Now drink this, but slowly. You need to hydrate.” He hands Jeongguk a hot mug of tea, which he sips at dutifully.

“Thank you,” Jeongguk croaks when he's able to speak. “Really. You saved my life.”

The man laughs, turning his head to the man tending the fire. “You hear that, Joon? We're heroes!”

“We're happy to help,” the taller assures Jeongguk, drawing near to sit on the floor in front of him. “But I am curious, what were you doing in the woods alone at this time of night?”

The other man smacks his thigh, sitting next to him. He's pretty, Jeongguk notices, enhanced by the sincere friendliness that's so obvious in his manner. “Have some decency before you interrogate him! We haven't even introduced ourselves.”

“Oh, right.” He laughs, deep and pleasant, dimples creasing into his cheeks. “My apologies. I'm Kim
Namjoon, and this is my partner, Kim Seokjin. It's nice to meet you, although I'm sorry that it had to be like this.”

Jeongguk tries and fails to not stare, eyes flicking from one man to the other. “I'm Jeon Jeongguk,” he says finally. “Thanks again. I don't know how to say it enough.”

“It's our pleasure to have you,” Seokjin insists. “We don't let people freeze to death around here, regardless.”

“Which brings me back to my question,” Namjoon adds. “Why are you all alone?”

Jeongguk stares at his mug of tea, uncomfortable. “It's kind of a long story,” he says.

Seokjin raises his eyebrows. “Well, we won't pry if you don't want to share, but just know that we're happy to listen. You look like someone who really needs to get something off his chest.”

Jeongguk doesn't know what it is exactly, but there's something in the way that Seokjin looks at him and squeezes Namjoon's knee in a subliminal message of concern that radiates care and love and trustworthiness. That same something has Jeongguk's mouth opening, an explanation tumbling from his lips like a waterfall.

“I'm looking for my aunt,” he bursts out. “She lives on River Lane and someone in town told me to go this way and turn right at the well, but I never found the well or the road. And then my phone died and... well, you saw the rest.”

Namjoon's forehead creases as he frowns, thoughtful. He looks at Seokjin meaningfully, nudging him with his toe.

“Jeongguk,” Seokjin says. He leans forward, scrutinizing him closely. “Tell me. Is there something special about you?”

“Special?” Jeongguk's mind nervously jumps to the curse. “W-what do you mean?”

“As in, magic.” Seokjin's eyes flick to Namjoon's again. “I can feel it on you.”
Jeongguk swallows. “Um.” He doesn't know what to say—he couldn't confirm their suspicions even if he wanted to. “What makes you think that?”

“We can tell,” Seokjin shrugs. “Namjoon and I are fairies.”

Jeongguk stares. The blanket wrapped around him is warm—to too warm to just be his body heat, as if it generates its own—and then it makes sense.

Magic. He was too distracted to notice, but he's been lured into the home of two magical creatures. They've given him no reason to distrust them so far, but Jeongguk is on alert now. His experience with fairies thus far has been bad, to say the least.

“Are you surprised?” Namjoon chuckles, catching sight of his expression. “Don't worry, we're perfectly safe.”

“The only time Namjoon is dangerous is in the kitchen,” Seokjin quips. “Really, don't be afraid. We just want to know what kind of magic you're carrying around. Someone put a spell on you, right? What is it?”

“I can't tell you,” Jeongguk says, shuffling his blanket awkwardly. He takes a sip of his drink.

“I promise we're safe,” Seokjin coaxes. “We want to help you.”

“No, you don't understand.” Jeongguk grimaces. “I can't tell you.”

“Is someone threatening you?” Seokjin’s expression curls into a frown. “Is that why you're all alone? How dare they--”

“Oh,” Namjoon cuts in, understanding clear on his face. “I get it. You're obedient.”

Jeongguk curls in, nodding. “Yeah.” He can't tell anyone about the curse, but nothing prevents him from talking about it after he's been discovered.
Seokjin’s face falls, expression deep with unspoken pity. “Who did this to you?”

“My aunt.” Jeongguk bites his lip, unsure if the truth will offend them. “She's... she's a fairy.”

Namjoon's eyes widen in understanding. “That's terrible. I'm so sorry.”

Beside him, Seokjin looks angry all over again. “How could another fairy do this? That's not what our powers are for! There are codes, for fuck's sake!”

“Shh,” Namjoon tells him, placing a hand on his shoulder and massaging gently. “Is that why you're looking for your aunt, Jeongguk? Are you trying to get rid of the curse?”

He nods, and at their urging, he tells them the whole story: how he was cursed, going to school, his friendship with Jimin, and finally the order that sent him running all the way here.

Namjoon and Seokjin are good listeners; the former takes everything in with calm attention, while Seokjin interjects at just the right parts—“That fucker,” he snarls as Jeongguk relates what Hunchul did to him.

It feels wonderful to tell someone everything for once in his life.

After he finishes, they're all quiet for a minute. The weather has picked up outside and the wind is howling at the windows, but it's perfectly warm and snug in Namjoon and Seokjin's cabin. The fire crackles, and Jeongguk draws the blanket closer—definitely magically heated, he decides.

“Jeongguk,” Namjoon says finally, his voice gentle. “There's no River Lane anywhere around here. I think someone misheard you and gave you directions to the little river that we crossed earlier.”

Jeongguk is silent.

“Your aunt probably gave your father a fake address. I don't know her, but my best guess is that she's long figured out that she violated the rules of magic and she's made herself scarce. I don't think
you'll have an easy time finding her if she doesn't want to be found.”

The words sink in like rocks in an ocean. “And… you can't help?” His voice is small. "You can't take away the curse?"

Namjoon shakes his head.

“Only the fairy that casts a curse can undo it,” Seokjin explains. He looks pained. “Believe me, we'd do away with it in a heartbeat if we could.”

Jeongguk’s face crumples. This was his last hope, and now there's nothing he can do. Nothing. “Why did she have to curse me?” He asks, voice cracking. A tear escapes from his left eye, running down his cheek.

He's not looking for an answer, and they don't give him one. Instead Seokjin hops up on the couch, folding Jeongguk up in his arms. Jeongguk trembles against him, gluing his lips together to muffle his sobs.

Soon Namjoon comes closer, too, rubbing at his back. Neither of them move as he cries, and it's exactly what he needed; a chance to let everything out and just be held.

He cries hard for several minutes, trying and failing to wipe his tears away with the back of his hand. He's getting snot all over their blanket, but neither of them are saying anything. Seokjin doesn't let go even when Jeongguk calms down, his sobs quieting into shaky breaths. Slowly, Jeongguk relaxes against him, letting his temple rest on Seokjin's chest.

“There are bad fairies in the world as well as good ones, Jeongguk,” Namjoon says from behind him, patting his arm gently. “No kind of creature is all the same. Some demons like to cause chaos and others restore order. There are rules for how we can use magic, but we can't enforce them any more than governments enforce laws. I'm so sorry this happened to you.”

It's not what Jeongguk wants to hear, but Namjoon has a point.

Abruptly Seokjin stands. “You must be hungry. I've been listening to your stomach growling for the last half hour. Can I give you some dinner?”
“I’m okay,” Jeongguk says. His stomach grumbles.

Seokjin raises his eyebrows. “I’ll bring you something.” He disappears into the kitchen.

“You're in for a treat,” Namjoon informs him, eyes twinkling. “Seokjin might be the best cook this world has ever seen.”

When Seokjin returns in several minutes with a hot bowl of soup—“Leftovers,” he explains—Jeongguk finds that he agrees. Whether it's his extreme hunger or the kindness it's served with or simply the cooking itself, the soup is delicious.

When he finishes, Jeongguk feels reluctant to leave, but the two have done so much for him already that he's worried he'll burden them if he stays any longer. “Where can I wash my dishes?” he asks, setting down his empty bowl. “And also, do you know of anywhere I can stay nearby? Maybe…like, a hotel? I can call my father and ask if he'll pay for it, he'll help if he knows it's an emergency—”

“You're not going anywhere, kid,” Namjoon interrupts, swooping in to pick up his bowl. “It's far too dark and cold. And I'll wash the bowl, don't worry about it.”

Jeongguk is probably irrationally emotional due to exhaustion, but he might tear up a little again at that. “T-thank you,” he stammers. “I don't know what I can do in return for all this.”

“It's a reward just to have you here,” Seokjin jokes, patting his hair. “Seriously, though, don't worry. It's what we do.”

Jeongguk thinks that Seokjin was right—all fairies are definitely not like his aunt.

Namjoon asks if Jeongguk wants to stay in the guest room, but Jeongguk prefers the couch, so they bring him several soft pillows and an extra blanket in case he gets cold. As he settles down for bed, he fiddles with the ring on his left hand. It's the same one Hoseok gave him years ago before he left for school; he's never tried using it, but he wears it all the time because it reminds him of home.

“What's that?” Seokjin asks, arriving with a glass of water for him to drink.
“A gift from a friend,” Jeongguk replies.

Seokjin leans closer, curious. “Can I see it for a second?”

Jeongguk slips it off and hands it to him, watching as Seokjin holds it up the light.

“This is magic,” Seokjin concludes, handing it back to him after a few moments. “Witch magic. How’d your friend come across that?”

“He’s a half witch,” Jeongguk admits. “I don’t know much about it, but it’s pretty.”

Seokjin nods. “Keep that on when you can. I can tell it’s meant to keep you safe.”

Jeongguk adjusts it back on his hand, nodding. The metal feels warm and comfortable on his finger.

“Sleep tight,” Seokjin says, turning the lights out and retreating down the hall.

Jeongguk sleeps in late the next day. He doesn’t mean to, but Seokjin and Namjoon don’t wake him up, and by the time that he opens his eyes, it’s well into the afternoon.

When he tries to apologize, Namjoon waves him off, insisting that he must have been exhausted.

Over a late lunch, Jeongguk works up the courage to ask them what their jobs are. It turns out that Namjoon is a researcher studying wildlife and magical activity in the region, and Seokjin writes
children's books. Settling down in practically the middle of nowhere suits them both fine.

Their home isn't large by any means, but it's comfortable. As he sits and shares a meal with the two, Jeongguk thinks that he's never been so cozy in his life. Seokjin and Namjoon care well for one another—they love each other far more than own parents ever did—and they've opened their hearts and home to a stranger so easily. He half-wishes he could stay here forever.

Jeongguk is helping clean up from the meal when his phone finally charges up enough to turn on and immediately starts ringing. It's Hoseok.

“Jeon Jeongguk, you brat!” Hoseok yells when he answers, loud enough to make Jeongguk jump. “What on earth is going on? Why am I getting calls from your school saying you've disappeared? Why was your phone off? You've nearly given me cardiac arrest!”

“Hi, Hoseok,” Jeongguk replies timidly. “Um. I can explain.”

He does. The moment Jeongguk tells him what happened with Hunchul, Hoseok's anger fades considerably, morphing into concern.

“I'm glad you're safe,” he says when Jeongguk finishes. “Next time, please tell me, okay?”

“Okay.” Jeongguk is relieved that he's not too mad.

“You're going to come home now, right? Do I need to come get you?”

“No, I'm going to take the train home soon,” Jeongguk promises. “Just meet me at the station, please.”

Seokjin and Namjoon are completely understanding when Jeongguk says he has to go. They offer to take him back to town in their truck, and he agrees. He doesn't want to make that walk again, ever.

At the station, Seokjin produces something from the backseat. It's a thick scarf, which he winds around Jeongguk's neck. He feels instantly warm.
“It's magic,” Seokjin whispers next to his ear. “This will keep you toasty no matter what the weather is.”

Jeongguk can only manage a sincere, “thank you,” before he has to run and catch his train.

Seokjin and Namjoon wave at him until the train pulls them out of his sight, Namjoon's arm slung comfortably over the other fairy's shoulders. Jeongguk knows he's never going to forget their kindness.

Jeongguk has to change trains about two thirds of the way home, and there's a forty-five minute delay in between, so he finds a quiet bench in the corner of the platform to wait.

The afternoon is fading into evening, but Jeongguk isn't cold, thanks to the fairy scarf. He only has an hour left to go once his train arrives, and though he's feeling burnt out and disheartened, he's looking forward to seeing Hoseok.

Thirty-five minutes into the wait, a woman joins him on the bench. Jeongguk scoots closer to the end, giving her plenty of room, but he can feel her looking at him.

He chances a glance back. She's probably in her late twenties, dressed nicely in a blouse and slacks, but the way she's looking at him makes him uncomfortable.

“Where are you going, cutie?” she asks, crossing her legs and tilting her head.

Jeongguk doesn't respond, immediately staring at his lap and pulling out his phone so he can look distracted. Maybe he should leave—interactions with strangers can be dangerous. He never knows when someone is going to order him to do something.
“Don't be like that,” she persists, moving closer. “Are you going home? I could take you.”

“No thanks,” Jeongguk chokes out, standing. He's about to walk off and find somewhere safer to wait when she grabs his wrist.

“I'm serious,” she says. “Co--”

Two things happen at once. Jeongguk shrieks, cutting off what is most certainly a command, and yanks his hand away. As he stumbles backward, he grabs hold of his ring, rotating it around his finger once, twice, thrice.

He has no idea what's supposed to happen. For a minute he's not sure that it did anything at all, but then he sees the utter confusion on the woman's face.

“What the fuck,” she says, looking around. It's like she sees right through him. “Did he just—disappear?”

Jeongguk looks down at his feet. The realization that he can't see them is followed by a mini heart attack; he nearly trips over a nearby ledge. By the time he's recovered, the woman is gone.

Well.

Jeongguk hides himself behind one of the huge advertisement stands and finds the ring on his hand, turning it three times. Nothing happens.

Shit. It's not permanent, is it? Hoseok wouldn't have made it permanent, unless he didn't now what he was doing.

He knew what he was doing, right?

Jeongguk paces around for a minute, considering calling Hoseok, but after a short while he finds himself fading back into view.
The ring has a time limit, Jeongguk understands with no small amount of relief. Like Hoseok had said, it's for emergency situations.

Blinking, Jeongguk realizes that his train has arrived. He swallows his surprise over the ring, adjusts his scarf and heads for the entrance, hands stuffed into his pockets against the cold.

He's so ready to be home.

As Jeongguk steps off the train he barely has time to blink before Hoseok is all over him, hugging him hard enough that his feet lift off the ground and spinning him around and then setting him down to give him a very thorough scolding.

“You have no idea what you put me through,” he insists, looking oddly teary. “Don't pull anything like that ever again. No, I mean, do it again if you need to—I'm sorry, I didn't mean to order you—just please tell me next time, I thought you'd been kidnapped and I know that you're helpless when someone discovers your secret.” Hoseok looks to Jeongguk for some sort of confirmation, catching his breath.

“I'll try to be more careful,” Jeongguk says honestly. “And I'm sorry. I know I worried you, but I needed to at least try. It would have killed me not to.”

Hoseok looks at him. He sniffs, then tries to pass it off by scratching at his nose. “You've gotten heavy,” he comments. “Why are you growing so fast?”

Jeongguk hugs him again. “I missed you.”

Hoseok gives him a look so tender that Jeongguk feels teary, too. “I'm proud of you.” He pats Jeongguk’s temple gently. “Let's get you home, sweetheart.”
Things are different when Jeongguk comes home. It's been a while since he's visited, not since summer, and yet there have been drastic changes.

What used to be a houseful of servants has been reduced to the cleaning lady twice a week, the cook, and Hoseok. He soon learns that Hoseok has picked up parts of the household work, transitioning from a PA to more of a steward.

Jeongguk is used to the bustle of footsteps echoing down the halls around him, but now he hears nothing. It's disconcerting.

He expects his father to be angry when he enters his study to say that he's home; in fact, he's prepared to fight him tooth and claw if he tries to send him back to school, but all his father says is that he was planning on pulling him out anyway. “The tuition is too high. Hoseok can teach you,” he adds dismissively, and Jeongguk is very okay with that. “I'll arrange for your luggage to be sent back.”

Jeongguk thinks that his father's business must really be going badly if they're reduced to this. It's not until the next morning, though, that he finds out just how badly it's faring—and why his father was so calm about his return.

They're eating breakfast together, as he's always required to do at home, when his father breaks the suffocating silence.

“You'll be eighteen in two years,” he says.

Jeongguk nods through a mouthful of food.
“Good. A two year engagement is perfectly appropriate,” his father muses.

Swallowing, Jeongguk wrinkles his nose in confusion. “Engagement?”

“Yes, engagement. I'm in the midst of arranging your betrothal.”

Jeongguk nearly chokes on his next bite. “Betrothal?” he asks, once he's managed to chew and swallow. “Father, I'm sixteen! A high schooler!”

“It's not uncommon for those in our social position to have even earlier engagements,” his father remarks airily. “This is no phenomenon. You can marry once you reach adulthood.”

Anger bubbles up in Jeongguk's chest, unexpected but fiery. “What's this about? You've never said anything about marriage before. Is it for connections? Money?” At the sight of his father's face, Jeongguk can tell he's hit the mark. “You're going to sell out your son for wealth?”

“Don't talk about things you don't understand,” his father says angrily. “All marriages at our level are connections. This is only to be expected.”

“Mom wanted me to marry for love,” Jeongguk counters, eyes flashing. “She told me so.”

His father pales. “Don't bring your mother into this conversation.”

Jeongguk has to bite back a retort because of the curse. “I won't do it. I won't meet the person at all.”

“You will meet her,” His father snarls, staring him down, “because she's coming for dinner tonight. Be ready at six.”
“It's a fucking crime,” Hoseok growls, slamming dishes around in the sink. Jeongguk is next to him with a drying rag, and he can't help but agree. “She's eight—*eight*—years your senior! That's practically pedophilia!”

“There's not much I can do,” Jeongguk replies dully. “Father gave the order, I have to follow it.”

“Damn cradle robber,” Hoseok mutters, punctuating his statement with a particularly loud clank. “I'd yell some sense into him if I wasn't afraid to be fired and taken away from you.”

Jeongguk laughs at that, stacking a clean plate in the cupboard. “Maybe I should show up dressed like a slob, wearing pajamas and stuff. She'd reject me on the spot.”

“She'd fall for you then and there,” Hoseok declares. “You're too cute for your own fucking good. No, you'd better act as stiff and unfeeling as possible and bore her to death.”

“You think that will work?”

“It's worth a try.”

As Hoseok suggested, Jeongguk dresses in a plain black dress shirt and pants. At six o'clock he's waiting in the living room, trying to look as boring as he possibly can.

His potential fiancée arrives a few minutes later. She's tall, obviously in her mid-twenties, just as he had been informed. Her long hair is pulled into a tight ponytail. She's beautiful in a sharp way, dangerous and intimidating.

“Jeongguk,” his father says, “meet Jiyeon.”

They meet eyes as they shake hands. Her eyebrows crease, looking him over, unimpressed.

Jeongguk already knows this is doomed.
Dinner is awkward between the stilted small talk and Jeongguk’s father's unsubtle inquiries about her family's wealth. Jeongguk constantly wants to cringe at his lack of propriety—that or run upstairs and never see Jiyeon again.

He supposes she might be okay if he wasn't being forced to marry her, but the only exchange they've had so far this evening is her asking if he liked school and Jeongguk replying, “it's okay.”

To be fair, Jiyeon is smart and well-mannered. He doesn't particularly like her, but she's not the worst person in the world.

That doesn't mean he ever wants to consider marrying her. Jeongguk couldn't be more relieved when she goes home.

“I won't marry her,” he reminds his father as he retreats up the stairs. “Mark my words.”

Jeongguk wakes up the next morning to find his father in a strange mood. He can sense that he has something to tell him all throughout breakfast, but neither of them say anything until the dishes are being cleared away.

His father clears his throat. “About your engagement...”

Jeongguk waits. The expression on his father's face isn't one that he's used to, something like embarrassment. It looks out of place on his features.

His father coughs. “I've had to call it off.”
Jeongguk has never heard such good news. “Why?”

Grimacing, his father sips his coffee. “Let's just say that her fortune is far less than I believed. It won't be a worthwhile connection.”

Jeongguk is relieved at the knowledge that he won't be forced into marriage just yet, but he understands that this could be just the beginning. Though he doesn't know the extent of their financial struggles, he is beginning to sense their severity.

This never would have happened if his mother was alive. She always kept their family within their income.

None of this would have happened if she hadn't died.

Amid his thankfulness at being saved from an arranged marriage, Jeongguk is nervous about what his father will do next.

He knows this can't be the end.

When Jeongguk has been home for a week and a half, he gets a text from Yoongi.

*Hey. Are you okay? I haven’t had a letter from you for a while.*

It occurs to Jeongguk that he's been too busy with the events of the past few weeks to so much as think about writing.
Something came up and I had to move home, he texts back. It's been busy.

The reply arrives within a minute.

Home? As in, you're home for good?

Yeah, Jeongguk says.

Yoongi's next message is a cartoon duck sticker that dances around when Jeongguk taps it. It makes him smile wider than he has in weeks.

Jeongguk receives another message before he can respond.

Fair warning, the next time I can escape from my uncle I'm going to show up and kidnap you.

It's not kidnapping when I want to go with you, Jeongguk replies.

He hesitates, then sends a heart sticker.

The typing bubble shows up for several minutes. Jeongguk waits, curious as to what Yoongi is writing, but when he finally gets another text, it's short.

<3.
It's mid-morning. Jeongguk walks down the stairs, freshly showered and ready to begin lessons for the day with Hoseok. He enters the living room, intending to cut through to the kitchen, but the sight of an unexpected person has him freezing in place.

What in God's name is Jung Hunchul doing in his living room?

He gawks. Hunchul meets his eyes calmly, with the air of someone who knows he has the upper hand.

“How've you been, Jeongguk?”

Jeongguk inhales sharply, defensive. “Why are you here?”

“You haven't heard yet?”

Jeongguk is utterly confused, but before he can try to piece together what's going on, his father is stepping into the room with Hunchul's mother in tow.

“Oh, good, Jeongguk. I was about to call you.”

Frowning, Jeongguk backs away from the three of them. Something is different—and wrong. Very wrong.

He takes in the sight of Ms. Jung's hand clasped in his father's and immediately understands. His stomach drops like an injured bird.

Oh, God, no.

“We have exciting news,” his father says, letting go of her hand to rest his palm on her back. “I asked Yeonhee to marry me this morning, and she said yes.”

Across the room, Hunchul grins.
Jeongguk can read the unsaid words clear as day.

*Game, set, and match.*
What are you up to?

Jeongguk receives the text as he dries his hair after his shower. It's nine in the evening, several days after his father's announcement, and things have been quiet in Jeongguk's world. He pulls up the message and replies with one hand while he brushes his teeth.

Not much. I was planning to head to bed early.

His phone dings almost immediately.

How tired are you?

Jeongguk spits into the sink. Not too tired?

Great. I'm finally free so I'm kidnapping you now. I'll be there in fifteen.

Grinning stupidly at his phone, Jeongguk rushes into his room to put on something nicer than his sweatpants. In his haste, he nearly barrels straight into Hoseok, who's carrying a stack of clean towels.

“Whoa there,” Hoseok laughs, steadying him with one hand. “Where are you going in such a hurry?”

“Can I go out?” Jeongguk asks, breathless.

“With whom?”

“Yoongi.”
Hoseok's lips quirk up as if he knows something Jeongguk doesn't. “I see. Yes, you can, I'll cover for you.”

“Thank you!” Jeongguk bursts out, giving him a fast hug before dashing off to his room.

When Yoongi pulls up in front of Jeongguk's home, he's sitting under the tree on the front lawn, wrapped up in a warm coat and hugging his arms to his chest. He's sneaked out the back door and come around; he knows his father can't see this angle of the yard from his study.

Yoongi turns into his driveway and emerges from his car. Jeongguk stands, too, and walks out to meet him.

Jeongguk hasn't seen Yoongi face-to-face for more than two years. He's stunned by how much Yoongi has changed. He's eighteen now, taller than he was the last time they met, but not by much.

No, Yoongi is different in other ways. His features are sharper, his hair neater, his shoulders wider. He must have changed his clothes after work, because he's wearing jeans and nice leather boots and his hands are tucked into the pockets of a long black coat.

Jeongguk's heart beats fast as he realizes exactly why Jimin is such a big fan of Min Yoongi.


“Yeah,” Jeongguk chokes out. “So have you.” He tears his eyes away from Yoongi's jaw—was it always that sharp? He doesn't know how to react. Being here with Yoongi, in the flesh, taking in his features with his own two eyes feels so different than writing letters or sending texts. It's almost awkward, uncomfortable.

Yoongi steps forward, pulling him into a quick hug and patting him on the back; it's familiar and sweet. Jeongguk's fear that everything has changed dissipates in a soft sigh. “Get in,” Yoongi says. “I'm getting you out of here.”

Yoongi's car is surprisingly plain; it's clean and new, but the model screams “economic mom car” far more than it does “rich young heir.” Jeongguk thinks he must have picked it out himself.
He fumbles with the seat belt when he climbs in, and Yoongi snorts, leaning over him to fix it. “How can you be a bowling prodigy and not be able to buckle yourself in?”

Jeongguk can't respond; Yoongi is too close and smells too much like spicy cologne. He's flustered as Yoongi returns to the driver's seat and turns the key in the ignition.

“Where are we going?” he asks, mostly to distract himself from the fact that being within five feet of Min Yoongi is doing weird things to his stomach.

“I can't tell you.” Yoongi places his hand on the passenger seat, watching behind him as he pulls into the street. “It wouldn't be a proper kidnapping if I did.” He shoots Jeongguk a grin, twisting the wheel to straighten out and pressing down on the gas pedal.


Yoongi is a good driver; he's focused on the road and stays within five miles of the speed limit. Jeongguk is quiet while he drives, watching the city go by outside his window.

“I never asked you,” Yoongi says after a few minutes. “Why did you decide to come home?”

Jeongguk knows Yoongi would understand everything. He wants nothing more than to tell Yoongi the whole story, but he can't. Instead he says, “My father pulled me out because tuition was expensive.” It's half true, though Jeongguk’s fingers curl into his sleeve guiltily. He doesn't like lying to Yoongi. If only he had a choice.

Yoongi nods, eyes still on the oncoming traffic. “Are you disappointed?”

Jeongguk considers the question. “Not exactly? I didn't love it there.” What he misses is Jimin, not the school itself.

“Well, I'm glad you're back.” Yoongi slows, turning into a parking lot. Jeongguk reads the sign as they pull into a spot.
“A skating rink?” Jeongguk asks, his eyes lighting up. “I love skating!”

“I thought you might.” Yoongi gets out, coming around to open Jeongguk’s door for him before he can get out himself.

Jeongguk tries not to get over-excited, but he’s practically bursting with energy. He hasn't been skating in years; how did Yoongi know he's been longing to go?

They wait in line to rent skates and sit down to lace them up. “Fair warning,” Yoongi tells him. “I'm pretty mediocre, and it isn't hard for me to guess that you're going to show me up whether you're experienced or not.”

Jeongguk already has his skates on, jittery with excitement. “It's fine,” he says, glancing at the door to the rink, then back to Yoongi. “Are you ready?”

“Two seconds, Gguk,” Yoongi huffs, knotting his second skate tightly. “Okay. Let's go.”

The cold air of the rink hits Jeongguk’s face in an icy blast as he opens the door. He can't help but smile. He doesn't wait for Yoongi, who is slowly making his way toward the door, wobbling dangerously on his skates. Impatient, he immediately steps out onto the ice.

It's a late skate session; there are only four other people there. Jeongguk pushes off, whipping around the rink, giddy with excitement. The air rushes past him, pushing his hair into his face. He smiles until he has to close his mouth because his teeth are cold.

After three laps, he comes to a stop near the entrance where Yoongi is waiting, watching him, a soft expression on his face.

“You better not expect me to keep up with that,” he laughs, shaking his head. He joins Jeongguk in the rink.

Yoongi hadn't been lying; he's mediocre at best. He moves clumsily, but he seems to be stable. Or at least, that's what Jeongguk thinks before Yoongi tries to round the corner and nearly topples over.
“Whoa!” Jeongguk says, reaching out to grab Yoongi's hand. He holds it, firm, pulling Yoongi back into balance. “Careful!”

“I'm trying,” Yoongi gripes, but he doesn't let go of Jeongguk's hand as they start moving again. His hands are slightly larger than Jeongguk's, and his gloved fingers are warm.

“I'll just… make sure you don't fall,” Jeongguk mumbles, flustered as he winds their fingers together tightly.

“You damn well better,” Yoongi snorts, gripping back. “Fucking prodigy.”

Jeongguk's face goes pink and it's definitely because of the cold.

After a lap or two Yoongi starts to improve, though he complains the whole time and it has Jeongguk laughing so hard that he manages to miss a turn and fall on his butt.

“Not so great after all, huh?” Yoongi asks, helping him up. Somehow, his bright smile overrides the snark.

Jeongguk giggles until he's breathless.

They skate for almost an hour before the rink closes. When they turn in their skates and head out to the parking lot, Yoongi suggests milkshakes. Jeongguk heartily agrees.

They stop at a cheap joint where they can get a quiet table in the corner. Jeongguk orders triple chocolate and Yoongi orders mint.

The lighting is dim and golden; it brings out the shine of Yoongi's dark hair. Jeongguk watches him through his eyelashes as he sips at his milkshake. If he could bottle up moments in jars to keep forever, he thinks that this would be one of the first ones he would save.

“What's on your mind?” Yoongi asks him, raising his eyebrows.
Jeongguk doesn’t want to discuss that unidentifiable feeling that’s sitting in his stomach, so he says, “I was thinking about my friend from school. Remember, I wrote you about Jimin?”

“Mm.” Yoongi stirs his milkshake. “Your roommate?”

“Yeah.” Jeongguk swallows the guilt that wells up in his throat. He misses Jimin an awful lot. Even though he knows it’s not true, he feels vaguely that their broken relationship is his fault; he wonders if Jimin would forgive him for what he’s had to do even if he ever breaks the curse. “He’s a big fan of yours, actually.”

“Of me?” Yoongi chokes back a laugh. “Why?”

“He liked your character in that one drama. And he thinks… um. He used to talk about how handsome you were. I think he kinda had a crush on you.”

“Did he now?” Yoongi sets down his milkshake, fixing his gaze on Jeongguk’s face. “That’s sweet. What did you say? Did you tell him I’m ten times more handsome in person?”

Jeongguk fights back a hot blush. “No, I told him you’re a grumpy idiot who stinks at bowling.” It’s not true, of course—he never told Jimin that he knew Yoongi.


Jeongguk stiffens. He’s been trying not to think about it since it happened. Hunchul has gone back to school now, so other than his mother visiting occasionally, Jeongguk has mostly been able to ignore reality. “Thanks,” he says softly, because how can he explain the real horror behind it all without being able to tell Yoongi about his curse?

Yoongi studies his face. “You’re not excited about it. Is it because of your mom?”

Admittedly, that factors in, too. Jeongguk stares at his milkshake, not meeting Yoongi’s eyes.

“I’m sorry.” Yoongi reaches across the table to pat Jeongguk’s hand tentatively. “I know you loved your mom. It must hurt.”
The situation hurts for many more reasons that Yoongi can't possibly know, but Jeongguk feels comforted all the same.

When Yoongi drives him home, he pats his head before he lets him out of the car. “You’re doing well, Jeon Jeongguk,” he says. “I'm proud of you.”

Jeongguk is an expert at doing what he has to do. Maybe that's why he adjusts quickly to the rhythm of living at home once more. He gets up in the morning, helps Hoseok with chores, completes his studies, eats uncomfortable meals with his father.

The highlight of moving back from school is Yoongi. They don't hang out often, per say, because Yoongi is so busy, but the older boy makes time for Jeongguk when he can.

Three months after Jeongguk arrives home, Yoongi cajoles him into going golfing with him. “My father is making me practice and Taehyung can't make it,” he says. “Keep me company?”

Jeongguk can't say no.

He's surprisingly bad at golfing, or perhaps his natural affinity just can't compete with Yoongi's years of lessons.

“Don't swing like that!” Yoongi chides the first time Jeongguk picks up a driver. “Jesus fuck, Jeongguk, you're going to hit yourself in the head at that rate. Here.” He steps behind him, closing his hands over Jeongguk's hands to guide his grip and swing. Slowly, he guides him through a proper stroke.

“Do it like that,” Yoongi says, his breath hot against Jeongguk's ear.
Jeongguk can barely breathe.

“Gguk?” Yoongi asks. He lets go, squinting. “Are you okay?”

“Fine,” Jeongguk says, turning so Yoongi can’t see the pink of his cheeks. “I got it now.”

He swings completely wrong again, sending the tee flying across the turf, and Yoongi laughs so hard that he has to crouch and rest his hands on his knees for support.

Spending time with Yoongi is like taking a breath of fresh air. Jeongguk lives from day to day on the knowledge that he’ll see him again. They visit the zoo, the movies, Yoongi’s apartment to play a ruthless game of Go Fish. People recognize Yoongi every once in a while when they’re in public—one time a teenage girl ambushes them in the middle of a coffee shop and demands a photo with him. Yoongi is endlessly polite, posing for the photo and signing the back of her hand when she asks. He's always thoughtful like that, Jeongguk thinks.

In June Yoongi takes Jeongguk to an art museum, and Jeongguk confides in him about wanting to be an illustrator.

“I'm scared to tell my father,” he admits. “I know he won't be happy with that.”

Yoongi pats his back gently as they sit on a bench in front of a landscape painted in various shades of blue. “Don't worry too much. You'll be able to tell him when the time is right. Just focus on doing what you want to do.”

“Is that what you're doing?” Jeongguk asks. He's always wondered if Yoongi really likes business.

Yoongi blinks. “Sure. I'm happy to take over the company.” He stretches, rubbing at one of his shoulders. “When I was younger I thought it was a chore. At one point I wanted to rebel and try to become musician,” he recalls, chuckling. “But now I'm happy with what I'm doing. Once I become a CEO I can make a lot of changes. I can improve the lives of all our employees and there's a chance I can work to improve corporate practice as a whole. There's lots of changes that need to be made in the treatment of laborers and magical creatures and the environment, and I want to help create those changes.”
Jeongguk looks at Yoongi with so much admiration. “You're amazing.”

Yoongi laughs and ruffles his hair. “I do my best.”

In August Yoongi finds out that he has to leave for several months to work at a different branch of the company. Jeongguk is crushed.

“Why does it always happen to me?” he asks his bedroom ceiling. “Every good thing in my life gets taken away.”

They go out to dinner together the night before Yoongi leaves. It's fun, but the mood is tinted gray by the knowledge that there won't be another night like this for a long time. When Yoongi takes him home, Jeongguk gives him a quick hug.

“Travel safe,” he mumbles into Yoongi's shoulder, clinging to him in the warm moonlight. Then he dashes up the steps and into his house, not daring to look back.

He's slightly consoled by the fact that Yoongi will be back by November, but not much.

Three months is a long time.

August passes excruciatingly slowly. Jeongguk rarely leaves his house except to practice soccer in the park and to make grocery runs with Hoseok. He spends a lot of time watching television and reading and drawing.

He's got all of his sketch diaries hidden away in a locked box in his closet. They're filled with his precious memories, from soccer to Jimin to winter snow drifts to Seokjin and Namjoon's cabin in the woods.

Jeongguk's current book is less varied. It's almost entirely filled with drawings of Yoongi—Yoongi laughing, Yoongi wearing suits when he doesn't have time to change after work, Yoongi's hands closed over his own, wrapped around a golf club.

Yoongi is still part of Jeongguk's heart, but it's a different part of his heart than before.
Afraid to explore that truth, Jeongguk simply continues to draw Yoongi and lock his sketches away.

The wedding is set for early October. As the date approaches, winding down from two weeks to one week to two days, Jeongguk's nerves get the best of him.

They're going to move into the Jungs' home rather than the other way around, so Hoseok helps Jeongguk clear out his room into boxes.

“You probably won't see Hunchul that much,” Hoseok tries to reassure him. “He'll be at school most of the time, remember?”

“Yeah,” Jeongguk says. He'd rather see Hunchul none of the time, but it's a relief all the same. “I don't want to attend the wedding.”

“I know, sweetheart,” Hoseok sighs. He shoots Jeongguk a sympathetic look. “I wish I could save you from doing anything you don't want to—you do too much of that, regardless—but there's really no way out of this one.”

Hoseok is right, of course, which is why Jeongguk finds himself waiting in the pews on the day of the wedding, wearing an uncomfortable suit and trying to swallow his worries.

It's an expensive wedding but a simple one all the same; his father and future stepmother had decided to have no attendants, which is why Jeongguk is spared from having to walk up the aisle.

He feels nauseous as the bride and groom enter. They say their vows, light two candles, and exchange rings. Jeongguk looks away as they kiss. He can see Hunchul watching him from the other side of the aisle, laughter in his eyes.
Finally the ceremony ends; the newlyweds exit, and Jeongguk makes his way out of the chapel sanctuary. Instead of heading to the huge reception hall located in the building, he turns the opposite way, making his way down a janitor's hallway. It's lined with windows, and Jeongguk dodges around several huge wheeled bins, leaning against the cold glass.

It's pouring outside, and the lights in the corridor are off so that the hallway is bathed in a dull, gray light. Jeongguk presses his forehead to the window, squeezing his eyes together to fight back tears.

“Jeongguk!”

Jeongguk knows that voice. He turns, not quite believing his ears.

“Are you here, Jeongguk?” Yoongi calls again before he spots him. “Oh, there you are.”

“I-I thought you wouldn't be back till next month,” Jeongguk gasps, feeling like the wind has been knocked out of him.

“I whined at the branch executive until he let me come back early,” Yoongi says. He navigates through the cleaning equipment until he's standing in front of Jeongguk. The corners of his lips droop; he looks terribly worried. “I was there for the wedding. Are you okay?”

“No,” Jeongguk says honestly, as a tear falls from one of his red-rimmed eyes.

“No, of course you're not,” Yoongi says, mostly to himself. His expression looks pained. “What can I do? How can I help?”

“Can you...” Jeongguk hesitates, wiping his nose on his suit sleeve, not caring if it's gross. “Can you give me a hug?” Another tear falls.

“Jeongguk...” Yoongi murmurs. He reaches for Jeongguk, folding him into his arms, and Jeongguk sags against him, exhausted. He breathes against Yoongi's shoulder; soft, trembling inhales and exhales. He sniffs, his lips quivering.
“Are you going back right away?” He asks quietly, his face still pressed into Yoongi's jacket.

“No,” Yoongi says. The rain spatters against the window outside with a gentle thrumming sound. “I'll be here till Thursday.”

“Don't go.” Jeongguk knows it's childish, but he's not feeling very much like an adult at the moment. “Please, Yoongi.”

“I won't.” Yoongi smooths his hand gently over Jeongguk's hair. “I'm here.”

They stay like that for a long time. Jeongguk doesn't know how much time he stands there, clinging to Yoongi, but he can't bring himself to let go. Just this once, he wants to have something that he wants, even if only for a few moments.

“We should get back to the reception,” Yoongi eventually whispers against Jeongguk's hair. “People will be asking for you.”

“I know,” Jeongguk says. He peels himself away, rubbing at his sticky cheeks with his sleeve. “Is my nose red?”

“Only a little,” Yoongi tells him. “I'm the only one who would notice.”

Jeongguk nods. “Okay. We should go back.”

He sneaks glances at Yoongi as they make their way to the reception hall. There's so many sensations swirling around in his head that he feels dizzy. Happiness and disbelief that Yoongi is really here. Warmth lingering from Yoongi's arms around him.

Fear, bubbling up in his chest at the knowledge that he's crossed a line beyond friendship. This is so much more than just friends.

No, Jeongguk realizes as Yoongi’s hand comes up to rest on his back, reassuring him. What he feels for Yoongi isn't platonic.
It's love.

“It's okay,” Yoongi says, catching sight of Jeongguk's face and assuming his expression is because of the wedding. “I'll stay with you.”

Yoongi has no idea.

They stay for most of the reception but Yoongi takes Jeongguk home early. He's supposed to go the Jung's house tonight, but he has a few cartons left in his room that he has to pick up. The house has already been sold; a new family is moving in next week.

Jeongguk wonders if they’ll have children to make friends with the rabbits underneath the porch.

“Want me to take you and your stuff, or wait for your father?” Yoongi asks. He's taken off his jacket and rolled up the sleeves of his shirt, leaning against the doorway of Jeongguk's room.

“I don't want to go just yet,” Jeongguk admits.

“Okay.” Yoongi scratches his head, thinking. “Hey. Have you ever slid down the banister?”

“Of course not!” Jeongguk is aghast. “My father would have a fit.”

“Your father isn't here right now.” Yoongi crosses over to where Jeongguk is perched on his bed, tugging on his arm. “Come on. I'll show you how.”
Jeongguk is hesitant at first, but after Yoongi clamors onto the long, curved railing of the main staircase—the one that leads to the front door of the house—and slips down it, whooping, he wants to try too.

It's incredible fun. Why hasn't he done this before?

“What did I tell you?” Yoongi asks as Jeongguk hops off at the foot of the stairs. “You have a great banister for sliding. Race you to the top?”

They slide down again and again; when they get tired of just that they have a timed competition to see who can make the most slides in three minutes (Jeongguk wins).

“Let's both go at once,” Yoongi suggests suddenly, and they rush to the top. “Hold my waist,” he directs Jeongguk.

Jeongguk is breathless with laughter when they finish. “Again!”

They run to the top, position themselves, and start down again. The two of them are so caught up that they don't hear the front door opening.

This time when they reach the bottom, they accidentally careen off the end, falling right at the feet of Jeongguk's father, stepmother, and Hunchul.

Shit.

“Father,” Jeongguk says, his laughs drowning in his chest. He clamors to his feet, afraid of the disapproving look in his eyes. He doesn't even look at Hunchul.

“Mr. Jeon,” Yoongi rushes out, bowing to Jeongguk's father. “Mrs. Jeon. My apologies. It was all my idea. I convinced Jeongguk to join in.”

Jeongguk's father clears his throat. “Jeongguk, go get your things. We'll wait in the car.”
Yoongi follows him up to his room. “Sorry,” he says. “I didn't realize—”

“It's okay,” Jeongguk says. “I'll be fine.” He picks up the two cartons that are stacked on his bed. “Thanks for everything, Yoongi.” He pauses, then adds, “I'm so glad you came back today.”

“Me too. I'll come see you tomorrow, if you don't mind.”

“I don't.” Jeongguk offers a smile. “I better go.”

“I'll walk you to the car,” Yoongi says. He takes one of the cartons from Jeongguk.

Jeongguk pauses on the threshold of the house, just for a moment.

*Goodbye,* he thinks.

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Jeongguk’s father leaves early the next day for business. He and Ms. Jung are skipping a honeymoon; instead he's heading overseas for an indeterminate amount of time.

Like he had said to Jeongguk before, it's just a business connection under the guise of family.

As soon as his father leaves with his suitcase, Jeongguk's stepmother calls him into the kitchen. She's sitting at the breakfast table, with Hunchul beside her (Jeongguk is amazed at the size of this house—they have a separate dining room for breakfast, lunch and dinner). Hoseok is at the counter behind them, writing something in his monthly planner. Jeongguk is so, so relieved that he's staying on as one of his stepmother's new employees.
Jeongguk stiffens when he sees the look that Hunchul is giving him: amused and satisfied. He doesn't sit down, just tugs at his sleeve. “What can I do for you?” he asks his stepmother.

“Hunchul just told me something interesting.” Her eyes travel up and down Jeongguk’s form, cool and curious.

Behind them, Hoseok’s head snaps up, alarmed.

“He says that you're extremely obedient,” she continues. “Is that true?”

Jeongguk’s eyes widen, shooting Hoseok a look of utter panic. Should he lie? What good would it do, when Hunchul can just prove it anyway? He chooses not to say anything.

“Try it,” Hunchul suggests. “You'll see.”

“Clap your hands, Jeongguk.”

Jeongguk doesn't want to. He resists, his arms trembling with the force it takes to keep them at his sides.

“He's trying to fight it,” Hunchul explains, as if he's a tour guide and Jeongguk is some animal in a zoo. “Wait for it. He'll do it.”

Jeongguk is only able to hold back for a few more seconds before his body jerks itself out of his control. He claps.

Ms. Jung's eyes have taken on a strange gleam. “Fascinating.”

“He'll do anything you say,” Hunchul says. “Useful, isn't it?”

“Very,” she agrees. “We could use more hands around here, couldn't we?”
Jeongguk's lip trembles involuntarily. He wants to ask Hoseok for help, but he knows why he isn't saying anything. One wrong move could get him fired and Jeongguk would lose him forever.

“Should we put him with the maids?” she muses. “Or the cook staff?”

“I could take him,” Hoseok cuts in suddenly. “I could use some help with my work.”

She narrows her eyes. “Really?”

“Yes; I can always use someone to carry things around for me and run instructions to the servants when I'm too busy myself. Jeongguk isn't too smart, but I'm willing to do the work of teaching him. With some guidance he could be useful.”

The suspicion fades from her expression. “Hmm. I suppose that's acceptable.”

Jeongguk is still nervous, but he's incredibly relieved that Hoseok found a way to manipulate the situation. Jeongguk will have some protection if he stays near him.

“Do a good job, Jeonggukkie,” Hunchul snickers, standing and patting his head condescendingly as he leaves the room.

Jeongguk is in his room, unpacking, when he sees Yoongi's car pull up in the driveway. His face melts into an excited smile, watching Yoongi get out and walk up through the vast front garden. Jeongguk checks his hair in the reflection of his phone before ducking out of his room, heading for the stairs.

“Stop,” Hunchul commands, meeting him halfway up the stairs.
Jeongguk comes to a halt, staring in disbelief.

“You don’t need to be associating with someone like Min Yoongi. Go to your room and stay there until he leaves.”

Jeongguk has never been so angry in his life. He glares at Hunchul, his teeth clenching. He wants to punch him in the face, but he can’t because his legs are already carrying him back up the stairs.

“Bastard,” Jeongguk seethes, stepping back into his room. He stands at the door, ears straining.

He hears the doorbell ring. It's muffled, but he can make out Yoongi’s voice asking if he's at home.

“He's out on an errand,” Hunchul tells him.

He's not. He isn't! “I'm here!” He shouts, poking his head as far out of his room as he's able.

“Hush!” Hunchul shouts up the stairs, shutting him up. “My apologies. The servants are being noisy.”

“Are you sure he's not here? That sounded like him.”

“You're mistaken,” Hunchul assures him. “You'll have no business here without Jeongguk. Have a nice day.” The door slams.

Sadly, Jeongguk watches Yoongi head back to his car. He gets into the driver's seat, then sits in the driveway, hunched over his phone.

Jeongguk’s phone buzzes next to him.

You're not at home?
Jeongguk tries to think this through. If he tells Yoongi that he is home, it'll be hard explaining why he can't come out.

Frustrated, he texts back, *No, I'm running an errand with Hoseok.* He watches Yoongi frown as he reads it, and then turn his car on and drive off. Jeongguk flops onto his bed and screams into his pillow.

Yoongi comes back the next afternoon, and the same thing happens. “You have bad timing, Yoongi,” Hunchul tells him as Jeongguk steams in his room, in mild disbelief that Hunchul managed to intercept him twice.

On the third day, Jeongguk is ready; he's not going to let Yoongi leave without seeing him. He texts Yoongi that he'll meet him outside, enlists Hoseok's help in distracting Hunchul, and sneaks out the side door (the one that the kitchen staff use to put the trash out).

When he clamors into Yoongi's car at last, Jeongguk breathes a sigh of relief.

*Victory.*

“You look like you just won an Olympic medal,” Yoongi says cheekily, flicking his shoulder.

“I should have,” Jeongguk mutters.

They go to a park to walk along the river. Yoongi hides the lower half of his face with a mask so no one will interrupt them, but Jeongguk can still tell when he smiles because his eyes scrunch up sweetly whenever he's happy.

“I don't like your stepbrother,” Yoongi says.

Jeongguk can't agree more. “Me neither. Thankfully he's going back to school in a few days.”

Yoongi stops walking abruptly, turning to look Jeongguk straight in the eyes. “Be careful around
him, okay? I don't know what, exactly, but there's something dark about him.” He grimaces. “I wish I...” he stops himself, falling silent.

Jeongguk's brows knit together, looking away from Yoongi. He doesn't know how to respond. He can't promise to stay away from Hunchul, either. It's simply not possible.

“I'll be careful,” he says finally.

They start walking again, watching a flock of geese descend onto the riverbank to rest. “How much longer will you be away this time?” Jeongguk asks.

Yoongi winces. “Actually...” He lets out a long frustrated breath. “I meant to tell you a few days ago, but you weren't at home and I wanted to say this in person.”

Jeongguk squints at him. “What is it?”

“My father is sending me to business school overseas. I won't be coming back in between the internship and school.”

Oh. Jeongguk tries and fails to hide his disappointment. “Overseas?”

“Yes.” Yoongi looks miserable too. “I want to study, of course. But it's so far from... from home.”

It's far from me, too, Jeongguk thinks. “How long?”

“Well, I'm going to take a really accelerated program and I should be out in two years.”

“Won't that be hard?”

“Sure.” Yoongi shrugs. “But I'm willing to do it if it means I come home sooner.”
Jeongguk sniffs, pulling his hoody around his shoulders. It's chillier than he expected. “What will you do then?” He curls his fingers inside of his pockets. “After you finish school, I mean.”

“I don’t know.” Yoongi stares into the distance. “My parents want me to get married.”

Those words sit unpleasantly in Jeongguk’s ears. “So early?”

“Yeah. We’ll see, though. I’m in no hurry.” Yoongi glances at Jeongguk. “Are you cold? You can have my coat.”

“No,” Jeongguk replies, embarrassed. “It’s okay.” He’s shivering, but taking Yoongi’s coat feels a little too much like boyfriend behavior, and Jeongguk is trying to push those thoughts away. He checks his watch. “Hoseok told me to be back by five-thirty. We should probably go,” he says reluctantly.

The drive home is silent. Jeongguk wishes he lived farther away from the park, wishes he could drag out the seconds into minutes and hours.

“Can you make it inside okay?” Yoongi asks him when they reach his stepmother’s house. “I could walk you to the door.”

“I’m all right,” Jeongguk says. He doesn’t get out of the car.

“Do you need anything else?” Yoongi is stalling. Jeongguk doesn’t blame him. He still doesn’t move, just staring at Yoongi’s face. He has pictures, but he wants to remember how Yoongi looks right this moment, when he’s only looking at Jeongguk.

“No,” he says finally, his voice soft.

There’s a tense pause, as if they both want to say something.

“Well.” Yoongi clears his throat. “Bye, then.”
Jeongguk grips the door handle, ready to get out, before he has an idea. “Hey. Do you want to write letters while you're in school. Like—like we used to?”

“I'd love to.” Yoongi's eyes light up.

“Um. Okay.” Jeongguk rummages around in his pants for a scrap of paper; he comes up with an old receipt. “Do you have a pen?”

“What kind of future CEO would I be if I didn't?” Yoongi chuckles, producing a pen from one of the compartments of the car.

“Here.” Jeongguk scrawls an address on the back of the receipt, handing it to Yoongi. “Wait. I could have texted that to you. I wasn't thinking straight. Sorry.” Jeongguk brushes at his bangs, flustered.

“No problem. Also, this has Hoseok's name on it?”

“Yeah.” Jeongguk falters. “Just. Um. Address your letters to him. I don't want them getting mixed up with my step-family's mail.”

“I'll do that.”

Finally, Jeongguk opens the car door, climbing out. “Bye, Yoongi.”

“Bye.”

When Jeongguk gets inside, he watches Yoongi from the window until his car disappears.
Jeongguk's life improves marginally when Hunchul goes back to school. He gets some protection by working with Hoseok, and they manage to continue with Jeongguk's studies as he helps in Hoseok's office.

Hunchul's mother isn't nearly so bad as Hunchul himself. She doesn't get the same kick out of humiliating Jeongguk as Hunchul does. Rather, Jeongguk thinks that her dislike of him stems from his father. Apparently she wasn't fully aware of Jeongguk's father's financial state until the marriage was completed, and he suspects that she's taking out her frustration with his absent father on him.

Jeongguk is thankful that she doesn't pay too much attention to him. In her eyes, he's simply another one of the servants.

He's reached another bearable part of his life; it's not easy, and he never knows what's waiting around each corner, but Jeongguk is nothing if not resolute. He looks for the good parts of his life, like when Hoseok teaches him how to bake bread or the late nights they spend in his bedroom playing board games. Sometimes Hoseok does little bits of magic, like making the pieces glow in the dark, which is very cool.

The real highlight of Jeongguk's life, though, is as constant as ever.

Dear Jeongguk,

How are you doing? School is going all right. I'm studying hard and passing my classes as best I can.

Businesses here aren't all that different than back home. Sometimes I don't understand the cultural cues and make a fool out of myself, but most of the time things are straightforward. I'm always surprised by how casual people are here—last week someone spilled coffee on a manager at my internship and all she said was, “it's fine, happens to the best of us.”

Another thing—everyone plays golf. Everyone. I suppose my father was onto something when he made me learn.

Yoongi goes on to tell Jeongguk all about the new restaurants he's been to, the kitten one of his new
friends is (secretly) keeping in his apartment, and one of his professors who consistently wears the same ugly yellow tie to class.

_I do know one person from home, Yoongi writes near the end. She's a family friend studying at the same school. Honestly she kind of annoys me—I can tell she's hoping to secure an engagement with me because she's always talking about how much she loves our company._

_Why does everyone see my marriage as another business contract? It's kind of tiring. Maybe I should just marry you and have a honeymoon on the beach and get it all over with. We can watch cartoons and eat junk food every day._

_You in?

Sincerely,

Yoongi_

_I'm too young for marriage, Jeongguk writes back, but I'll take you up on the cartoons and junk food._

Jeongguk can't write about his real situation, so he sends back a light-hearted letter. He tells Yoongi about how he's gotten close with his stepmother's gardener and how he's been given a little patch in the corner that's just his.

_I'm going to grow peonies, he says. They're so lacy and beautiful._

Jeongguk debates for a whole day until he finally tucks a sketch of the garden into the envelope and sends the letter off with Hoseok before he can change his mind.

_Your drawing is amazing! Yoongi raves. I showed it to one of my friends—she's an artist—and she says you have a real eye for composition. I'm going to pin it up in my room so I can look at it every day._
Are you still too young to get married? You're two weeks wiser now. The offer still stands; I'll even throw in free ice cream.

Jeongguk laughs when he reads it, his face turning red.

You need to stop thinking about this and start thinking about your studies, he writes. Besides, there's no way we can get married. You're too short for me.

Wow, that's so rude, Jeongguk, Yoongi replies. It's not my fault you're an overgrown child. But fine, if you insist I'll buy stilts to walk down the aisle.

Jeongguk snorts at that. You'd just fall, he writes.

Months fly by; Hunchul eventually comes home for summer vacation. With Hoseok's help, he mostly avoids him; when they're working in his office Hoseok refuses to so much as let Hunchul inside. “You'll distract me,” he insists. “I'm working on very important financial documents.”

There are always low moments. Once Jeongguk finds himself stuck in Hunchul's room for hours, forced to say “you look great,” to any outfit he picks out. He feels like a dumb parrot that repeats everything it hears and he hates it.

Another time Hunchul orders him to empty his pockets and give him all the money he has—which is only enough for a cup of coffee and dinner, but it's Jeongguk's allowance from Hoseok. He grits his teeth as he hands it over.

After that he hides his money.

Jeongguk's stepmother spends the summer throwing parties; they're giant, extravagant ordeals where Jeongguk is usually roped into serving drinks or prepping food in the kitchen. He supposes they must be fun to attend, but they're a great deal of work for the servants. He hates them.

He writes to Yoongi about every party, though he leaves out the important detail that he was a server and not a guest. He hopes it will mean that Yoongi doesn't worry about him and can concentrate on his work. The last thing he wants to do is burden him when he has so much on his shoulders already.
After a particularly late night of dishes, courtesy of another of his stepmother’s galas, Jeongguk wonders if he should tell his father about the situation with his stepmother. Would he do anything? He's not sure.

Regardless, he decides it's worth a try. He chooses to write a letter—his father might appreciate the old-fashioned medium—and he makes sure to emphasize how being forced to work as a servant is an insult to their family name. He knows he'll get a better response if he can make it about his father and not himself.

A lot of time goes by without a reply; one month melts into two before he finally receives a letter from his father.

_Sorry to hear that_, his father says. _Bear with it for now; I'm too busy to visit. I'll try to fix it when I return._

Jeongguk has no idea if and when his father intends to come home. It's as good as a rejection.

Facing the disappointment head-on, he steels himself and pushes on through the long weeks.

“Why does Min Yoongi bother being friends with you?” Hunchul asks one day as he plays video games in the basement. Jeongguk is stuck watching, since Hunchul ordered him to keep him company. “I don't get what he sees in you.”

“We've known each other for a long time,” Jeongguk responds curtly. “Also he's actually a decent human being and cares about others.”

Hunchul shrugs. “Still. There's nothing really that special about you. I don't get it.”
Shivers run down Jeongguk's arms. He's reminded suddenly of what happened with Jimin; he can't let that happen to Yoongi too.

“He doesn't really like me that much,” Jeongguk says. He hopes that convincing Hunchul that he's overestimated their friendship will draw his attention away. “He only hangs out with me out of pity.”

“Oh, 'cause you follow him around like a puppy?”

“Something like that,” Jeongguk mutters. “I'm not on his level.”

“Damn right,” Hunchul snorts. He shoots someone onscreen. “You're not on any of our levels. That's why you're a servant.”

Jeongguk tries to remind himself that Hunchul is compensating for his low self-esteem, just like Hoseok told him, but he has to sit on his hands to keep from clenching his fists.

“Tell me that was awesome,” Jeongguk demands as he picks off a line of virtual enemies.

“Awesome,” Jeongguk repeats flatly. He stares at the wall and wonders when this will end.

Dear Jeongguk,

It's a holiday here so we didn't have classes (they never cancel class in summer term, so you know this is big). I went to my classmate's parents' home for a barbeque, and their yard was full of peonies. It made me think of your drawing.
Are you ever going to send more?

At this point most of my work seems to be presentations, which is good, because I'm getting more confident at public speaking. At least I'm doing better than some people—one of the presentations last week received a zero because the girl literally copied the entire project from a student last semester who had the same class. The same class, Jeongguk. If you're going to cheat, at least be stealthy…

I keep thinking about your drawings because of my friend who's an artist. I showed her your picture and she said you're cute. Did you ever talk to your father about your dream? Do you still want to be an artist? I know you'd be great.

Since I came here, I've met a lot of people, but there's no one that I can talk with about bunnies and flawed capitalism in the same conversation. I miss you.

Sincerely,

Yoongi

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Dear Yoongi,

I'm too busy to do a lot of art, but I still want to be an artist. I didn't talk to my father about it, he hasn't come back from his trip yet. I have to finish the high school curriculum first, anyway. Maybe we can talk about art school when he gets home.

Since you asked, I'm sending a drawing I did of the squirrel who likes to sit on the tree outside of my window. His name is Ferguson; I told him all about you and he's impressed.
Keep working hard! If you have to cheat, at least don't get caught. I don't want to have to yell at you for being expelled from business school.

The assistant cook is teaching me how to make dumplings. The first time was a disaster but I'm getting better. When you get home, I'll cook you a whole meal. By then my food will be edible, I promise.

Study well!

Sincerely,

Jeongguk

P.S. I miss you too.

In the fall, Hunchul returns to school. Jeongguk turns eighteen, and Hoseok buys him a cake. They have a party with Jeongguk's closest friends: the gardener, the assistant cook, and the lady who comes by once a week to clean the windows.

The cook gives Jeongguk a new hat; the window lady brings him a houseplant for his room. He receives new weeding gloves from the gardener, and Hoseok buys him a set of colored pencils.

It's not a big celebration, but Jeongguk is happy. He feels loved.

Happy birthday! Yoongi writes. Jeongguk is flattered that he remembers. You're an adult now, which means you're definitely old enough to elope with me.
The words tug hard on Jeongguk’s heart. *I'm far too old to get married if trig problems count as years*, he says. *I've done at least a hundred in the past week and I'm dying. You're too late.*

It’s friendly banter. It always is, Jeongguk knows that for certain.

That’s why he could never in a hundred thousand years have anticipated the content of Yoongi’s next letter.

*Dear Jeongguk,*

*I've been hesitating to write this for weeks, but I have to say it now or never.*

*You're driving me absolutely insane. Do you even know what you're doing? I can't think what to make of it.*

*All I want is to fly back to you and shake you until you tell me what you really think. Do you like me? I can't decipher your words. I'll read your letter once and think I have a chance, then read it again and decide that you're joking.*

*You know I'm not the world's most patient man, and I can't wait any longer. You might be laughing over our exchanges, but I'm in earnest. I have been since we met. If I asked you for real, would you still say you're too young or old or tall or tired?*

*Would you marry me, Jeongguk?*

*I feel like a fool writing this. Please reply as fast as possible; I'll be miserable till you do.*

*Love, (do you know how much I've wanted to write this?)*  

*Yoongi*
Jeongguk's first reaction is elation. His heart soars. Yoongi loves him! He's been in love with him! He hadn't thought it possible, and yet it is.

Yoongi is offering him a way out of hell that he had never imagined he would have. They can get married as soon as Yoongi returns, and then they can move away from here. He'll never have to see Hunchul again; Jeongguk can stay by Yoongi's side as he reworks the whole industry from the inside out. He can support Yoongi when he makes enemies and cheer him on through each success.

He wants to open the windows and shout to the world, “I'm in love with Min Yoongi and he loves me too!”

Jeongguk rushes to find a pen and paper, ready to write his reply then and there.

_Dear Yoongi—Dearest Yoongi—_

_Yes! Yes, yes, yes!_

_Of course I'll marry you. Of course I love you. When have I not loved you?_

He's so worked up that he has to pause, his cheeks aching from smiling.

It's then that Jeongguk realizes the horrible, painful truth.

He's cursed.

_Oh. _He slumps back in his chair, breath rushing out of his lungs in a terrible gasp.

There's no way he can marry Yoongi.

It would be dangerous for the both of them. What if his curse was discovered? Someone could use him to infiltrate the company. He could be made to hurt Yoongi, even kill him. Jeongguk knows that things can get dirty in the top tier.
What if Jeongguk shut himself up, didn't talk to anyone except for Yoongi? No one would find out then. But no, it would be like living in a prison, ten times worse even than now.

Yoongi could give up his position to his brother—but Jeongguk could never ask him to do that, even if he knows Yoongi would. Besides, he would still be a target as a popular celebrity.

They could keep their marriage a secret.

No, they couldn't. Of course someone would find out.

Jeongguk presses his hands over his eyes. He can't marry Yoongi. He loves Yoongi, and Yoongi loves him, but he can't marry him because he's been ruined.

Out of the infinite things that Jeongguk has lost in his life because of the spell, this is the worst of all.

He's going to lose Yoongi, too.

Jeongguk cries into his pillow all night, trying to muffle the noise in case Hunchul hears. He barely sleeps at all.

He hates it all so much. Why him?

Why did it have to be him?

Night closes in, dark and heavy and suffocating. He has no answers.

In the end, he finds that there's no way out.
In the morning Jeongguk finds Hoseok and tells him everything. He cries all over again, and Hoseok is endlessly sympathetic, wiping his tears away and clucking his tongue in anger.

“Come with me,” he tells Jeongguk when he's finished. “There's something I should have done long ago.”

He pulls Jeongguk into his room and shoves him into his closet. “Keep the door cracked but don't let yourself be seen.”

Jeongguk nods. He does as he's told.

Hoseok strides into the center of his bedroom and snaps his fingers twice. Nothing happens aside from a few green sparks. Jeongguk is confused.

A long ten seconds pass. Then someone starts to materialize in front of Hoseok. Jeongguk's eyes are wide as his aunt fades into view.

Vaguely, Jeongguk remembers something Hoseok has said before about being able to force-summon other magical creatures every so often. He's half awed and half frightened.

“Hyunju,” Hoseok says dryly.

“Hoseok,” she retorts. She's dressed in a bathrobe and fluffy slippers. “Why would you wake me up in the middle of the night and bring me here?”

“I wonder.” His eyes flash with anger; Jeongguk doesn't think he's ever seen Hoseok so mad. “I want you to undo the curse.”

“What curse?” She cocks her head, stretching her arms tiredly.
“The one you put on my employer's son, you dumbass; your own nephew, Jeon Jeongguk. The curse that's been single-handedly ruining his life for seven fucking years.”

His aunt rubs her forehead. “You woke me up for this?”

“Yeah, I fucking did,” Hoseok seethes. “Do you have any idea what you've done? I would have chewed you out years ago if I thought you'd listen, but now… Hyunju, he's in love and he can't get married because of what you did to him! What kind of monster are you?”

“It probably did him good. Don't tell me what to do, witch.” She glares. “First the magic council comes after me, now you. Why can't I catch a break?”

“Maybe there's a damn reason!” Hoseok's voice rises in volume. “Undo the curse, before I make you.”

“I can't,” she says.

“What do you mean, you can't?”

“The council took away most of my powers as punishment, that's why,” she spits. “All I can do is transport now. I have no ability to create or dismantle spells anymore.”

Jeongguk's throat floods with disappointment.

“If that's all,” she says to Hoseok, “I'll be taking my leave. I need my beauty sleep.” She steps back from Hoseok and disappears in a puff of smoke.

“Bitch,” Hoseok mutters, eyeing the place she had been standing. “You can come out, Jeongguk.”

“Can't. You ordered me to stay in.”
“Oh, right. Come out, then.”

Jeongguk emerges from the closest. “There’s nothing that can be done?”


Swallowing his feelings, Jeongguk pats his shoulder. “I know. Thank you.”

Hoseok pulls him into a hug, sighing into his hair. “I want to tell you everything will be okay, even though I know it won’t.”

“I’ll survive,” Jeongguk manages. “I’m strong.”

“I know you are.” Hoseok’s voice trembles. “You’re the strongest person I know.”

________________________________________________________________________________________

Jeongguk has Hoseok write a response for him. He says that Jeongguk is too busy to write back because he’s occupied with his engagement to a wealthy young lady—it's a secret, he writes, and Yoongi can’t tell anyone.

*I’m sorry.* Jeongguk thinks as he sends the letter. *It's not what I want to tell you, I promise.*

*I love you.*

After that, he doesn’t get any more letters from Yoongi.
Chapter 5

Autumn is followed by winter, and winter is succeeded by spring, as it always is. Jeongguk spends as much time as he can in the garden as it gets warmer, planting and weeding and coaxing his peonies to grow. He still finds them beautiful, even if they make of him think of Yoongi, which hurts.

Jeongguk refuses to give up on himself. It's difficult now, but he holds fast to the knowledge that the winter of his life will end someday, too.

He forces himself not to think about Yoongi's reaction, about what Yoongi is doing since he stopped writing and texting. He must be hurting; Jeongguk's actions were to protect him, but how would Yoongi know that? It fills Jeongguk with guilt, so he guides his thoughts away.

Though he isn't keeping in touch with him, Jeongguk imagines what Yoongi is doing on a daily basis. He knows that Yoongi is set to graduate at the end of the summer term because he read a news article on his planned succession of the company. Jeongguk hopes that he does well.

Jeongguk finishes his high school work and Hoseok holds a graduation ceremony for him in the garden. He buys him a graduation cap, and Jeongguk paints the top with pictures of flowers. His father hasn't been home since the wedding two years ago, but Jeongguk has long given up on his support. He's been accepted to art school, and now he just needs a part-time job to help put himself through. Hoseok insists on helping to pay, and combined with the scholarship he's been promised, it's looking more and more possible.

There's still the issue of where he'll live—anywhere other than with his step-parents will do—but he's working through it one step at a time. Jeongguk is sick of lying down and letting the curse rule his life. He's going to live the way he wants, as much as he can.

Spring blooms into summer, stretching and growing into the warm fullness of August. Jeongguk finds a weekend job cutting lawns for people in the neighborhood. It's not enough for school, but he's still looking.

One foot in front of the other, he reminds himself.
A card arrives at his stepmother's home in mid-August. He sees it open on the counter of the breakfast nook a day later; he might not even have noticed it if he hadn't recognized the Min Corporation's logo embossed on the card.

Shaken, he picks it up, scanning the words.

_The Mins would like to cordially request the presence of your family on August 17, 18, and 19 from eight in the evening to one in the morning for a masquerade ball._

_Please wear a mask to fit with the theme of the event._

Jeongguk freaks out for all of ten seconds before he realizes that there's no way that Yoongi sent this himself. It must have been his parents.

Curious, he retreats to his room to look up what he can. It turns out that it's a huge event—there are already news articles about the attendance of nearly five hundred guests. Even more interesting are the speculations.

**myg_forever posted 1:31 PM**

I heard that Min Yoongi's parents set it up to find him a wife?

**leila324 posted 1:39 PM**

I heard that too, but not just a wife. Did you hear the news that Min Yoongi is bi?
The last commenter is right, he confirmed that in an interview recently. But I think it’s true his parents are trying to set him up, I mean he’s about to take over the company?

I wanna be invited too :(

Someone leaked inside info! It is an engagement ball! The source says his parents are requiring him to be married before he becomes CEO!

dang whomever it is will be a lucky girl/guy

Jeongguk’s heart is beating quickly. He’s been invited to Yoongi’s engagement ball! But he can’t go, surely. Right?
He asks his stepmother about it later in the evening and she snorts. “It says it’s for our family, Jeongguk. You’re not a part of it.”

Jeongguk knows that. He almost wishes he hadn’t heard about the ball in the first place—he doesn’t want to think about Yoongi getting married to someone else.

His stepmother is forcing Hunchul to go—“If only you were gay,” she laments—because she believes it will strengthen their family connections. With a lot of grumbling, he agrees.

“Guess the upside will be lots of cute girls,” he tells Jeongguk later. “Are you sad that you can’t go see your puppy crush?”

“No,” Jeongguk says. “I don’t want to go.”

It's a lie.

Jeongguk gets more and more anxious as the first day of the party approaches. Hunchul goes out shopping with his mother and buys a new suit for the occasion. Jeongguk is forced watch him parade it around his room and tell him how great it looks.

On the morning of, Jeongguk can tell his stepmother and stepbrother are anticipating it because he barely gets a second to sit down. Every time he sees one of them in the hallway, it's “Jeongguk, fetch me a glass of water,” or “take this to Yeongja and have her press the collar again, it's crooked” or “fetch a new container of bubble bath from the closet upstairs.”

Jeongguk follows orders all morning, helps cook lunch, finishes a spreadsheet for Hoseok, then sits
in Hunchul's room for an hour as he debates his appearance.

“Part on the right or left?”

“Left,” Jeongguk says honestly. He looks at his watch. When will they leave? The ball starts in forty-five minutes.

“Hmm.” Hunchul smooths out the part and tries the other side. “I like right better.”

Why did you ask me in the first place? Jeongguk thinks. “Aren't you going to be late?”

“Right. I better get my mom.” Hunchul gives him a nasty grin, slipping a plain black mask over his eyes. “Enjoy your night in, golden boy.”

After all these years, Jeongguk still hates that nickname. He grimaces.

When Hunchul and Mrs. Jeon finally call their chauffeur, get into their car, and drive off, Jeongguk slumps against the back of the door.

He can't help but let his shoulders sag. He wants so much to go see Yoongi too.

“Hey sweetheart,” Hoseok says, entering from the hallway. “You've had quite the day.”

“Yeah.” Jeongguk feels deflated. “I think I'm going to go to bed.”

“So early?” Hoseok raises his eyebrows. “Don't you have a ball to go to?”

Jeongguk scrunches his nose up in confusion. “What are you talking about? I can't go, Hoseok.”

“Oh? Why not? It's a masquerade ball. No one will recognize you.”
“But,” Jeongguk says lamely. “I… I can't get there alone. And I have nothing to wear.”

Hoseok's face slowly spreads into a grin. “What good is being a half-witch if I can't fix my prince up for a party? Follow me,” he orders. Jeongguk does.

Hoseok gives him a warm bubble bath using his stepmother's fancy soaps, washing his hair with gentle fingers. Slowly, Jeongguk relaxes as the exhaustion of the day fades and excitement seeps in. He's going to the party! He's going to see Yoongi! He closes his eyes, content as Hoseok rinses the conditioner from his hair.

He towels off, and Hoseok blow-dries his hair.

“Hold still and close your eyes.” he murmurs.

Jeongguk complies. His head feels warm and tingly for a few seconds, but it's gone after a moment.

“Okay, take a look.”

Jeongguk gapes at the bathroom mirror. His hair—previously sleek and black—is a warm chestnut shade. It's soft and silky. He reaches up to touch it in disbelief.

“No one's going to recognize you like this,” Hoseok says, smug. “Do you like it?”

“Yeah,” Jeongguk breathes. “It's lovely.”

“You look good.” Hoseok rubs a dollop of hair product between his hands and goes expertly to work, sweeping Jeongguk's bangs off of his forehead and arranging them into place.

He turns Jeongguk toward him gently, picking up an eyeshadow palette. “I'm gonna line your eyes really softly, okay?” He directs Jeongguk to close his eyes. “Not that you're planning to take off your mask, but just in case, you know?”
He finishes, deftly whirling Jeongguk back to check in the mirror. “Good?”

It's subtle, just a soft, smoky brown tinge, but it's alluring. Jeongguk loves it.

Next Hoseok steers Jeongguk into his own bedroom and starts rifling through his closet. “I've got something—here.”

He pulls out a deep navy suit with dark trim, followed by a collared shirt. “It's not your size, but it will be in a minute.” Hoseok strokes the fabric, muttering something. Jeongguk watches the garment expand and shrink, adjusting into a slightly new shape.

“There.” He hands the suit and shirt to Jeongguk. “Put those on.”

They fit perfectly, of course. The cut flatters his long legs and thin waist. “I really like it,” he says softly, fingering the material of the sleeve.

Hoseok eyes him critically. Crossing over to him, he grasps his hand and touches the ring—the one he had given him years ago that Jeongguk still wears every day. “Keep this on, just in case,” he says, adjusting it. “Are you feeling ready?”

“Yes,” Jeongguk replies. His chest is full of butterflies. “Can we leave?”

“Hold on a minute.” Hoseok produces something from his pocket and presses it into his hand. “You can't forget your mask at a masquerade ball.”

Jeongguk looks at the item in his hand. The surface is covered in jet-black velvet; delicate silver swirls trace the edges. It's beautiful.

Hoseok must have bought it for him. “Thanks,” he says sincerely. “I don't know what to say.”

“So don't say anything,” Hoseok replies lightly. “Just get yourself to that party and charm everyone's pants off.”
Hoseok drives him across town to the venue, insisting that he sit in the backseat as though he's a chauffeur. On the way, Jeongguk thinks up a method to disguise himself—it isn't as if he can go around introducing himself as Jeon Jeongguk when both his step-family and Yoongi are in attendance. He decides to call himself Hyunseong and pretend that he's from Jimin's hometown. When they were at school together, Jimin taught him how to imitate his accent, and Jeongguk is still good enough at it to pass as a person that's only half-lost their dialect.

As they pull up in the circular drive of the hall, Jeongguk is so jittery that his joints feel numb—like his knees might give out if he tries to stand. He takes a deep breath, trying to slow the dizzy beating of his heart.

“I'll pick you up at midnight, is that okay?”

“Yeah. Thank you so much.” Three hours is plenty; so much more than he had expected.

He's stunned as he gets out of the car. Wide steps lead up to the giant doors of a grand building. Tall, two-story windows glitter with the promise of excitement within and the whole effect is nothing less than magical.

Glancing back at Hoseok, who gives him a thumbs-up, he climbs up the stairs.

He's worried that someone will ask for his ID at the door, but the tall man who is waiting outside simply waves him on, smiling, and pulls the door open.

Jeongguk steps into a lavishly decorated lobby, bathed in the light of a crystal chandelier. Through two open doors at either side he can hear the noise of the ball.

The nervous shakiness in his legs increases tenfold, but he didn't come all the way here just to back down, so he makes his way to the entrance on the right and steps into the ballroom.

Jeongguk has never seen such a vast room in his whole life. The white walls and deep red of the tablecloths gleam beneath countless chandeliers. Against the wall nearest to him is a long table loaded with refreshments, and beyond the round tables full of guests eating and chatting—he spots his stepmother with Hunchul at one of them—is a spacious dance floor. A few people are waltzing, but most of them are clustered near the opposite end of the hall.
In the middle of it all stands Min Yoongi.

Jeongguk’s breath catches in his throat. It's like it's been two days and not two years since they had last met; Yoongi hasn't changed a bit, aside from the fact that he looks dashing and perfect in his suit. He's not wearing a mask, of course—there's little point—and Jeongguk can make out each line of his face.

Jeongguk can't breathe for a second, but the moment passes when someone bumps his arm as they walk by.

“Sorry,” Jeongguk chokes out, moving out of people's way and reorienting himself. He's here to look—just to catch a glimpse of Yoongi—so that's what he does.

He positions himself at the end of the refreshments table, near the punch bowl, pouring himself a cup and retreating to stand near the wall. He can see Yoongi from here, talking politely with a young woman in red. His shoulders are squared, as they always are when he's in work mode. It's a sign that he's uncomfortable. Jeongguk wonders how much he hates this occasion.

Yoongi turns, eyes passing over Jeongguk's side of the room, and his fingers fly up to his mask involuntarily just to check if it's still there. His heart beats incredibly fast, but Yoongi has already turned away.

Jeongguk doesn't know whether the shaky feeling in his chest is relief or disappointment.

“Got your eye on tonight's prince?”

Jeongguk turns, startled, his punch nearly sloshing out of his cup. There's a man standing behind him, tall and slim and sharp-featured. He isn't wearing a mask.

“I don't,” Jeongguk stammers, flustered. He lays on the accent slightly as he speaks up again. “I was just looking in that direction.” This stranger looks oddly familiar, as though he's seen him somewhere before, and Jeongguk's mind is racing in an attempt to place him.

“What a relief,” the man says, eyes twinkling. “I won't have to compete for a dance. Will you oblige me?” He ducks his head politely and holds out his hand, the question hanging in the air. He's handsome, Jeongguk thinks, and polite, too.
Jeongguk likes to dance—as the child of a formerly wealthy family, he had been forced to take ballroom dancing lessons when he was young. He's still good at it. Why not? He thinks.

“Yes,” he tells him. “I'd love to.”

“It would be a crime for someone as lovely as you to be left at the wall all night,” the man says as he leads him onto the dance floor. “What's your name?” The orchestra is setting into a quick waltz, and Jeongguk finds his feet falling properly into step with his partner's.

“Hyunseong,” Jeongguk says, trying not to overstate the accent. “I'm from the southern border.”

“Really? Your dialect is nearly gone. You must have worked hard to get rid off it.”

“I suppose,” Jeongguk says, thinking back to Jimin's struggle with polishing away his accent. “It can be difficult.”

“Yes.” The man's hand rests lightly on his waist. He's a good dancer, completely at ease, as though he's been raised going to balls all his life. “What brought you here?”

“My relatives live in town,” Jeongguk says. “I'm only visiting for the party.” He adjusts his position, shifting his hand on his partner's shoulder, and then realizes he still doesn't know who he's dancing with. “What about you? Who are you?”

“Oh, you don't know?” The man's eyebrows rise, mildly surprised.

“Should I?”

“No, no,” he laughs. “I'm sorry, that was arrogant of me. I just thought since—well, I'm Min Yoongi's brother, Taehyung.”

“Oh,” Jeongguk gasps, because that's why he looked so familiar. “Oh. I had no idea.” He's flustered; why hadn't he realized? He looks so much like Yoongi. Of course Taehyung isn't wearing a mask,
“Don't look so worried,” Taehyung teases, patting his shoulder as they dance. “I'm not going to eat you.”

“No, I'm... I should have known. My apologies.”

Taehyung grins. “Don't worry, it's not a problem. I just wish I got that cute reaction every time I introduced myself.”

The music ends, and they step apart. Jeongguk bows politely. “Thank you for the dance, Taehyung. It was a pleasure.”

Clucking his tongue, Taehyung shakes his head. “You think you're getting away that easily? I'm not done with you yet. I want to introduce you to my brother.”

That can't happen. “No,” Jeongguk says immediately, panicking. “I, um. I can't. No thanks.”

Taehyung cocks an eyebrow, amused. “No need to be shy. I know he'll like you too. Come on.”

At the order Jeongguk's legs immediately follow. He wants to curse at his stupid feet as they cross the room toward Yoongi, who's managed to pull away from the crowd and is now hovering at one of the tables, talking with a middle-aged man and his daughter.

He's terrified. Yoongi is going to recognize him, despite his disguise, and everything will be ruined. Jeongguk is almost hyperventilating now; he desperately tries to calm himself as he approaches Yoongi's back.

“Yoongi!” Taehyung calls when they get close. Yoongi turns toward them. He's beautiful. Jeongguk's stomach does a nauseating flip-flop.

“Taehyung,” Yoongi says. He glances at Jeongguk, but his eyes pass over him without registering anything.
He doesn't recognize me, Jeongguk realizes with a pang of dizzying relief. He's not going to find me out.

“Who is this?” Yoongi says. He gives Jeongguk a calm smile—it's his business smile, he knows—before it melts into slight concern. “Are you all right?”

Jeongguk realizes that he looks overwhelmed and schools his face back into an appropriate expression. “Oh! Yes, I'm fine. Just fine.” God, he's already embarrassed himself; he wishes his mask would cover the blush on his cheeks, too.

“I think he's just excited to meet you.” Taehyung pats Jeongguk's back. “This is Hyunseong. Hyunseong, meet Yoongi.”

Yoongi bows and Jeongguk returns it. “Nice to meet you, Hyunseong. I hope you're enjoying the party.”

“I am,” Jeongguk says, careful to keep his voice steady and accented. “Thank you.”

“Well.” Yoongi's attention is fading fast; he glances at someone behind Jeongguk. “Have a good rest of your night.”

Out of nowhere, something tugs on Jeongguk's heart, hard. He hasn't seen Yoongi in two years; now that he's met him he can't just let him go that easily.

“Your drama,” he bursts out before he loses Yoongi's attention. “I really liked it.”

“Oh?” Yoongi's eyebrows shoot up. “You mean the comedy from when I was fifteen?”

“Yeah,” Jeongguk says. “I liked your character. You were great.”

“Thanks,” Yoongi says. “I'm surprised you know about it. I'm a pretty awful actor.”
“I know,” Jeongguk blurts, then immediately regrets it. “Sorry—no, I just meant that you were funny. I had this… um, pet bunny back then. I named it after your character.” It's not quite a lie—he did name one of the rabbits in his yard after Yoongi’s character. He named another after Yoongi himself, but he's not going to say all that.

Yoongi stares for a second. Then his lips quirk up the way that they always do when he's stifling a laugh. “I like that,” he says after a pause. “It's cute.”

Jeongguk barely notices Taehyung slipping away to greet another guest; all he sees is Yoongi.

“You're not from around here, are you?” Yoongi says. “You've got a southern accent.”

“No,” Jeongguk agrees. “I've never been to the city before.” His eyes dart around the room, anywhere but at Yoongi.

“Oh? How exciting. Have you had a chance to sight-see?”

“A little,” Jeongguk says. Gradually, he's relaxing; it's a relief to know that Yoongi doesn't recognize him.

“Do you like art?” Yoongi asks. “They have a wonderful collection at the museum here.”

Art? Is he catching on to Jeongguk's identity? His heart skips a beat. “Uh, art isn't really my thing. Museums are too stuffy for me.”

“Ah.” Yoongi's expression closes; he's losing him again.

“I love zoos, though,” Jeongguk amends. “And aquariums. Do you have any good ones around here?”

“Yes, we do.” Yoongi cocks his head, studying his face intently. “Are you sure you've never come here before?”
“Sadly, I'm sure.” Jeongguk thickens his accent slightly, trying not to tense. “I wish I had. It's very exciting.”

“Ah.” Yoongi nods. “I'm sorry. You reminded me of someone I know, that's all.”

They're interrupted suddenly by a young woman. “Yoongi!” she cries, rushing up to them. She's not wearing a mask. “It's been so long! How've you been since school ended?”

Yoongi shoots Jeongguk a strained smile. “Nice to meet you. We should talk again later,” he says ambiguously, letting the girl lead him away.

Jeongguk has to move away and sit down at an empty table to nurse his aftershock. He saw Yoongi. He talked to him. He might talk to him again that night. Jeongguk's thoughts are flurried, too much input at once. He feels guilty for lying to Yoongi about who he is, elated at their conversation, generally giddy at the sensation of being here.

He can't sit still, so he stands, crossing to the refreshments and swiping another cup of punch. He sees Hunchul nearby, and he tenses, but Hunchul doesn't notice him at all, simply continuing past without so much as a glance.

Jeongguk winds around the edges of the dance floor, watching the people who are dancing and observing Yoongi from the corner of his eye. Yoongi talks for about ten minutes with the girl who came up to him, though he looks like he can't wait to get rid of her. Jeongguk wonders if she's the woman he spoke of in his letters. She is, admittedly, quite pretty. Perhaps someone like her could make a good partner for Yoongi.

Yoongi will have to settle down with someone eventually. Jeongguk just wants him to be happy.

He watches as Yoongi meets person after person, smiling and gesturing pleasantly. Yoongi is going to be a fantastic CEO, Jeongguk thinks. He admires how Yoongi, despite being reserved in private, can network with such apparent effortlessness.

Eventually he tears his eyes away and makes his way over to the food. He spots Taehyung across the room, busy trying to flirt with a woman in a navy dress. Eating a strawberry, Jeongguk looks for Yoongi again, but he's not where he last saw him. Jeongguk scans the room, but Yoongi is nowhere to be seen.
“Found you,” Yoongi’s voice says from behind him. Jeongguk nearly jumps a foot in the air.

“Christ, you frightened me,” he exclaims, almost forgetting the accent.

“Sorry,” Yoongi says. He offers Jeongguk his hand. “I didn't mean to surprise you. Would you like to dance with me?”

Oh, *would* he. “Yes,” he says, taking Yoongi’s hand. It’s large and warm. Jeongguk’s skin tingles where their fingers meet.

As they move to the floor, Jeongguk can feel people staring at them. Yoongi hasn’t danced with anyone else yet this evening; Jeongguk is flattered that Yoongi has chosen him despite not knowing who he is.

The music is slow and they fall into a dance that’s more swaying than stepping. Yoongi’s hands rest on his waist, nothing but courteous and genteel, and yet it feels intimate. Jeongguk tells himself that he’s imagining it.

“Tell me about yourself,” Yoongi murmurs, so Jeongguk does, ignoring the thousands of eyes watching them. He recalls everything he can that Jimin told him about his hometown, from the beaches to the old baseball diamond to the view from the pier at night.

“Are you still in school?” Yoongi asks when he runs out of things to say.

“No.” Jeongguk doesn't have to lie about this. “I'm working instead. I heard that you just graduated.”

“Yes,” Yoongi agrees. “I was away from home for a long time.”

“It must have been hard.” Jeongguk tries to read Yoongi’s face. He’s thankful that the mask hides some of his own emotions.

“At times.” Yoongi doesn't offer any more.
“Well, congratulations.” Jeongguk feels a swell of pride in his chest over Yoongi's success. “It's a big achievement to go from a gag character to a top figure in the business world.”

Yoongi chuckles; his shoulders shake beneath Jeongguk's hands. “You're never going to forget about that, are you?"

“Never.” Jeongguk smiles devilishly. “The scene where you fell into the pool was iconic.”

“Oh, God,” Yoongi groans. “You know what? That was hell. I had to take it six times because I kept forgetting my lines and every time I had to change clothing, dry my hair, and get re-styled. After that scene I swore I was never filming again.”

Jeongguk giggles so hard he nearly chokes. “I would pay to see that footage.”

“Don't even think about it.” Yoongi shakes his head, scrunching his forehead. “It's best forgotten.”

The song is ending; they let go of each other and step apart. Jeongguk sort of wants to ask for another dance, but he can't expect Yoongi to stay with him all night. He's flattered enough that Yoongi asked him for one.

“Do you--” Yoongi starts, at the same time as Jeongguk's phone buzzes in his pocket. He pulls it out.

It's ten minutes past midnight and he has three missed calls from Hoseok. The latest text says, Where are you?

Shit. “I have to go,” Jeongguk blurts, tucking his phone into his pocket. “Thanks for everything.”

“Already?” Yoongi's forehead creases.

Jeongguk's phone buzzes again. “Sorry,” Jeongguk says. “Have a good night.”

He doesn't want to leave Yoongi, but he also needs to leave now if he doesn't want to be caught by Hunchul and his stepmother.
“See you tomorrow, then?”

“Yeah,” Jeongguk agrees, distracted. “Bye.” He strides out of the ballroom, aware of Yoongi's eyes on him the whole time.

It's not until he reaches the car and gets in that he realizes what he's just agreed to. He was only planning to go for one night.

But Yoongi will be disappointed if he doesn't show up again, Jeongguk thinks.

“Hoseok,” he says as they pull out of the drive, “Is there any way I can go back tomorrow?”

“You want to?”

“Yes.” Jeongguk's cheeks are still flushed with the excitement of the evening. “I… I saw Yoongi. He didn't recognize me, but we talked. He even asked me to dance.”

“Jeongguk,” Hoseok says softly. He glances over, taking in Jeongguk's expression. “I'm glad you had fun but…” he hesitates. “Sweetheart, aren't you going to hurt yourself if you get attached?”

“It's just one more night,” Jeongguk insists. “It won't hurt me any more than the first.”

“Well,” Hoseok sighs, “If that's how you feel, then I'll help. I have another suit you can borrow.”
When they reach home, Hoseok helps him wipe the makeup off and changes his hair back to its normal dark color. By the time his stepmother and stepbrother come home, Jeongguk is reading a book on the sofa, looking no different than he does any other day.

“Did you have fun?” he asks Hunchul, in a lighter mood than usual.

“It was fantastic.” Hunchul grins. “I talked to Min Yoongi for almost half an hour. I bet he’ll offer me a position in his company after another night or two.”

Hunchul’s arrogance is astounding. Besides, he hadn’t seen Yoongi so much as glance at Hunchul. He’s obviously lying.

Jeongguk isn’t in the mood to fight, though. “Cool,” he says, turning a page in his book.

“Yoongi is pretty popular these days,” Hunchul continues. “You’d be surprised to see your old boy crush now. He’s got a legion of powerful men and women practically kissing his feet. Too bad that he’s forgotten all about you.”


Hunchul may be able to say whatever he wants, he may be able to tell Jeongguk what to do, but he has no power over Jeongguk’s mind anymore. Jeongguk has learned that the hard way—though his body moves at the whims of the world, his thoughts are only his own.

Hunchul can’t chip away at that no matter how hard he tries.

Arriving at the ball on the second night, Jeongguk is less nervous and more excited. He slips into the
hall, his hair light brown again and dressed in another of Hoseok's suits—this time a deep maroon.

The first person who spots him is, surprisingly, Taehyung, who rushes over to him just a minute after he walks in. “You're here! Yoongi has been asking for you.”

“He has?” Jeongguk asks, dazed.

“Of course! You've obviously caught his eye; he asked you to dance, after all.”

“Oh,” Jeongguk says, a funny warmth sprouting within his chest. Yoongi talked about him—even if he didn't know it was him. That's—oh.

“I wouldn't have introduced you two if I knew he was going to steal you away,” Taehyung teases, his eyes twinkling. “I'll tell him you're here.”

Taehyung slips away, and Jeongguk is left to his own thoughts. His stomach is churning; he hadn't realized how much he would react. He wonders if maybe Hoseok was right—maybe coming back for another night was a bad idea—but then he sees Yoongi crossing the room toward him, and suddenly all he can feel is blood rushing in his ears.

“Hyunseong,” Yoongi says, and Jeongguk is confused for a quick moment before he remembers that that's supposed to be his name.

“Hello.” He smiles, shy.

“I'm glad you came back,” Yoongi says suddenly. He leans closer. “Between you and me, stuffy parties aren't really my thing.”

“Me neither,” Jeongguk admits. He's touched that Yoongi considers him a breath of fresh air.

“Would you like to see the garden? I'd like to get out of the crowd for a bit.”

Of course he wants to. He and Yoongi slip through the masses of people to the terrace on the
opposite end. Jeongguk hadn't seen before, but there are two staircases on either side, leading down into an elaborate garden.

The view is magnificent. Jeongguk pauses at the entrance to the shrubbery, entranced. If he were alone and had his sketchbook, he would sit down right then and there to draw.

Instead he lets Yoongi lead him through the maze of carefully-pruned bushes to the central fountain. The central statue is of a young girl reaching toward the sky, with tiny jets of water bubbling all around her. It's lovely.

Yoongi and Jeongguk sit on the edge of the fountain, relaxed, and the conversation flows easily. They talk about everything: Yoongi's job, his experiences in school, his family life, snippets from Jeongguk's last few years that he doesn't think give him away. Then they talk about nothing: their favorite animals, the best singers of the year, whether summer or fall is the superior season. It's perfect.

Jeongguk is ashamed to find that he's falling in love all over again.

An entire hour and a half passes before either of them think of the time. “I should go back inside,” Yoongi admits, standing. “Trust me, I'd rather talk with you the whole night, but I have a duty to my other guests.”

They make their way back slowly, neither one in a hurry to rejoin the party, but eventually they part at the doorway to the ballroom.

“I hope you enjoy the rest of your night, Hyunseong,” Yoongi says. His eyes linger on Jeongguk's masked face. “Will you be here tomorrow?”

“Um.” Jeongguk pauses. He wasn't planning to, of course, but he will if Yoongi wants him to.

“I'd like you see you again,” Yoongi adds. “If you can come.”

That's that, then. “I'll be there,” Jeongguk says.
It's only moments after Yoongi walks away and Jeongguk reenters the hall that he's practically assaulted by the girl whom Yoongi spent so much time with the day before. She's still not wearing a mask, and her expression is frankly a bit frightening.

“It see you're getting close with Min Yoongi,” she says in lieu of a greeting.

Jeongguk frowns ever so slightly. It's not really her business, is it? “I met him yesterday,” he says. “We danced. That's all.”

“Oh? He's spending an awful lot of time with you, though.” She steps closer, a smile pasted on her lips but her eyes flashing. “It's quite impolite of you to demand so much of his attention.”

“He came up to me,” Jeongguk points out. “Not the other way around.” What right does she have to tell him what to do, anyway?

Her lips twist into a sneer, and she leans in close to Jeongguk's ear. “Listen. I think you should know that I've been secretly engaged to Yoongi for two years.”

Jeongguk stares. He didn't expect her to lie so blatantly. There's no way that what she says is true, or Yoongi would never have proposed to him.

“Shocking, isn't it?” She giggles. “You'll understand why I have to ask you to leave him alone.”

“If he's really engaged to you, you shouldn't be worried about him talking to me, should you?” Jeongguk counters.

She looks surprised for a moment before her eyes narrow. “How dare you. It's what both of our families want. Do you really think that the CEO of the Min Corporation is going to marry anyone outside of his own level?”

“I hope he does,” Jeongguk says, “If that's what he wants.”

That strikes a nerve. “You should watch your mouth,” she snarls. “It's none of your business.”
“What I do or say with others is none of yours, either,” Jeongguk retorts.

She looks like she wants to say something else, but a group of people pass close to them and she appears to think better of making a commotion. “You better watch yourself,” she says finally before stalking off in Yoongi’s general direction.

Jeongguk feels sorry for Yoongi if this really is the girl he’s been dealing with throughout business school.

After a moment he makes his way toward an empty table so he can observe the room. He’s winding between two chattering circles of people when someone walks smack dab into his side, nearly bowling him over.

A quick glance tells him it’s Hunchul; his stepbrother doesn’t so much as apologize as he continues on his way. Jeongguk snorts to himself. Typical.

He sits down at a table, looking for Yoongi. To his surprise, Taehyung joins him after just a few minutes.

“How’s it going, Hyunseong? Did you enjoy talking to my brother?”

“I did,” Jeongguk says, glancing shyly at his lap. “He’s… funny.”

“My brother? Min Yoongi?” Taehyung stares. “He made a joke?”

“Well, kind of.” The corner of Jeongguk’s mouth lifts slightly. “Not a joke, really. Just… he makes me laugh.”


“Huh?”
“If you've cracked Yoongi's soft side, you're special,” Taehyung says. “He doesn't open that up to just anyone. Even I don't see it too often.”

“I,” Jeongguk stutters. “I mean, I'm probably exaggerating. Maybe I found him funnier than he really was because I'm a fan.”

“No, I think I'm right.” Taehyung looks at him intently. “The way he treats you is different.”

“You're mistaken,” Jeongguk insists. “I'm just… an acquaintance. And I'm going back to my hometown after tomorrow.” He can't let this balloon out of his control; it's gone far enough already.

“If you insist.” Taehyung frowns. “But—just in case—I have to ask you, please don't break Yoongi's heart. I saw it happen once and I don't want to watch it happen again.”

Jeongguk's jaw trembles slightly. That's his fault. Taehyung is right—he can't let it happen again. He stands, pretending to check his phone. “I'll treat him well,” he promises. “I'm sorry, my ride is here. I have to head out.”

Taehyung nods. “Have a good night, Hyunseong.”

“You as well.” Jeongguk scurries out of the room, texting Hoseok to meet him at a nearby cafe. Peeling his mask off when he deems himself far enough away, he stops on a street corner to catch his breath.

The city moves around him; the rushing sound of cars going by, the distant blare of horns, soft jazz drifting out from the restaurant behind him. Jeongguk buries his face in his hands and tries to breathe.

He's so whipped. He knows how much pain he caused Yoongi, knows that he's been hurting for a year and it's all his fault. And yet, he's so selfish that he can't stay away; he doesn't have the self-control to leave him be. If he keeps at it, he's going to hurt them both all over again.

Should he come back tomorrow night? Jeongguk wrestles with the question, deeply conflicted. It might be his last chance to talk with Yoongi—perhaps forever. Is it worth it?
He argues and argues with himself, but in the end, he finds that he's too selfish.

*It's just one more night,* he thinks. *Just one.*

Hoseok raises his eyebrows when Jeongguk tells him that he wants to attend the last night of the party, but he doesn't say anything against it. He takes extra time doing Jeongguk's makeup beforehand—"I just have a feeling," he says, and Jeongguk doesn't push it.

The clothing that Hoseok produces tonight doesn't look like something he would own. The suit is sleek and black, paired with a shirt the same color. It isn't Hoseok's size, either.

"I've never seen this one before," Jeongguk says hesitantly.

Hoseok laughs. "That's because it's not mine, sweetheart. It's for you."

"For me?" Jeongguk's eyes bulge.

"That's right." Hoseok winks. "Every young man needs a suit of his own. Think of it as an early birthday gift."

"Hoseok," Jeongguk starts, his voice wobbling. He imagines Hoseok memorizing his measurements, going to the store and picking out a suit for Jeongguk, buying it with his own money.

"Don't you dare cry all over my beautiful eye makeup," Hoseok warns him, shaking his finger. "I
just had a feeling you would need something special for tonight.”

Jeongguk doesn't know what to say, so he goes in for a hug. “Thank you,” he mumbles, overwhelmed.

It fits well; any area that isn't quite right, Hoseok fixes with a few quick touches. Jeongguk stands in front of the mirror, fiddling with his collar. It's sleek and flattering. He looks stunning.

More than that, he looks confident. Jeongguk knows what he's getting into tonight; there's no nervousness left in him, just resolve.

“Is it time to get our prince to the ball?” Hoseok asks him.

“Yes,” Jeongguk replies. “I'm ready.”

Tonight, Jeongguk finds Yoongi. He's talking with another man, but when he sees Jeongguk, he ends the conversation and approaches.


“You can't see half of my face,” Jeongguk teases. “No need for false compliments.”

“It's not false.” Yoongi grins. “I don't need to see the rest of you to know it's true.”

Well. Jeongguk colors slightly. “You look nice, as well,” he offers.
“Thank you.” He pauses. “Would you like to dance again?”

“Yes!”

The first dance is a fast tango; Jeongguk is quick on his feet while Yoongi is less so. It's a bit messy but it's great fun. By the end they're breathing hard from both exercise and laughter; Yoongi's eyes are bright with energy.

Jeongguk doesn't know whether to expect a second dance, but Yoongi doesn't let go as the music transitions to a slower song, so Jeongguk lets it happen, lets Yoongi pull him close and rest his hands on his waist.

“I like your ring,” Yoongi says, nudging at Jeongguk's left hand. “Where did you get it?”

Jeongguk stiffens, thinking fast. “It's a family heirloom.”

“Oh, I see.” Yoongi smiles. “I knew someone with something similar. He wore it constantly.”

“Oh,” Jeongguk says, uncomfortable. He hopes Yoongi will drop the subject, and he does, thankfully.

They dance for a minute or two without speaking, just the two of them, holding each other in the center of the floor. Jeongguk feels as if they're the only two in the world.

“How long will you be in town?” Yoongi asks in his ear. Jeongguk shivers involuntarily.

“I'm leaving tomorrow,” he replies. He doesn't particularly want to have this conversation at the moment; he just wants to think about now, when Yoongi is right there with his hands on his waist.

“And would you visit again?” Yoongi presses. “Or… would you let me visit you?”
Jeongguk bites his lip, unsure how to respond. “Perhaps. We'll see.”

“Okay,” Yoongi says. “Perhaps is good enough for me.”

Suddenly Jeongguk finds himself fighting back tears. He chokes slightly, pushing them back. He can't get emotional now, not when Yoongi is right there--

“Hyunseong?” Yoongi asks, alarmed, pulling back. “What's the matter?”

“Nothing's the matter,” Jeongguk says, collecting himself. “I had a dizzy moment. I must be too hot.”

“Let me take you to the terrace,” Yoongi says. It's an order. Jeongguk does.

Admittedly, it is a little better to be out in the night air. Jeongguk pulls himself together, trying to think of something light to say, but too quickly he sees the same girl from the night before approaching them.

“Yoongi, dear!” She coos, draping an arm over his shoulders. Yoongi winces, just barely, only enough that Jeongguk would catch it. “I've been waiting to talk with you!” She shoots Jeongguk a look that very clearly says, get lost.

Jeongguk stays put.

“You know,” she says after a minute. “The masquerade theme got a little old after the first night, don't you think?” She eyes Jeongguk. “Almost everyone is taking off their masks. Why don't you join them?”

“Let him be, Minkyung,” Yoongi chides, shrugging her arm away.

“Who knows what he's hiding?” She continues, insistent. “What if there's a crooked nose under that mask? What if he has warts? Or maybe he's a wanted criminal!”

Jeongguk is literally right there. “Pardon me,” he says, “but that’s my concern and not yours.”
Her face crumples angrily. “It's mine now,” she growls, and quickly, before anyone can react, she stalks over to Jeongguk, grasps at his mask and tears it off, bearing his face and identity to the whole world.

They both gasp. Yoongi reaches out to stop her, but he's too late. And then he catches sight of Jeongguk’s face.

Jeongguk draws a shaky, terrified breath. He's so shocked for a moment that he can't move; it's like his limbs have been frozen in place.

“Jeongguk,” Yoongi says. He doesn't look surprised, in fact he looks resigned.

Jeongguk doesn't stop to contemplate that. It only takes another split second for him to bolt. He races down the stairs, ignoring Yoongi yelling after him, moving as fast as he can. He makes it around the corner, flattens himself to the wall, and turns the ring on his left hand three times, watching his feet fade from view.

Yoongi rounds the corner, stopping when he doesn't see Jeongguk. He's breathing hard, scanning the area anxiously. “Where did he go?” he says aloud.

Jeongguk doesn't dare breathe. He hasn't got much time.

Finally Yoongi shakes his head and continues on. As soon as he's far enough not to hear footsteps, Jeongguk dashes back around the other way. He feels for his pocket and pulls out his phone—thankfully, it becomes visible once he tugs it out of his clothing.

He dials Hoseok. “Come quickly, it's an emergency,” he hisses when he answers.

“Are you hurt?”

“No! Yoongi saw me. I have to get out of here.”
Hoseok understands immediately. “I'm nearby,” He says. “I'll be there in just a minute. Hold tight.”

Jeongguk’s body turns visible a short time after that; another attempt to turn the ring yields nothing. It has a short magical charge, apparently.

Thankfully, he manages to sneak out to the parking lot and into Hoseok’s car without running into Yoongi. They depart for home.

“Are you all right?” Hoseok asks, weaving around the other cars in the street. It's dangerous, but time is invaluable right now. Who knows how long it will take Yoongi to look for Jeongguk at his home?

“I hardly know,” Jeongguk says, dazed. “Oh, God, Hoseok, he knows it was me. What do I do? He'll want an explanation and I can't give him one. What if he asks me to marry him again? What if my stepmother hears, and they push us together just so they can manipulate Yoongi? What if--”

“Hush,” Hoseok says. “We're going home, getting your things, and leaving tonight. Really, we should have done this a long time ago.”

“What about your job?”

“Jeongguk.” Hoseok fixes him with a sharp look. “The only reason I ever kept this job is because of you.”

Jeongguk quiets down at that and remains silent all the way home.

He dashes up to his room the minute they arrive, trying to pick only the necessities. It's eerily reminiscent of that night so long ago when he ran away from school, throwing together a backpack and sneaking out of his dormitory.

Jeongguk pulls his sketchbooks from his closet, dumping them into his suitcase along with an armful of clothing. He grabs his phone charger, a book for the road, the sock in the back of his underwear drawer where he’s stuffed some of his savings.

Everything else is replaceable. He zips the suitcase closed and rushes down the stairs. “Hoseok?”
“Coming!”

The front door opens, and in walk his stepmother and stepbrother. “What a commotion!” she’s saying to Hunchul, laughing. “Too bad the party was canceled early.”

They catch sight of Jeongguk standing in the hall with his suitcase.

“Jeongguk?” Hunchul asks, his eyes wide. “You—oh.”

No, Jeongguk thinks. He hadn’t thought that his step-family would return early, too. This can’t happen. “Hoseok!” he screams.

“You were the boy that Yoongi was chasing after?” Hunchul asks in disbelief. “No way.”

His stepmother’s eyes flash. “You went to the party without my permission? Did Hoseok help?”

Everything is happening at once. The door bursts open again, and this time, Jeongguk locks eyes with Yoongi.

“Jeongguk! I found you,” Yoongi gasps. “Thank god.”

Jeongguk drops his suitcase, backing away. His stepmother and Hunchul look from one to the other, flabbergasted.

“Please don’t run away,” Yoongi says, walking toward him. “Please, Jeongguk. Just hear me out.”

“What’s going on?” Hoseok asks, emerging at the top of the stairs. “What’s—oh.”

Jeongguk doesn’t move. His chest shakes in a shuddery gasp, and then he’s crying, hard and fast, his face crumpling into ugly sobs.
“No!” Yoongi hugs him. “It’s all right.”

“It’s n-not,” Jeongguk blubbers. “You need to g-go.”

“Not again. I have something to ask you.” Yoongi lets go of him, grasping his hand instead and sinking to one knee. “I knew it was you. I didn’t understand, but I knew it had to be you from the first night. Your accent wasn’t nearly as good as you thought it was. God, I’m so in love.” His expression is impossibly earnest. “Marry me, Jeongguk.”

It’s an order, but it can’t happen. It doesn’t matter how much he wants to marry him, because Yoongi will get hurt and his employees will get hurt and Jeongguk would rather die than allow that. “No,” Jeongguk chokes out. “I won’t do it.”

“This is nonsense,” his stepmother huffs. “Go to your room right now.”

Jeongguk doesn’t go.

“No, mother,” Hunchul butts in. “This is good. Marry him, Jeongguk.” His eyes are gleaming, the possibilities of such a connection suddenly apparent to him.

“I won’t marry you,” Jeongguk repeats. He can barely breathe, he’s crying so hard. “I’ll never marry you!”

He rushes to the door, flings it open, and shouts to the whole neighborhood. “I won’t marry Min Yoongi!”

Yoongi follows him, concerned. “It’s okay,” he says. “You don’t have to marry me, not if you don’t want to. But I thought… I thought…”

“I want to,” Jeongguk says miserably. “But I can’t. I’m cursed, so I can’t marry you.”

He can’t tell anyone about the spell. Why is he telling Yoongi right now? He’s dizzy.
“Then marry me, if you want to,” Yoongi says. He brushes Jeongguk's hair aside from where his bangs have collapsed into his eyes. “Just choose what makes you happy, Jeongguk.”

“I can't,” Jeongguk repeats. His voice cracks on the second syllable. “I can't. Oh, god.”

“Stop crying and just marry him,” Hunchul says from behind them. “Jeongguk! Why aren't you listening? Do as I say!”

Jeongguk sniffs, tilting his face up to meet Yoongi's eyes. He looks confused. “I'm cursed,” he whispers. “You don't want me.”

And then he realizes. He's not doing anything he's been told to do. He's not feeling the pull of Hunchul's orders.

The curse isn't working.

“Yoongi,” he manages. “Tell me to do something.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Just, please. Say something. An order.”

Yoongi blinks. “Sing a song.”

Jeongguk doesn't sing. He doesn't feel that horrid inward compulsion.

The realization hits him like a truck.

“Yoongi,” he bursts out. “I love you! I've loved you forever, you have to believe me. I'll marry you a thousand times over, yes!”
"You changed your mind?"

"Never. That was always my answer. I'm free now." He's wet-faced but no longer crying, giddy with excitement. "I love you. I love you so much!" He feels like he could float. Is it real? It must be, because he's not responding to any of the orders.

"Free from what?" Yoongi is struggling to follow.

"My curse, Yoongi! I was cursed! I had to do whatever anyone told me to do and I couldn't tell a soul; that's why I couldn't marry you." He wipes at his face with the back of his hand. "I broke it. I'm free. I'll marry you."

"This is ridiculous," Hunchul says. "Make them stop, mother."

Jeongguk takes a deep breath. "Hunchul," he says. "Shut the fuck up."

Turning to Yoongi, he takes his shocked face in his hands, gentle. He's not dreaming, because Yoongi's jaw is warm and alive beneath his touch. "I love you," Jeongguk says. "So much. I'm never going to get tired of telling you that."

"I don't know what to say," Yoongi manages finally. "For so long you— but it all makes sense. Oh, Jeongguk."

"You don't have to say anything," Jeongguk is crying again, but this time it's tears of pure happiness. "Nothing at all."

He brings his mouth to Yoongi's, lips trembling, and slots them together. He tastes tears, and when he pulls back, he realizes that Yoongi is crying, too.

"Don't cry," he says, a watery giggle escaping. He barely notices the other three leaving the room.

"I'm not," Yoongi says. Another tear falls.
He moves his hands to Jeongguk’s waist, presses him back against the door, and kisses him.

They break apart but remain close, breathless.

“Let me ask you one last time,” Yoongi whispers against his lips. “Will you marry me?”

Jeongguk smiles through the tears. “Yes.”
“Wait,” Jeongguk says. “I just realized. You knew who I was the whole time?”

It's close to two in the morning; they're sitting on Yoongi's sofa at his apartment, talking. They've both changed into sweatshirts and sweatpants; Jeongguk's suitcase is sitting next to the coffee table and Hoseok has long since retired to Yoongi's guest room.

“Of course.” Yoongi looks insulted. “I've been in love with you for years. Did you really think that hair dye, a fake accent and a mask were going to hide you from me?”

Well. Jeongguk had thought that they would. He catches sight of Yoongi's fond expression and he laughs, his eyes scrunching up. “I guess you're right. I wasn't thinking very hard.”

“Obviously,” Yoongi snorts. He reaches over and laces his fingers with Jeongguk's, squeezing gently.

“Why did you let me keep pretending?”

“Because I trust you,” Yoongi says seriously. “Once I figured out that it was you, I knew there had to be more to the story than I'd been told—otherwise why would you seek me out?” He strokes the back of Jeongguk's hand with his thumb. “And I thought that if you felt you had to hide from me, I would give you time to show me why.”

How is Jeongguk so lucky as to be the object of Yoongi's affection? He wants to kiss him all over again. “I wasn't going to tell you who I was,” he admits.

Yoongi shakes his head. “I planned to confront you about it at the end of the night if you didn't say anything. Unfortunately, Minkyung beat me to it.”

“She's the girl from your school, right?” Jeongguk says. “She pulled me aside after we talked on the second night and told me you two had been secretly engaged for years.”

Yoongi rolls his eyes. “We're not,” he says flatly. “You ignored her, right?”

They share a look. Yoongi can't help but smile.

Since they'd taken Hoseok and Jeongguk's things out of his step-family's house and driven over to Yoongi's apartment (they're staying with him until they can find a new place to live), Jeongguk has spent the last hour and a half telling Yoongi the true story of what's happened to him since he was eleven. Yoongi hadn't said very much, just nodding as Jeongguk explained about his father and Hunchul and why he hadn't accepted his first proposal, but Jeongguk could see the anger and hurt in his eyes.

It was enough.

“How did you break the curse?” Yoongi asks after a long pause, as though it's been on the tip of his tongue the whole time.

Jeongguk scrunches his nose, thinking. “I'm not entirely sure. I just… I knew I could never marry you under the spell. I would rather have let it rip me apart than put you in danger like that. And then all of a sudden, the pull stopped.” He tilts his head. “Maybe I just tried harder than ever before? I don't know. It's not as if I didn't make an effort before.”

Yoongi looks thoughtful. “No… that's not right. I think…” He shakes his head in disbelief. “You were ready to die for me. For someone else. I think that your self-sacrifice did it.”

Jeongguk bites his lip. “I don't know, maybe it's not as dramatic as all that. I just wanted to protect you.”

“Don't sell yourself short,” Yoongi says.

Instinctively, Jeongguk waits for the internal tug that follows every order. When it doesn't come, he realizes all over again that he's free.

He laughs, joyfully surprised. “I don't have to listen to you!” Yoongi looks confused for a short second before he joins him, his lips unfolding into a smile that shows half of his gums.
“I’ll never get tired of you saying that,” he tells Jeongguk. “Say it to your family and your friends and random people on the street, every day.”

“I will,” Jeongguk promises cheekily. “I'm looking forward to being a brat.” He squeezes Yoongi's hand once more before he turns serious again. “Do you really think that's how I broke the curse?”

“I can't say.” Yoongi frowns. “I know even less about magic than you do. We'll probably never know for sure unless we ask your aunt—and that's assuming that she knows. But if I had to guess, that would be why.” He reaches for Jeongguk's other hand and holds them both gently. “You're a special person. I don't know how in the world I was so blessed as to receive love in return from someone like you.”

Something heavy hangs between them. High on the jubilation of breaking the curse, he'd had no qualms in kissing Yoongi earlier, but now, when everything is quiet, Jeongguk feels shy. He looks at Yoongi's lips, then back up to his eyes.

“Kiss me?” he whispers, tentative.

“Oh, darling,” Yoongi breathes. He lets go of Jeongguk's hands and brushes the hair from his temples, Yoongi's hands curling around his shoulders to meet at the nape of his neck. Jeongguk's breath catches in his throat when Yoongi leans in, sliding their mouths together. Yoongi's lips are chapped but soft, and Jeongguk's eyes flutter closed as he kisses him, slow and sensual.

His fingers search for something to hold onto so they wind into the material of Yoongi's sleeve. Yoongi's thumbs stroke over his cheeks, tilting his head and kissing harder, more desperately. His jaw moves slowly against Jeongguk's; languid, passionate.

Finally they part. Jeongguk's face is completely red, but he grins stupidly and rests his face in Yoongi's shoulder.

Yoongi's arm curls around him, stroking his hair. “Wanna kiss you like that everyday,” he whispers.

Jeongguk giggles. “You better.” He relaxes into Yoongi's hold, boneless. It still feels kind of like a dream. He'd barely let himself imagine being allowed to see Yoongi again, much less touch him and be held by him and kiss him at two in the morning.
“Look at the time,” Yoongi says finally. “We should go to sleep. It's been a long day.”

“Kay.” Jeongguk nuzzles into Yoongi's sweatshirt. He realizes that he's been sitting on one of his feet and it's starting to fall asleep; he shifts it out from underneath him. “Should I take the couch?”

Yoongi blinks. Licks his lips. “You could share my bed,” he says. “If you like.”

Jeongguk flushes. “I... Yes. I'd like that.”

“Do you want to stay here?” Yoongi asks him over morning coffee. “You know, instead of going with Hoseok when he finds an apartment.”

Jeongguk is perched at the counter with Yoongi, watching Hoseok cook at Yoongi's stove. He looks from one to the other. “Would... would that be okay?” He's more asking Hoseok than Yoongi.

“Why not?” Hoseok shrugs. “You're going to move in together when you get married, right? Why wait?”

“But... you'll be lonely?” Hoseok has done so much for him his whole life; how could he just... leave him?

Hoseok shakes his head. “It's time for you to leave the nest, sweetheart. I'll be fine.” He looks over his shoulder and sends Jeongguk a wink. “Yoongi will take good care of you.”

Jeongguk hesitates. “Are you s---”
“Perfectly sure.” Hoseok flips an egg with expert precision. “You’re going to have to teach him how to cook, though. I don’t think this stove has been used twice.”

“Hey,” Yoongi says. “I just got back from a different country!”

Hoseok turns around and raises his eyebrows at him. “And you’re telling me you cooked your own meals there?”

Yoongi falls conspicuously silent.

“That’s what I thought.” He smiles at Jeongguk. “Seriously, it’s fine. It’s time for us all to start a new chapter of our lives; I just need to find a new job, and I’m not worried. I’m the best damn personal assistant the world has ever seen.”

“It’s up to you, Jeongguk,” Yoongi agrees. “The world is your oyster now. What would make you happy?”

Jeongguk nods slowly. “I want to stay with you.”

“Then stay,” Yoongi says, reaching over to hold his hand under the ledge of the counter. “And actually, Hoseok, I have a proposition for you...”

“I’m so glad Yoongi hired you,” Jeongguk says, holding the door open as Hoseok carries another box into the apartment.

“In the words of your fiancé,” Hoseok says, setting the box on the counter and hunting for something
to open it with, “every top CEO needs a good personal assistant, and it doesn't get better than me.” He spins, frowning. “Where are the damn scissors?”

“Here,” Jeongguk says, handing them over with a grin. “Is there anything else left to carry?”

“Not till I go apartment shopping tomorrow.” Hoseok cuts open the packing tape, pulling out a stack of books. “Put these on the shelf for me, would you?”

“Just a minute.” Jeongguk's phone is buzzing, and when he looks at the screen, it's Yoongi.

He answers. “Hi,” he says, smiling stupidly.

Hoseok snorts, muttering something about fucking heart eyes, and retreats to his bedroom with another box.

“Hey, love,” Yoongi says. “Are you still with Hoseok?”

“Yes. We've got everything inside the apartment and now we're just unpacking. Are you off of work yet?” Jeongguk paces in a circle around the kitchen, brimming with happy excitement.

“Not yet, but I'll be done in an hour. I could swing by with dinner, if you two would like?”

“Sure, sounds good!”

“Anything specific you want?”

“Uh… I don't know, let me ask Hoseok.” He covers the mic on his phone with one hand and shouts down the hallway. “Hoseok, what do you want for dinner? Yoongi’s buying.”

“Dinner?” Hoseok pops out of his room, returning to the kitchen. “How about chicken?”
“Chicken, please,” Jeongguk repeats into the phone.

“Gotcha. Okay, see you in a bit, love.”

“Bye, Yoongi,” Jeongguk says. He hangs up.

Hoseok catches him smiling at the dark screen of his phone and shakes his head. “I'm only tolerating this because your future husband is bringing food.”

Jeongguk looks sheepish. “Sorry. I just love him a lot.”

“I know.” Hoseok reaches around him into the box on the counter, ruffling his hair with his free hand. “I'm so glad.”

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It's just past midnight. Yoongi and Jeongguk are in bed; Yoongi's arm is draped around Jeongguk and his breathing is soft. Jeongguk thinks that he might have fallen asleep.

“You awake?”

Oh. Yoongi is definitely not asleep.

“Yeah.”

The clock ticks on Yoongi's nightstand. Jeongguk shifts in Yoongi's hold. He can feel Yoongi's pulse and the unhurried rise and fall of his chest.
“When do you want to get married?”

Jeongguk takes in the question. He shuffles, turning over properly so that they're face to face. The outlines of Yoongi's soft features are hazy in the moonlight.


“Sweetheart--” Yoongi cups Jeongguk's chin and pecks his lips. “How do you feel about next month?”

“Yes. That's great.”

“I would rather give you more time, really—it's going to be tricky to plan—but my parents would like to see me married sooner rather than later. If you would prefer to wait longer I can insist, but...”

“Next month is perfect,” Jeongguk assures him. “It doesn't matter, anyway. I'm going to be here forever whether we're married or not.”

“Okay.” Yoongi huffs out a contented laugh. “I'll tell my parents. They'll be overjoyed.”

“Why,” Jeongguk mutters. “Why do humans have to have fucking feet?” He flips another page over in his sketchbook and tosses it onto the coffee table, leaning back and rubbing at his head. “Maybe art school was a bad idea.”

Yoongi looks up from his laptop and snorts. “Don't be a brat. You loved it yesterday.”
“Yesterday I wasn't required to draw feet for homework,” Jeongguk huffs. He wiggles his bare toes at Yoongi to emphasize his point. “It's dumb and I can't do it. I'll only draw portraits from the ankles up for the rest of my life. Or shoes.”

“Oh? Then what are you going to do when you get to life drawing class?”

Jeongguk grimaces. “Cry?”

“Come on, Gguk. Try again. It's not like you learned to draw faces without ever practicing.” Yoongi shuffles closer, pulling one of his socks off and setting his foot on the coffee table in front of Jeongguk. “Maybe you need a change of model. Try drawing my foot.”

“Ew.” Jeongguk wrinkles up his face, dramatically pinching his nose. “Your feet smell, Yoongi.”

Yoongi reaches over to smack Jeongguk's thigh. “I've been at work all day. Of course my feet are sweaty. Shut up and draw it.”

“I'll include the fumes,” Jeongguk promises, picking up his sketchbook again. “For accuracy.”

“Hello?”

“Hi, Dad. It's Jeongguk.”

“I saw.” Jeongguk's father sounds flustered, like he's caught him at a bad time. “What do you need?”
“Do I have to have a reason to call? You're my father.”

“Jeongguk, I'm a bit occupied—”

“You haven't come home in years. You should care about what's happened to me.” Jeongguk takes a deep breath.

“I do care, Jeongguk, I'm just busy.”

“So busy that you can't keep in touch with your *wife and family*?” He doesn't wait for a response. “I don't want to hear your excuses. You've hardly been a parent to me my whole life. Anyway, I have news.”

“Wha--”

“I'm getting married to Min Yoongi. It's going to be announced in a few days.”


“Yes. *That* Yoongi.”

There's a poignant pause. “That's good, Jeongguk. Have you discussed business with his parents?”

“No, and I never will.” Jeongguk squares his jaw, perching on the edge of his and Yoongi's bed. His hand is squeezing his own thigh to release his nervous tension. “This isn't a business marriage. It's love.” His father protests, but Jeongguk cuts him off. “I'm not calling for your opinion. I'm calling to tell you the news.” He licks his lips. “Mine and Yoongi's home will be open if you're ever interested in trying to get to know your son and be a decent father. But if you're going to say a *single* thing about money or business or trying to manipulate my relationship with my husband, don't even bother showing up. Is that clear?”

He's met with stunned silence. Then, faintly, in the background, Jeongguk can hear a woman's voice.
Babe, what's taking so long? Who's on the phone?

“One second,” His father grits out. “Jeongguk--”

Of course. His father is having an affair.

“I have to go,” Jeongguk says. “Remember what I said. Oh, and Dad? Just get a divorce. Your 'marriage' is pathetic.”

He hangs up.

Jeongguk paces nervously. There's ten minutes until the ceremony; he's dressed and styled to perfection, and all the preparations are finished.

All that's left now are pre-wedding jitters.

He's not rethinking the decision—he's rarely been this sure of anything in his life—but standing in front of a crowd with Yoongi, posing for the press, and the thrilling anticipation of being married are pooling uncomfortably beneath his skin. What he really wants is to see Yoongi, just to get a quick hug to calm him down, but Yoongi's parents are being strictly traditional and insisting that they can't see each other at all until the ceremony.

Jeongguk walks down an empty hallway to the drinking fountain, takes a long drink, then straightens up.

Nine minutes left.
He turns around. Should he find the wedding planner to go over everything once again? No, it's too close to the ceremony.

Jeongguk doesn't know what to do with himself for nine whole minutes.

He takes a step back toward the wedding hall, hoping to draw out the journey, when someone comes hurdling around the corner.

“Quick,” Yoongi gasps, clutching at his sleeve and pulling him into one of the side rooms. “Shut the door!” They stumble inside, pushing the door closed. Jeongguk hears it click behind him.

“Wha--” Jeongguk starts, but before he can say anything Yoongi shoves him against the closed door and kisses his breath away.

Pulling away after a long moment, Yoongi clears his throat and adjusts his suit. “Um. Sorry. I wanted to see you beforehand and my parents would kill me if they knew I was breaking their rule.”

“That's okay with me,” Jeongguk says, flushed and smiling. “Are you nervous?”

“A little bit,” Yoongi admits. “Less so now. I wish we could walk down the aisle together instead of all this dramatic shit.”

Jeongguk's worry dissipates as he takes in Yoongi's appearance. His dark bangs are parted in the middle, falling to either side of his forehead; he's dressed in a crisp white shirt and black suit, much like Jeongguk himself. He looks fantastic, of course. His cheeks are pink from running all the way here, and he looks—he looks elated, joyful, earnest.

“It's okay,” Jeongguk says. “Let's humor them for today. The rest of our lives are all ours.” Wrapping his arms around Yoongi's waist, Jeongguk hugs him tightly. “You'd better get going. You have to go in first.”

“Okay.” Yoongi doesn't move.

“Yoongi.”
“Ugh.” Yoongi peels himself away. “Okay. I'm leaving. See you at the altar, love.”

The wedding is nowhere near as large as it could have been. They've kept it relatively intimate with less than a hundred guests, but Jeongguk still squeezes Hoseok's arm when he sees the crowd of people staring at him.

Neither his father nor his step-family were invited to the wedding—at Yoongi's insistence, not his. However, when Jeongguk peeks down the rows of chairs, he can see Jimin, Namjoon, and Seokjin all sitting together near the front. Namjoon leans over to whisper something in Seokjin's ear, and they both grin at Jeongguk. Jimin catches his eye and gives him a thumbs up.

At the opposite end of the room, in front of the altar, stands Yoongi. He's watching Jeongguk intently; when they make eye contact, Yoongi shuffles his feet and smiles at him.

The pianist starts, and Jeongguk walks up the aisle.

The actual ceremony passes like a blur; they've kept their vows short—neither Yoongi nor Jeongguk care for long-winded public declarations of love. Soon, they've exchanged rings, the talking is over, and Yoongi is bending him backwards into a sweeping kiss, right in front of everyone.

“You're so embarrassing,” Jeongguk whispers when he regains his balance.

“I'm your husband now,” Yoongi replies solemnly. He takes Jeongguk’s hand, guiding him as they start back down the aisle. “That's my job.”
The reception lasts until midnight; rather than departing right away for their honeymoon, Jeongguk and Yoongi return to their apartment with some of their friends—after all, it's not often that everyone is in town.

In the kitchen, Hoseok and Namjoon are eating leftover cake and arguing about magical policy; Seokjin, Jimin, Taehyung and in the living room with Yoongi and Jeongguk, chatting pleasantly.

“It's nice to finally get to know you, Jimin,” Yoongi says. “Jeongguk says you had a crush on me when you were in school together.”

Soon after the curse broke, Jeongguk had called Jimin and tried to explain. At first he was angry. He had every right to be, Jeongguk knew; how could Jimin have thought anything except that he had been deserted by his closest friend?

Following his graduation from the academy, Jimin had gone on to study physical therapy at a university in the city. When Jeongguk called, he was pleasantly surprised to find out that Jimin lived nearby. They agreed to meet at a cafe and talk it out, and after several hours, a few tears, and four muffins, the whole story was laid bare between them.

Once he understood what had happened, Jimin had forgave him, of course. In no time at all they were bantering again, as if it were just yesterday that they were roommates.

“Oh my god, Jeongguk,” Jimin whines, kicking Jeongguk's foot. “I was thirteen! People make mistakes.”

“Mistakes,” Jeongguk chortles, slapping Yoongi's thigh. “You're a teen idol. What was I thinking marrying you?”

“I'm a catch,” Yoongi says, wiggling his eyebrows. “I have no idea what Jimin is talking about.”

“No, you're right Jimin,” Taehyung agrees. “I'm honestly surprised that Jeongguk likes him. Yoongi
is marrying up for sure. How did you even get Jeongguk to go on a date with you?”

“My dashing good looks,” Yoongi deadpans. “Also, my golfing skills. Nothing's sexier than a man who can land a hole-in-one, eh Jeongguk?” He nudges his husband playfully.

“You disgust me,” Jeongguk says, kissing his cheek.

Ignoring them, Taehyung scoots closer to Jimin. “Speaking of sexy golfers, I'm pretty good myself,” he says, winking. “Can I have your number?”

Jimin pats his arm. “Good try, but no.”

“Oh!” Seokjin speaks up suddenly, reaching into his bag. “I almost forgot. We got you a real present, but I wanted to give this to you myself. Sorry I didn't wrap it, someone was running late.”

Jeongguk takes the book that Seokjin hands to him. On the cover is a brown rabbit in a hot-air balloon; the title reads, *Coco's Big Adventure.*

“It's my newest book,” Seokjin explains. “We thought you might like a copy.”


“Let me see it!” Jimin insists. He takes the book from Jeongguk's hands and flips through it, his eyes bright. “This is adorable, Seokjin!”

Taehyung peers over his shoulder. “Aw, look at the cute bunny. It's—holy fuck!”

They all stare at Jimin and Taehyung, who've nearly dropped the book. Jimin's hand has come up to instinctively cling to Taehyung's arm.

Seokjin chuckles. “It's not just any book! This is a fairy book. The pictures will animate the whole story while you read.”

“Wow.” Jimin is impressed. “This is a great gift,” he says as he hands the book back to Jeonnguk. Jeonnguk notices that he's still touching Taehyung's arm.

Namjoon and Hoseok enter from the kitchen, plopping down on the couches. “Anyone up for a board game?”

When Jimin and Taehyung look dubious, Hoseok smirks. “You'll like it, I promise. No game is boring if you've got two fairies and a witch playing.”

“Don't get ahead of yourself,” Namjoon says. “You're only a half-witch. Your mother was human, remember?”

“I'm plenty magical, fairy-boy,” Hoseok counters. “I'd kick your ass at enchanted Jenga any day.”

“Oh?” Namjoon's eyes narrow. “You're on, then.”

It's hilarious. Namjoon wins by a long shot—to Hoseok's chagrin. They take lots of pictures and eat too much cake and finally send everyone home at nearly four AM.

“Yesterday was a day to treasure and today is a night to remember,” Jeonnguk yawns as they collapse into bed.

“And now is a time to sleep,” Yoongi adds. “Good night, love.”

Jeonnguk falls asleep fingering the ring on his left hand.
Jeongguk’s feet hit the ground the second Yoongi parks at the vacation home they rented, erupting from the car with a joyous shout and catapulting toward the seashore. He hops on one foot, haphazardly tearing off his socks and shoes and shoving his pants up to his knees before rushing out into the water.

“It’s cold!” he shrieks, splashing around and turning back to see if Yoongi is coming.

His husband is leaning against the car, watching him with a satisfied smile. “Of course it's cold!” he calls back. “The sun is going to set soon!”

Jeongguk cups his hands to his mouth, shouting. “Come join me!”

Yoongi shakes his head adamantly.

“I'll make you, then!” Jeongguk tears back across the beach, sand coating his wet feet, and grabs Yoongi's arm. “Take off your shoes and join me or I'll drag you in clothes and all.”

Rolling his eyes, Yoongi very gingerly peels off his shoes and socks. He sets them in the back seat of the car, along with his phone, and rolls up his pant legs. “The things I do for you.”

Jeongguk leads him into the water, smacking him when he complains about the temperature. “Look!” He bends down, picking up a smooth, red rock. “It's pretty.”

“Do you know how to skip stones?” It's low tide; tiny waves lap leisurely at their ankles. “Find a flat rock and I'll show you.”

Jeongguk locates a couple of good skipping stones and brings them to Yoongi, accidentally soaking his pants in the process.

“You have to flick your wrist—like so—and you want to throw across the water, so it'll 'hop' when it touches the surface. Watch.” Yoongi tosses a stone and sure enough, it skips twice before sinking. “Go ahead and try! You probably won't get it the first time, but that's okay—"
Jeongguk throws a stone. It bounces four times across the surface.

Yoongi watches the place where it sunk, open-mouthed. “Damn. Have you done this before?”

“Nope.” Jeongguk grins at him cheekily. “I'm just talented.”

“Show-off.” Yoongi brushes Jeongguk's hair out of his eyes, then kisses his nose, like he can't help himself.

Behind them the sun is sinking below the horizon and the sky is striped in vivid, blaring orange. There's no one else anywhere in sight; just the empty beach and the sky and the two of them standing fully clothed in the water.

“I told you I would take you to the beach for our honeymoon,” Yoongi says. “Do you remember that?”

“Of course.” Jeongguk laughs. “At the time I thought you were joking.”

“I was testing the water,” Yoongi admits. “I have a lot of pride, you know.”

“I know.” Jeongguk pats his shoulder. “It's one of your great flaws.”

Yoongi scoffs, pretending to be offended. “I should splash you for that.”

“Go ahead and try!”

Jeongguk takes off, Yoongi pursuing as best he can, but he's too fast for Yoongi, of course, and the ensuing chase is relatively unsuccessful. After several fruitless minutes, Jeongguk is still far out of range, so finally Yoongi gives up, panting. “Fine! You win! Let's go inside, I'm exhausted.”

Jeongguk bounds over, victorious. “Told you! You're just a slow old ma--”
He screams as Yoongi dives at him, tackling him entirely into the shallow water and rolling over on top of him.

“HEY!” he shrieks, spitting gross water from his mouth. They’re both completely soaked now, but Yoongi is sitting on him, a Cheshire grin stretched across his face. “You dirty cheater!”

“Life isn't fair, love,” Yoongi informs him. “Some of us have to use different tactics to get ahead.” He wiggles his butt, still pinning Jeongguk to the ocean floor. “Anyway, I win.”

Jeongguk splashes him in the face for good measure.

“What? You can't have it all!” Yoongi shouts, still laughing. “I'm the winner here, you know.”

“Should I shower tonight or tomorrow?” Jeongguk asks, watching Yoongi unpack their suitcase from the bed.

“Up to you, love,” Yoongi says. He pulls a pair of pajamas from the stacks of clothing. “We have all the time in the world.” He yawns, unbuttoning his shirt, and Jeongguk looks away lightning fast.

“Are you going to bed now?” He stares pointedly at his feet, but he can't concentrate on anything else besides the thought of Yoongi standing five feet away, removing his clothes. At home, Yoongi usually changes in his closet; Jeongguk can't help but be acutely aware of him now.

“Maybe. It depends. Is there something you want to do?”

Jeongguk risks a glance at him. Yoongi is dressed in a t-shirt and boxers now, still holding his pajama pants in one hand. He's staring at Jeongguk, one eyebrow cocked.
He looks away again. “No. Um. Nothing!”

“Really?” Yoongi chuckles. “Nothing at all?” There's a shuffling sound as he puts on his pants. Jeongguk's throat constricts.

He reminds himself for a second that this is Yoongi in the room with him. Not some unreachable being, just Yoongi—his husband. His shyness ebbs away as he turns to him.

“Kiss me.” He swings his legs over the side of the bed facing his husband and holds his arms out.

Yoongi takes the three steps it takes to reach him and gathers him up, pressing his face into the crook of Jeongguk's neck. He turns his head to kiss at Jeongguk's jaw, right below his left ear.

Soft night sounds drift in through the window, the hum of waves and the quiet rush of the beach breeze. Jeongguk takes a deep breath, air filling his lungs, and lets it out in a gentle sigh. “Again, please.”

Yoongi pushes him back onto the bed, crawling over him to press a kiss to his forehead, his ear, the bow of his upper lip. “Love you,” he breathes, as if those words are as natural as exhaling, and then molds his lips over Jeongguk's, rough and sweet. Jeongguk's heart beats wildly in his chest, coming up to cup Yoongi's face and bring him closer, deeper.

Yoongi's knees are settled in between Jeongguk's legs; when he shifts, he accidentally bumps against Jeongguk's inner thigh, brushing his crotch. Jeongguk gasps against his lips.

“Sorry,” Yoongi blurts, breaking away. “God, I didn't mean to do that, Gguk.”

Jeongguk meets Yoongi's gaze with wide eyes. He hesitates for a long moment. “No. It's okay.”

Yoongi blinks. “It's not okay if you're not ready.”

“No—no, I'm ready.” Jeongguk swallows, but he doesn't break eye contact. “I want to do this with you.”
“Now?” Yoongi's eyebrows knot together. “I don't know, Jeongguk, this seems fast—”

“It's not fast. We're on our honeymoon.” Jeongguk tugs at Yoongi's tee, biting his lip. How can he begin to say what he feels? “I want… I want to be intimate with you. I want you to be intimate with me. I want to have that between us.”

Taking a sharp breath, Yoongi sits up, rubbing at his neck. “I want that too, trust me. I… I guess I'm just afraid, Jeongguk. Giving your body to someone is a precious gift, and I… I'm worried…” He presses his lips together momentarily, looking for the right words. “You've spent your whole life without being able to give consent. I never want to remind you of that. What if you're only saying this because you feel like… like I want it, even though you don't, or what if I accidentally tell you to do something and that makes you uncomfortable—”

“Oh, Yoongi, no,” Jeongguk murmurs. He sits up, too. “It's not like that; it's never been like that with you. Even before, when I had to—you didn't order me to do anything. You've always been different. And,” he continues, reaching for Yoongi's hand, “the curse never controlled my heart. I wanted you. I still want you. That's all me.”

Yoongi's upper lip trembles. “I hate that you had to go through what you did. I hate even thinking that you had those experiences, and that I could hurt you even now.”

“You don't hurt me,” Jeongguk insists. “Never. Yoongi, it's okay for you to tell me do things. It's okay to want things. I have my own mind and own body now—you can trust me to choose whether to listen or not. It's okay.” He squeezes Yoongi's hand. “I love you. I want to be with you.”

Yoongi's face scrunches up; Jeongguk can see that his eyes are damp. He clears his throat and dries his eyes with the edge of his shirt.

“Okay,” he says simply. “All I want is for you to be happy. Tell me what you want, and I'll give it to you. I trust you. My will is yours, love.”

“Then…” Jeongguk wipes a stray tear from Yoongi's eyelashes with his thumb. “Make love to me. Please, Yoongi. You'll never hurt me, I won't let you.”

Yoongi nods. He pulls Jeongguk in by two fingers beneath his chin, joining them in a soft, quick kiss and guiding Jeongguk back down against the pillows. Jeongguk's fingers wind into Yoongi's hair;
it's soft and silky to the touch. Yoongi groans against him, parting his lips and kissing deeper, harder. He pulls back and nuzzles at Jeongguk's jaw.

“We'll go slow,” he whispers. “Just enjoy it.”


Yoongi's hands make their way down his body, pushing his clothing up and off and running his fingers over Jeongguk's skin, and Jeongguk comes apart beneath him. They're close, skin to skin, pulse to pulse.

When they finish, they lie together, Yoongi holding Jeongguk close and adjusting his sweaty hair.

He doesn't say *I love you* in words, but he says it in the press of his lips and the tenderness of his embrace. Jeongguk tells him back in as many ways as he knows how.

The autumn wind scatters dead leaves across the grass; one lands in Jeongguk's hair, and Yoongi gingerly picks it out. He studies his face for clues. “Are you okay?”

Two years have passed since their marriage. Just a few days ago, they received a letter notifying them that Jeongguk's aunt had passed away. Jeongguk hadn't been sure how to react to the news; there was no funeral for her, but his father had paid for her cremation and burial in a tiny plot of a graveyard near their house. Now Yoongi and Jeongguk stand in front of it, trying to come to terms with what had happened.


“No one would blame you for that.”
“I know. It's just...” Jeongguk sighs. “I didn't really know that much about her, either. I know she was lonely. The story goes that her parents forced her to marry my uncle because she was abnormal —sometimes magical creatures are born to human parents, you know, even though it's rare. They thought it would straighten her out. Whenever they visited together before his death, they were unhappy. My uncle was... a lot like my father is. And then after that she lived and died alone, with no family or friends to attend her funeral.”

Yoongi nods, listening intently. “It's sad, but that doesn't excuse her actions.”

“Of course not,” Jeongguk agrees. “I never said it did. But... I sort of wish I had made more effort to understand her. Bitter people can do horrible things.”

“That's true.” Yoongi licks his lips. “What's on your mind, Jeongguk?”

He hesitates. “I'm so happy now. I have you. I'm enjoying art school, you're doing well as an executive, and you're making a real difference in the world. I think that maybe holding in all this anger over what happened in the past is more hurtful than helpful. I want to forgive her.”

“She's dead,” Yoongi points out. “It doesn't matter whether you forgive her or not.”

“It's not about her,” Jeongguk explains. “It's about me. Think of it as letting go, in a way. I'm not forgiving her because she deserves it. I'm forgiving her because that means that I won't have to carry the experience around for the rest of my life.”

“Well... if it's for you, I suppose it's good.” The wind whips Yoongi's hair into his eyes, and he pushes it back with one hand.

“It is good,” Jeongguk says. He looks at the bright blue autumn sky, thoughtful. “The power to forgive is my own decision, and I'm choosing to do so.” Reaching into his pocket, he pulls a tiny bouquet of daisies.

“Where did you get that?” Yoongi asks in surprise.

“Earlier today.” Jeongguk bends, sets it on his aunt's grave, and stands back to admire. “I'm free,
Yoongi. This is it. My regrets over what happened die here and now.”

There's a poignant silence; Yoongi winds his arm around Jeongguk's waist, possessive and tight. He sighs. “I'm glad I have the privilege of calling you mine— and that you choose to let me.”

“I'm glad I chose you,” Jeongguk says. He hugs Yoongi, resting his chin on his head. “Let's enjoy the rest of our lives together without regretting the past. How does that sound?”

“It sounds perfect.” Yoongi looks at the grave for a long moment, then back to Jeongguk, “I can't wait.”

They walk back to the car, hand in hand. Behind them, the miniature bouquet rustles in the breeze, and a hush falls over the cemetery in the clear afternoon sun.

They buckle in, and Yoongi pats Jeongguk's shoulder. “You know I'm proud of you, right?”

“I know,” Jeongguk says. “I'm proud of you too.”

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