Murmuration

by fringe city (indiachick)

Summary

Park Jimin is a rookie detective at the flashiest department in Seoul Metropolitan. When he's tasked to work with Min Yoongi - an apathetic, disgraced cop handling the ineffective cold case division - he doesn't expect the murder case they're working on to turn intensely personal.

For both of them.

(Superpowers AU with mysteries! Taegimin)

Notes

Hi. I've been working on this fic for a while! I really like Taegimin, and this fic is dark, it's crazy, it's got all the shit I love. (Mainly angst. Some fluff is forthcoming. Also plot. Fuck I
love plot.) Before you get into it, please be aware that this fic will have character death. It's there, it happens before the timeline of the fic, it's resolved in what I hope is an interesting way. The "Everybody Lives" tag is true so please don't be put off by that (or murder me).

A very small part of this is inspired by Victoria Schwab's 'Vicious'.

Sapphiamur made a brilliant trailer for this story here: https://youtu.be/Lriv6uQzN1s
Yoongi’s on his sixth coffee when the phone begins to ring.

He ignores it in favor of building an apartment complex in Level 50 of GrimCity. Complete this, and he gets three Skull Stars, and with those three Skull Stars he can build a fictional coffee shop for his fictional coffee-deprived citizens. He’s frantically refreshing his inventory screen to check if he has enough bricks when Namjoon thumps a fist on his table.

“Aren’t you getting that, Min?”

“It’s right there,” Yoongi says, ignoring the pile of dust that Namjoon just unsettled. “You get it.”

“I’m writing up the report on today morning’s drug bust,” Namjoon counters. “It’s a very exhaustive report. You have done nothing in the last two days, so you pick this up.”

“I did contribute. I gave you a report on the Jang Shin Dye murder-case two hours ago.”

Namjoon raises an eyebrow. Then he holds up a greasy McDonald’s napkin, covered top to bottom in Yoongi’s pre-coffee, pre-breakfast angry scrawl. “This is not a contribution, Yoongi. This is a travesty.”

“Some of the greatest things have humble origins in napkin notes,” Yoongi observes lazily, watching as his apartment complex slowly rises from the dark, Gothic mud of GrimCity’s virtual landscape. “The Gettysberg address. Magnetic Resonance Imaging. Kim Seokjin’s drunken rendering of himself as an alpaca.”

“Fine. But the Jang Shin Dye murder case is a dead end way past the statute of limitations. Why are you even working on it?”

Because it is a dead end, Yoongi doesn’t say. He twiddles his thumb and purchases bushels for his virtual city’s horses instead.

Namjoon exhales sharply and throws up his hands. “You’re a terrible co-worker.”

The phone keeps trilling. Namjoon moves to pick it up. Yoongi starts laying the groundwork for the coffee shop. It’s really either this or a primary school, and he’s pretty sure he, Min Yoongi—the benevolent overlord of this grim Yoongopolis—has his priorities straight. He’s just trying to decide between one floor or two for the coffeeshop when Namjoon thumps his fist on the table again.

“What?”

“It’s that kid Jimin from Extraordinaries,” he says. “Wants to talk to you.”

“What kid Jimin?” Yoongi asks, although a stir of interest ripples through him at the mention of his old squad. “We have a girl in Extraordinaries now?”

Namjoon rolls his eyes. “It’s a boy. Their rookie. Here.”

Yoongi leans forward on the table to try and grab the phone without having to actually move out of the chair. Namjoon sighs and hands it to him. Then he makes a sort of face—scrunched up and wide-
eyed, obviously code for don’t traumatize the kid. Yoongi rolls his eyes. He may not give a shit about the dust bunnies populating an entire city on the files piled up on his table, but he knows that any call from Extraordinaries—even if it’s just their rookie—is not something to trifled with.

“Min Yoongi,” he drawls. “Cold Case squad. What do you want?”

“Uh. H-hi—um,” says a high voice. Yoongi gives Namjoon a look that’s supposed to say you sure it’s not a girl? Namjoon clearly misinterprets this as either I’m constipated or fuck you because he just makes a face back and gets to typing at his clunky police issue laptop. “Uh, Yoongi sunbaenim?”

“Yes. Jimin, is it?”

Laughter in the background. Jimin clears his throat, sounds deeper when he says, “Y-yes. Park Jimin. Sorry to trouble you—”

More laughter. Yoongi throws the phone receiver a disgusted look and then picks idly at his nails. “Look, Jimin,” he says, and hears the boy take a sharp breath on the other side. “If your team’s making you do this, just look at their faces and say 2015 Pizza Murder incident. Stop prank calling your seniors just because they threatened you. Offer to buy them some chicken wings instead.”

Silence on the other end, then more laughter. Yoongi moves to slam the phone down, but then hears Jimin’s panicked voice yell, “Wait!”

Yoongi sighs. “Hey. I know a rookie who’s a team leader now, just on the back of free chicken wings. Anything is possible. Have a good day, Park Jimin.”

“No, sunbae, please—it’s about Operation Starling.”

Yoongi freezes. It feels like his tongue is stuck to the roof of his mouth suddenly, and he thinks he barely sounds legible when he says, “Have a good day, Jimin.”

Namjoon jolts in surprise in the force with which he slams the phone receiver down. For a moment Yoongi just stands there, heart thumping, eyes on the black cord of the phone snaking across the desk. He has a horrid, wild urge to pull it out of the socket. But anger’s not going to help anything and Yoongi knows it, so he closes his eyes for a minute and breathes out slowly through his nose.

When he looks up again, Namjoon’s eyebrows have pulled together. “What? What did Jimin want?”

“Nothing,” Yoongi says, trying to sound nonchalant and failing. He picks up his phone again, staring blankly at the blocks of pixels on his screen. “Just a prank. Kid’s a rookie. I’m sure they’re tormenting him, all those bastards in Extraordinary.”

Namjoon’s frown deepens. “Prank calls,” he spits. “As if no one has work around here.”

Yoongi eyes the dusty files on his desk. “Yeah, well. They think I don’t have work. They’re not too far from the truth.”

“You handle cold cases,” Namjoon says, placating. “The pace is dissimilar. That doesn’t mean the work you do has no value, hyung. You know that.”

“I know that I’m a disgraced cop relegated to a shit division where I can’t do anymore harm,” Yoongi says, lifting one shoulder lazily. “Suits me just fine. They can make all the prank calls they want.”
A beat of silence, and then: “Your hands are shaking.”

“They’re not.”

“Hyung, what’s wrong? What did Jimin say?”

Namjoon’s voice drips with concern. Yoongi knows it’s real—Kim Namjoon is the nicest, most kind-hearted fool of a policeman Yoongi has met in Seoul. Yoongi sometimes wishes they weren’t friends. Namjoon is easily affected by all the bad shit, loses sleep over victims, and takes on everyone’s heartbreaks upon his own shoulders. He’s also terribly bright and incredibly perceptive. Yoongi’s not even surprised when the confusion on his face morphs by itself to something like understanding.

“He said something about Starling, didn’t he?”

Yoongi’s stomach flips. He looks to the wall-clock, which says 5:30 pm. That’s early to leave by cop standards, but Yoongi’s an early wash-out stuck in a division where the most exciting thing that ever happens is Namjoon dropping coffee on one of their case files and rendering it useless. He locks his phone and stands up.

“I’m leaving for the day.”

“Hyung, I—”

“Worry about your own cases, Namjoon-ah. Isn’t the report due at 6?”

Namjoon’s lip curls. “And what, leave you to go home and drink and wallow, again?”

“You can’t babysit me,” Yoongi says, a little sharper than he’d intended. “Besides, I don’t wallow.”

“I’ve known you for eight years, hyung. I fucking got demoted with you for the Starling case. I’ll talk to Extraordinaries. Fuckers, the lot of them. Thinks they’re above everyone else,” Namjoon’s shoulders tighten and he thumbs furiously through his phone without glancing at it. He’s looking right at Yoongi as he speaks. The anguish pooling in his gaze is alarming. “Hyung, they shouldn’t—they know they shouldn’t—”

“It’s just a stupid prank, Namjoon-ah.”

“It’s not a prank. The Starling thing…Some things are better left undiscussed. They can’t make a joke of it. Especially not with you.”

“Jimin didn’t know.”

“But his sunbaes did!”

Yoongi picks up his bag. “I gotta go.”

He ignores Namjoon’s worried face as he walks into the drizzle. The sky’s clouded, edges of it spun gold from a weak sunset. Light bleeds all around him—signboards and contrails and a sky hazed with pollution. People walk past him, trailing the purgatorial aura of daily routine. Yoongi strides past an alley of street food tents, the sizzle of meat and the heavy, flavored steam clashing with the cold spray of rain. The words—*Operation Starling*—in Jimin’s sweet voice gnaws gently at a corner of his mind. He tries to put it out of his mind, ducking past the transparent windows of one of the tents to grab himself some fish cakes and a drink.
The woman working the street food tent is an Extraordinary—her fingers are aflame as they expertly work searing pieces of cubed beef, charring the meat and skewering them yakitori style. Yoongi watches sparks fly from her hands, the glimmer of her registration bracelet on her wrist, looks for the slight peek of the thin monitor strapped on her ankle. If he clicks a picture of her and sends it to Seokjin in Extraordinaries, the man would be able to tell in a matter of minutes who she is, her entire life history, including the number of loo breaks she took today and every single transaction she’s ever made on her bank account.

She’s safe. He knows she’s safe as he accepts his food from her and pays her in crumpled pills. Knows she’s safe enough that he can turn his back to her. That he can walk away from her with no pistol pointed at her. That he returns her warm smile with a weak one of his own.

“Long day at work?” she asks, sympathetically.

“Something like that.”

“You’re a cop, right?” she says. “Is there any movement on the case of that Extraordinary they’re calling Ghost?”

“Not my department.”

“Scary though, isn’t he? Killing so many people. I’m glad I live on this side of Seoul. If I lived in the Extraordinary sector—”

“He doesn’t kill people like you,” Yoongi interjects. “His victims are all criminals. So unless you’re hiding something I don’t know…”

The cook laughs. “Guess I’m safe, then. Still. Twelve murders. It’s all the radio talks about.”

Yoongi knows what the radio talks about the Ghost.

Extraordinary criminals, turning up in the river. No eyes, inner organs dissolved into inconclusive goo. It’s not even your garden variety robbers or drug dealers. The Ghost is dropping big names—gang leaders, torture artists, the nastiest fuckers to grace the Extraordinary Crimes team’s Wall of Inglorious Bastards.

Whoever they are, they’re murdering Extraordinary criminals. Tossing them in the river. Taking their eyes for trophies. Never leaving a single trace. Not DNA, not clues, not even a vague witness anywhere in the area.

Which is a feat, considering he’s killing Extraordinaries—men with super strength or healing or elemental abilities, women with telepathy or super hearing or speed. By all imagination, a lot of them would have put up a hard fight, leading to easily missed evidence.

But there’s not even a bruise on the victims. Just the sloppy goo of their innards and the empty holes for their eyes.

The Ghost seems like an apt name.

“I thought all the police are after this guy.”

“Not all departments. My department deals with long unsolved shit. Nothing but dust and cold leads.”

“Not very exciting, then?”
Yoongi shrugs. He’s had enough excitement to last a lifetime. His demotion to the cold cases department was almost welcome when it eventually happened, whether kids like Park Jimin understood that or not.

He thanks the cook when his food arrives and finds a table at the very corner of the tent. This is just another day, he thinks. Another stupid, useless day spent poring over useless, long forgotten cases with no resolution in sight. He’s not even trying to stay relevant to the department anymore, and it seems like most of the Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency knows this. The displeased look on his section chief’s face at every weekly meeting shows it. The anxious way in which Namjoon flutters around him, goading him into looking at a new case file every two days, bringing him what he thinks might be leads all point to it. Now it’s just a game of who’ll pull the plug first: Yoongi himself or his superiors.

He doesn’t care.

This is just another day.

But then Park Jimin’s voice sticks in his mind. The clear, grave way in which he said it’s about Operation Starling. It niggles at him, weighs on his mind. Something about it.

He pours the iced tea into the garbage bin as he gets up to leave. Tonight he needs something stronger.

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The next day, Yoongi’s sprawled on his desk, watching a YouTube video of two registered Extraordinaries making random objects levitate. Their fingers remotely undo shoelaces. A baguette rises slowly to whack a baker in the face. It’s stupid shit—shit they’ll get a warning and a fine for if they’re caught—but it still churns his stomach.

He looks at the dusty, water-scored ceiling of the leaky basement that serves as their office. A whole atlas of damp stains crawl across the vista of his vision, interrupted occasionally by the glistening silver of a spider web. The beams are all rusted. Namjoon brought in a vacuum cleaner when they first came down here to eat up the dust, but the dust seems to have prevailed over him. It tickles Yoongi’s nose, makes the whole place smell musty. The stiff, waterlogged books and dirty case files that sit on the shelves and all over his desk doesn’t help matters, either.

Yoongi used to have better. He used to be better. Now he has a stain on his tie and his shirt is wrinkled, and he can’t even bring himself to give a shit.

Namjoon makes distressed whining sounds as his eyes dance across whatever text is flashing on his computer screen. Yoongi watches him for a minute, thinking Namjoon might have been happier in an easier job. Like a professor, maybe. Or a musician. The cop thing doesn’t jade him like it does other people. If anything, Namjoon seems rawer now, all nerves on display, just waiting for something new and awful to stomp on him.

“What?” Yoongi snaps, when he can’t take Namjoon’s low groans of frustration anymore. “Are you working or watching porn? Can’t tell by those sounds you’re making.”

“I’m profiling victims for the Ghost murders.”

Yoongi sits up. “But you’re not in Extraordinaries.”

“But I’m a good profiler.”
“Still, what’s there to moan about? All the victims are criminals, Extraordinarys, all of them had some high connections and tons of cash. Perp is probably some sort of vigilante with a mind control type power.”

“Yeah, but why’s he choosing these guys? Just convenience? Or is there a vendetta?”

“Don’t know. Who cares.”

Namjoon shoots him a look. “Korea cares. Have you seen the newspapers, hyung?”

Yoongi shrugs and goes back to his videos. “They always care about the splashy shit.”

Namjoon squishes his Ryan desk-plushie like a stress ball. It squeaks. Yoongi sighs and resigns himself to an afternoon of squeaking noises and Namjoon’s muttering to himself.

He watches a video of women with skin that changes from tan to green to mermaid scales. A young man keeps pace with a train, laughing and making obscene gestures at him for nearly a mile. On a commercial street, an element worker freezes water right from a tap to make shaved ice for patbingsu.

No matter how much he watches, his mind still rebels against the anomalies.

Irregularities.

Extraordinarys.

The shape of the world blur in their fists. They—more than anyone else—work gears into motion that spin the wheels of fate. Yoongi is sometimes fatalistic—believes firmly that they will end the world, one day soon, the bad ones overpowering the good ones until none remain. Namjoon’s more hopeful, thinks good will prevail, and Yoongi has to remind him that this is not fucking Hogwarts.

He knew someone else who used to think like Namjoon. He doesn’t like to think of what happened to them.

He’s startled out of his thoughts by the very sudden scent of churros. And then something very large and very warm falls on top of him.

“Yoongi-hyung! I missed you. You never come by anymore.”

Yoongi tries to pry Jung Hoseok off him, wondering faintly if he might have better luck if it was an octopus, a jellyfish, or some other sort of clingy marine creature. Perhaps Hoseok is an unregistered Extraordinary with some special Spiderman-type shit that allows him to stick onto people.

“I was literally in the ME’s office yesterday, Hoseok-ah.”

“Asking about a case so cold it’s perma-frosted by now,” Hoseok replies, rolling his eyes, little lips pulling into a downward triangle. “Not to see me.”

“What are you talking about?” Yoongi mumbles. “Asking you that is my job. Giving me a straight answer is yours.”

“Yes, but I wanted to talk to you about other things. Rap battles. Chef’s Table. My fortune cookie from Yoon Shin Ha’s truck that said suck a dick.”

“I hate you.”
“I brought good coffee.”

“I love you.”

Yoongi wriggles. Hoseok doesn’t seem to want to move at all, happily sprawled over him, but he holds out a churro for Yoongi to nibble at, so this is okay, Yoongi guesses.

“I thought you were on a diet, Hoseok-ah. Something about a street dance team?”

“There was a case yesterday—a man with a spear in his brain,” Hoseok mumbles into Yoongi’s ear, immediately dropping his sunshine demeanor. “I had to pry his gray matter out from around a fucking Viking spear so the telepathic Extraordinary working for me could tell me something about how it came to be there. Definitely fell on the higher end of my Grossness Scale. I earned this sugar, okay, hyung?”

Yoongi sighs. A sad Hoseok is way worse than a sad puppy, and there is actual video evidence to prove this. His face gets drawn and his mouth puckers, and his eyebrows make a sort of defeated line. Yoongi knows that face: Hoseok looked at him that way for the entire clusterfuck that was the last year and a half, the smile only returning to his face when Yoongi had finally stopped obsessing over the Starling case.

Yoongi asks, “Do you want to talk about it? Is there chocolate sauce with this churro?”

“Have I ever had tentacle sex?” Hoseok says, chuckling, and then frowns. “No, wait, I don’t want you to answer that—oh hi, Namjoon. You never visit me anymore.”

Namjoon’s eyebrows drew tight together. “We’re house-mates, Hobi, what the fuck. You woke me up at two in the morning today to show me some shit about red neurons.”

“Excuses, excuses.” Hoseok shrugs, airily. “I came by to give you an update on the Ghost murders.”

“Music to my ears,” Namjoon mutters, dipping a churro in way more chocolate sauce than necessary. “Let’s hear it.”

“Okay. So you know how we saw some anomalies in Extraordinary gifts a couple of years before? Around late 2015.”

“The multiple ability shit?”

Hoseok nods animatedly. “Yep—like how that dude we pegged for a water element worker suddenly had water and fire. Or the teleportation guy with the extra invisibility—remember that?”

“The Gangnam Shoplifter?” Yoongi groans. “Fuck, that was a shitty case. I still have a stain on my ___”

“The Forger,” Hoseok interrupts, leaning forward in his excitement. “With the telekinesis and the duplication. And the Chameleon, with the metamorphosis and the venomous teeth. Remember how it was almost unheard-of for anyone to have two abilities before all that?”

Namjoon leans back on his chair, arms crossed tight in front of his chest. “That investigation went nowhere. Our scientists grabbed one and did a whole bunch of tests, but they found nothing.”

“Yeah. Well. That’s who the Ghost is taking down. That’s the profile of his victims. Extraordinaries with multiple abilities.”
“Can we get a list of these dual ability Extraordinaries?”

Yoongi exhales, gently. “It isn’t that easy. A lot of them aren’t registered. There isn’t even census on them.”

Namjoon twirls his pen. “Hoseok, you said the dual abilities only started presenting itself a couple of years ago. What happened then?”

“Two years ago?” Hoseok pretends to think. “Jin hyung had blond hair and kept being bullied by nasty Captain Lee for being just a pretty face. Yoongi hyung complained about headaches and had a mouse living in his desk drawer. Namjoon accidentally lit his trashcan on fire thrice and was in his obscure philosophy phase.”

Yoongi snorts. “Namjoon is always in a fire-starting, obscure-philosophy phase.”

“And—um,” Hoseok pauses, looking from Yoongi to Namjoon, mouth falling into a quiet pout. Yoongi knows what’s coming next, knew it the moment Hoseok said a couple of years ago, and he’s still not prepared to hear it. “And Operating Starling.”

Namjoon’s face goes grave. “Oh.”

Hoseok’s voice is hushed when he speaks again. “Didn’t Extraordinary Crimes call you, yesterday? They traced a link between the Ghost murders and Operation Starling.”

“They made their rookie do it,” Namjoon says, flicking a glance in Yoongi’s direction as if he doesn’t expect Yoongi to be able to explain this. “We thought it was a prank.”

Yoongi clears his throat. He’s sitting up now, fists clenched tight, wishing he could hide his face. But he has to know. He’s lost sleep for more than a year over this case. He’s had nightmares so bad he’d finally given into Hoseok’s pleading face and ended up planting his ass on a therapist’s couch. He needs to know.

It feels very drafty in here, suddenly, the cold pricking goosebumps on his skin, and Yoongi’s eyes keep going to the desk drawer within which he knows is a blue file, thick and full of coffee stains. It’s a file Yoongi had pored over for the better part of a year and a half before he gave up and stashed in the drawer.

“What’s the link?” he asks, and ignores the sharp look Hoseok directs towards him. “Between Starling and this. What’s the link?”

“The victims were all in that building,” Hoseok says, eyes wide and hands more still than Yoongi’s ever seen them. “The Ace Hotel. Where the operation happened. All the Ghost victims were there that night.”

“They were on the guest list that night?”

Hoseok nods. “The hotel has the list.”

“So then it’s easy,” Namjoon says, “We don’t need a list of all the Extraordinaries with multiple abilities, just the ones who were in Ace Hotel that night.”

“Yes, but—”

He trails away, eyes bugging at something by the door. Yoongi looks too, and barely sees a wobbling tray and a mug of coffee before both crash to the floor, along with a mop of honey brown
hair that seems attached to a small person with way too much arms and abs to belong to that face.

It’s a very distinctive face. Sleepy dark eyes and full thick lips, soft hair falling in a gentle sweep across darker brows. There’s a hint of cheeks on that face still, shadowed soft and round, but it’s mostly a face that’s been sculpted into hard angles—just like that body—with some amount of hard work. Jimin’s still very beautiful. He’s also somehow familiar. Yoongi can’t tell how, because he’s sure he doesn’t know any other Park Jims, and this really should be him, judging by the blue Extraordinary Crimes vest loosely hanging off his shoulders. He looks at the three of them with a deer in the headlights expression.

Definitely Park Jimin.

Hoseok gives a loud, theatric sigh. “Park Jimin, were you eavesdropping on us?”

Jimin’s eyes go innocently wide. Yoongi can tell it’s mostly an act, that the kid had orchestrated everything up to the careful way in which the coffee didn’t really spill off the tray. Classic rookie trick: acting stupid so the seniors picked on you less. Yoongi looks at him with a bit of renewed interest.

“No, Hoseok-ssi,” Jimin says now, sweet and panicked. “I would never.”

“Why did you drop the tray when I looked at you, then?”

“I tripped.”

“What did you trip over?”

Jimin looks around for a plausible answer. “This telephone wire here, Hoseok-ssi.”

Hoseok’s lips twitch slightly at the corners. “Are you not a policeman? Are telephone wires going to stop you when you’re running after a criminal? Is this acceptable behavior?”

“No, Hoseok-ssi.”

“Tch. I told you to call me hyung. Granted I said it while I was elbow deep in a corpse, but do you have a terrible memory?”

“No, Hoseok…hyung.”

“Are you going to pick up that tray and call the telephone wire a bastard for making you trip?”

Jimin picks up the tray and then looks dubiously at the wire.

Hoseok chuckles, mirth sparkling in his eyes. “Go on.”

Jimin kicks the wire a little. Yoongi pretends not to hear him whisper you’re a bastard. Hoseok’s shoulders shake a bit with held-in laughter. “I’m just messing with you, Jimin-ah,” he says, face splitting in a wide grin. “What are you doing down here in the dusty parts of the office? Doesn’t Extraordinaries have air conditioners and ergonomic chairs? You fuckers.”

Jimin colors. “They, uh. They sent me down here. To talk to Min Yoongi.”

He looks around until his gaze lands on Namjoon, who’s staring at him with surprise still etched on his face, eyes sharp and mouth severe. Jimin drops immediately into a bow. “Sunbaenim, I’m sorry if I made you think I wasn’t serious on the phone yesterday.”
Yoongi clears his throat. Jimin looks up, realizes his mistake, and blinks a few times in puzzlement. Then he drops into another bow, this time facing Yoongi.

“Stop that,” Yoongi mutters, embarrassed. “Rookie or not, it makes you look like an idiot.”

“Are you an idiot, Jimin-ssi?” Hoseok asks, and cackles when Yoongi swats at him.

Jimin seems to ponder this for a while. “No,” he says, finally, licking his lips lightly as he speaks. “I don’t think so, Hoseok hyung.”

“Good. Didn’t think you were. Come sit over here and tell us why you want to talk to Yoongi hyung then.”

Hoseok pats a chair right next to him. Jimin nods stiffly, slinks closer and slips efficiently into it. He clasps his hands neatly on his lap and looks around with thinly veiled disgust. Yoongi feels himself bristle a little. Sure, the basement isn’t much, but not everyone can have the cushy offices that Extraordinary does. Not every team gets a good budget. Who the hell is this kid to judge?

“Your cactus is dying.”

Yoongi shoves the cactus behind his computer screen.


“This is a basement. There’s no sun here.”

“There are other places that can house a cactus.”

“I can’t change my whole life to help one fucking cactus, jeez,” Yoongi snaps. He wonders why he’s even justifying. He snaps again, “Are you a cop or a cactus doctor?”

Jimin opens and closes his mouth, looking slightly affronted. Then he takes a deep breath and launches into what is clearly a rehearsed speech. “The victims of the Ghost murders were all in the Ace Hotel the night of Operation Starling. Operation Starling was unauthorized and planned by a small faction of policemen within the Extraordinaries division—headed by, um. You,” he peeks through giant eyelashes at Yoongi, possibly expecting him to fly off his handle and deny his involvement, clearly thrown when Yoongi does nothing but nod. He wonders what Jimin has heard about the whole mess—whether he thinks Yoongi simply flouted orders two years ago and deserved to end up disgraced. “Uh. So—because it was unauthorized, it cannot be officially investigated as per protocol. That means we can’t extend warrants or arrest anyone because, as far as documentation is concerned, it never happened. We never went to that hotel. The solution is to reopen investigations into the cause of the Operation.”

“Which is?”

“Mainly? The entrapment and death of a police informant on the scene.”

There’s a loud squeak from Namjoon’s desk. Yoongi looks over, startled, to see him holding the Ryan plushie tight, face white. “Reopen…what?”

Jimin swallows. “The murder,” he corrects. “The murder of the police informant in the hotel that night. It’s a cold case, isn’t it? It’s never really been solved. My team pressurized section chief Jinsoo into reopening it. Here’s the circular. It’s…it’s your division, sunbaenim. We’re hoping that reinvigorated efforts to solve this murder by the cold case squad will help unearth some leads to the Ghost murders. I am to assist you with this.”
Yoongi looks at the envelope Jimin’s holding out. He feels his fingers go cold. His heart thumps loudly in his chest.

They want to reopen the case. His case. The case.

Now—after Yoongi has given up hope, after he’d stopped badgering higher officials, after he’d stashed the case file in a desk drawer. Now, after his single-minded determination to solve this had gotten him kicked out of his own team, relegated to this cold, dusty office in the basement with the only other guy who’d stuck with him through it. All because Yoongi had gone against orders to try to save an informant—the best fucking informant they’ve ever had.

Now, after all these months, and not because they care about the murder. Not because they care about him, that boy who died for them, trying to get information no one else could.

Just because it would open some doors for a more decorated team, because it might lead to the capture of a flashy criminal with a media following, because it might lead to recognition and medals and felicitations instead of exposing police disgrace at letting one of their informants die.

Yoongi grits his teeth, not trusting himself to speak. To his side, Namjoon coughs. “This is ridiculous,” he says, his voice tight. “Fucking ridiculous. They tell us to bury it because it’s just an informant who no one cares about. And now they want to reopen it?”

Jimin wriggles uncomfortably in his seat. “I know it might be difficult—”

“Difficult?” Namjoon jumps up. “It’s unfair! All Yoongi hyung did in the last one year was to chase after this, and we got blocked at every juncture. No support, no warrants, not even Forensics would help! Hoseok nearly got fired for sneaking us reports from the medical examiner’s office. Jin hyung had to wipe his computer just so he wouldn’t get fired for lending technical expertise. All the higher ups were determined to let this become a cold case. Now they want to dig it up again? For what, for the media to celebrate the fact that you’re doing something to stop a vigilante murderer who has nothing to do with this?”

Jimin’s wide-eyed, gentle rookie mask slips to reveal something sharper. It’s barely a moment—a matter of seconds in which he seems to drop one persona and pick up another—but Yoongi’s heart skips a beat. Something about this kid is so familiar. It reminds him so much of someone else—something else. Jimin’s mouth falls into a stony scowl and he rubs lightly at his eyes, breathing out once, twice before he speaks again.

“It’s to stop the Ghost. He’s murdered twelve people already. Or does that not matter to you, sunbaenim? Twelve people. I don’t care if they’re criminals, or Extraordinaries. This guy is dangerous. We have to do everything to stop him.”

Namjoon looks mutinous for all of three seconds before he deflates. Yoongi can tell he wants to fight at the unfairness, to rail against their superiors who played politics with innocent lives. He himself can think of a hundred things to snap at Jimin right now. Don’t take that sanctimonious tone, kid, we’ve seen a lot more shit than you have. Or: if you’re looking to serve justice, you’re looking for it in the wrong line of work. But for all his storm and bluster, Jimin really is right. Yoongi’s not stuck-up enough to not admit it. The Ghost Murders are important, sensational or not, and the guy does have to be stopped.

Namjoon collapses back into his chair. “It’s just not fair,” he points out, in a soft, grave voice, face crumpling. “Not fair to hyung, not fair to me, not fair to Jin hyung and Hoseok and the others who tried to work this case as much as they could. Not fair, greatest of all, to Tae—”
He stops abruptly and looks at Yoongi, far too quick for Yoongi to hide his wince. Jimin notices it too. His mouth sets into a small O, curious eyes narrowing. “Who’s Tae?”

Hoseok and Namjoon exchange glances. But Yoongi’s tired of this, tired of the way they all talk around him like he’s fragile glass or something, tired of the way they all keep saying informant as if the person behind the moniker has never mattered. He’s so tired and they’re reopening this fucking case and his heart hurts. He slides off the top of his desk and walks over to his drawer, yanking it open as they all watch him. He pulls the file out, unable to stop the shaking in his fingers.

Even touching the thing feels like voluntarily plunging his hands into a chamber of thorns.

Yoongi throws it on the desk and it lands in a cloud of dust. Jimin’s gaze flicks from it to his face, questioning.

“Taehyung,” Yoongi says, firmly, slapping his hand atop the file. “Kim Taehyung. That’s the informant’s name. Did you know that?”

Jimin shakes his head. He’s dropped the sharpness for wide-eyed guilelessness again, eyeing the file with an innocence that gnaws at Yoongi’s heart. He stamps down on that feeling. There’s no room for sympathy here; not if this case was going to be reopened again. He should hate Jimin. Jimin represent his old team, everything he threw away, everything he’d believed in until it had all failed him.

He should resent Jimin.

“You don’t know his fucking name and you want to work his case,” Yoongi says, coldly. “He lived a life beyond this file. At least refer to him by name.”

Jimin’s mouth opens, like he wants to say something. He settles for just a nod. “I understand.”

“Everything about him is in here,” Yoongi says, and slides the file towards Jimin. “Read it all, rookie. We ran out of leads on this case long back. You’re welcome to slam your head against this wall as many times as you want.”

Jimin takes the file gingerly. “We’re supposed to work it,” he says, his voice cautious. “Together. That’s in the circular, too.”

Yoongi stands back and smiles a glittering smile. “And we will. Find me one solid lead I missed. One thing I overlooked. One new avenue your team’s clout can open up. Then come see me. Sounds fair?”

Jimin swallows convulsively. “But I—”

“I don’t have time for you or your team,” Yoongi says, and gestures to the piles of cases collecting dust on his desk. “They demoted me here, remember? Got all these to solve and some online rummy to play. Come back when you have something, Park Jimin.”

Jimin’s fingers clench tight together. Yoongi can tell he’s trying hard not to speak up, to tell Yoongi he’s being unfair. That Jimin’s just trying to do his job, and Yoongi should stop being an asshole and help him like he’s been asked to. But apparently Jimin seems to decide Yoongi’s seniority trumps whatever unfairness he perceives in the situation. He schools his face into compromise and stands up. He looks like a little doll when he does that, pretty and expressionless, and that annoys Yoongi.

He’s never liked the way subservience is expected off their juniors; never understood why an asshole with a year of work experience can’t get off his ass to make his own fucking coffee. He wishes Jimin
would yell at him. Maybe that’ll give Yoongi something solid to hate. Hate is as good a crutch as love, and as it is, this all feels like a nightmare he can’t wake up from.

Jimin starts, in a gentle voice, “I don’t think I—”

“Shut it. Don’t peel your ass from your cushy chair up in Extraordinary to bother me until you have something,” Yoongi snarls, making Jimin jump. “Understood? Now scoot.”

Jimin doesn’t scoot. He just stands and bows. “I’ll be back soon.”

“I really doubt that.”

There’s a spark in Jimin’s gaze when he looks up. “I don’t know how to respectfully say watch me, sunbaenim.”

*That’s more like it.* “Good,” Yoongi smirks. “I’ll look forward to that.”

Jimin’s eyebrows rise a bit. Then he rolls his eyes, tries futilely to hide it, grabs the file and runs out before one of them can snap at him again. Hoseok sighs and stuff his mouth with another churro. Namjoon lets out a breath, and kicks his desk a little.

“He’s just doing what his team wants him to,” Hoseok mumbles through all the food. “Should you have been so hard on him?”

“I’m not being hard. I’m just being practical. There’s no need for me to open this can of worms again, unless there’s something new to go on. If Jimin finds something, good for us.”

“Really?” Namjoon asks, voice cracking. “Good for us? Do you think you can go after this again, hyung? After everything that happened, all the shit we got within the department for conducting Operation Starling and then working this case…You were going to burn yourself out, hyung. You almost did. And now you’ll consider working it again?”

“I’m still on Seoul Metropolitan’s payroll. That means I don’t pick and choose the cases they assign to me,” he sits down and picks up his phone again. “This is just another case.”

“It’s not and you know it.”

Yoongi turns his gaze to his phone’s wallpaper. It’s an innocuous thing—a dumb photo of him and Namjoon looking sulky as children at a dinner they very clearly didn’t want to be at. The screen is cracked and his speaker doesn’t work, and Hoseok has told him to change his phone a hundred times, but Yoongi can’t make himself. Because of this photo. Because of what it means.

Taehyung took that photo. A few days before all the shit went down in that hotel, before Yoongi decided to storm in there without orders to save him, before he realized he was too late.

That he’d failed him in the worst way.

Yoongi reaches over to pat Namjoon’s shoulder. “I’ll only work it if Jimin finds a lead,” he says, and talks over Namjoon’s protests. “You saw the kid. What are the chances of *that* happening?”

***

“Back from the dragon’s den,” Seokjin says, when Jimin pushes through the door to the Extraordinary Crimes department’s office. The place is well-lit and buzzing as usual; a stark contrast to the dingy basement where he’d met Yoongi and Hoseok. The air smells like lemongrass. Jimin
heaves a breath. Seokjin peers up at him through thin glasses, one hand still working at cleaning his evidence gathering kit. “How did it go?”

“A lot like how you told me it would, hyung,” Jimin winces, rubbing lightly at the top of his head. “He was an asshole. The other guy, Namjoon, seemed to mean well but yelled at me a bit, too. Hoseok hyung was…scarily friendly. I don’t know whether to be frightened or amused by him.”

Seokjin lets out a surprised chuckle. “Wait a minute. Namjoon yelled? At another actual living being?”

“Don’t know why you sound so surprised,” Jimin mumbles, striding over to the small desk equipped with the oldest, most useless computer screen and the only wooden chair in the room. Cushy chair, his ass. He moves his potted plant aside to reach for his coffee flask, sulking as he adds, “Everyone yells at me.”

“That’s because you’re our rookie,” Seokjin laughs. “I see you got the file.”

“He said to read it and find a lead and then come back.”

“I see.”

Jimin flips listlessly through it, noticing records and bank statements and telephone transcripts, crime scene photos, a whole bunch of barely legible handwritten notes on police issue paper. Jimin doesn’t look at the crime scene photos. He already knows how it happened. The distress call Taehyung sent Yoongi; the hostage situation; the blood. No clue as for the perpetrator, or what information he was trying to find.

“He seemed to really be taking it rough,” Jimin says, pausing to glance at a photo of a bridge.“Yoongi sunbae, I mean. This case reopening and all.”

“Not surprising,” Seokjin says, thoughtfully, perfect face marred in a frown. “It’s his case. He didn’t even fight it when they threatened to demote him and finally did. He just wanted to keep working it. Yoongi thought he’d failed that boy. That because of that, it was his responsibility to close this case. It ate him up.”

Jimin bites his lip, holding his palm down flat on a photo that falls out of the front of the file. “Did you know him, hyung?” he asks. “The informant?”

Seokjin’s smile turns dull. “Oh. Everybody knew Tae,” he says, and then stands up, pushing his chair back as he closes his kit. “I have to get going. Lab results waiting for one of the victims. I’ll see you later, Jimin-ah.”

Jimin finds himself studying the boy. Somehow this—just a candid old photo—clearly captures him as well as any professional portrait. He was very beautiful, Jimin thinks. Jimin has always expected him to be, in an odd way: something about the age at which he’d died and the mystery surrounding it and the way he clearly was enigmatic in life had given him that feel. Here was a beautiful, lost boy, with a firecracker life. Jimin had, however, expected conventional beauty: hard lines and a slim nose, light skin, neat hair. Kim Taehyung didn’t look conventional in this photo— not with his striking
features and deep tan and messy rose-colored hair pulled into a ponytail. Not with that wide, brilliant smile.

He looked so real. So interesting. There was something so easily familiar in the freckle on the tip of his nose. Something instantly memorable in the rectangular shape of his smile.

How the hell was this kid a police informant? He looked innocent, sweet-faced, a bit of gentle mischief in his gaze if anything. But Jimin skims the first few pages of Taehyung’s file and words like double agent and no loyalties crop up everywhere.

Kim Taehyung seemed to have passed on information to the police on everything from drug cartels run by Extraordinaries to brothels catering to their whims. He seemed to have had known ties with Hyungsik of The Green Dragon family and Madame Yuri of the Extraordinary trafficking fame. And all this, at an age where Jimin was still struggling through police academy, working gas-station jobs to pay his tuition fee. Kid was even actually younger to him by a few months.

Not so innocent after all.

“’S that Taehyung?” Daehan’s voice comes from behind him. “Fuck. I remember him. Can’t forget that sort of face. Never seen him that bare-faced though.”

Jiimin looks up cautiously. “Did you know him, sunbaenim?”

“Know him? Everyone fucking knew him. Kid was an open double agent. Really smart, very valuable. Said he turned tricks at the toll booth at the Seam—you know, that bridge near the Extraordinary sector. Don’t know if I believed him about that bit—he was pretty enough to make some money that way if he wanted, but I’ve worked with whores. You can sort of tell.”

Jiimin looks down at the file and frowns at the words that pop up: Seam, prostitution, possible connections to Extraordinary mafia.

Daehan raps on his desk to catch Jiimin’s attention. “Anyway. Kim Taehyung delivered as many criminals to the cops as he sniffed out undercover cops and informants for the other side. Min Yoongi had a file on him that he kept real close. We had a bet that one day he’d print it out, and it would say terminate with extreme prejudice,” Daehan snorts at this, and shakes his head. “That didn’t happen though. Kid got himself killed. Yoongi got obsessed with finding out why. Rest is history.”

“Was he Extraordinary?”

“No. Seokjin tested him once. No powers. Just weirdly smart and knew how to work the system. Until it blew up in his face,” Daehan raps his desk again, lips curling into a shit-eating grin. “Hey. Rookie. Go make sunbae a coffee, yeah?”

“I’m working.”

“Ah, come on. You can work later. File’s not going to go anywhere, and everyone already knows Yoongi refuses to co-operate with you. Take a chill pill. Make me some coffee, help Minho clean up the rest room, put the cabinets back in order. You know. Real work.”

“That’s not—”

“If you do as you’re told, we’ll let you go out on the all night stakeout today. Won’t that be a treat? You can see for yourself how intense it gets.”
Fuck you, Jimin thinks. Stakeouts are terrible and sleepy and the chugging of all that coffee is brutal on their systems. Jimin’s been on them before—he didn’t exactly join the department yesterday—and there’s no reason for Daehan to call it a fucking treat. But Daehan is right in that Yoongi doesn’t seem to want to cooperate with him, and Jimin needs Yoongi to work this case.

It was Yoongi who’d known Taehyung best of all, it was Yoongi who’d spent a year investigating this.

It was Yoongi who’d launched Operation Starling in the first place, flouting official orders to try and rescue an informant from a potentially dangerous situation.

He needs Yoongi and Yoongi needs a lead.

Jimin sighs and leans over the file. If Yoongi wanted a lead, he’d get a lead. Jimin would make sure of that.

“Rookie.” Daehan yells. “Get to!”

“Going, going.”

“I want less sugar in my coffee this time,” Sehun calls. “But more milk.”

Jimin shakes his head. “Not a barista,” he mutters, but is pretty sure no one is paying any attention.

It’s when he gets up to go make the assholes some burnt coffee that the little black notebook falls out of the file.

***

There’s a little hole in the wall cafe that Jimin frequents. He’s friends with the guy who runs it and he likes that it’s rarely crowded. He can sit in the American style vinyl booth and look out at the street, watch for hours as traffic fades and the light changes and people walk by in various states of zombification brought on as the day dies. He knows all the English tunes that filter out of the retro jukebox in the corner. Sometimes he dreams up choreography for the more dreamy jazz numbers, faint muscle memory stirring at the thought of dance, something he’d pursued so long ago for less than a year at a college he’d ended up in against his parents’ wishes.

His parents are happier now. They have a picture of him in his cop uniform, saluting the camera, hanging right above the refrigerator in their home.

Jimin’s not so sure about his own happiness.

Taemin had inherited a sundae restaurant from his parents. He’d turned it into this: a retro, American style cafe serving coffee and burgers. Jimin comes here often, because Taemin is an old friend, and also because this place has been his working space for so many years in university that his brain is conditioned in a Pavlovian manner to associate it with focus and study.

It’s in his usual seat at Taemin’s cafe that Jimin starts to pore over the notebook.

It’s filled with cramped handwriting, page after page after page, almost cover to cover. The force of it, the speed with which it’s written somehow invokes a feeling like longing—Jimin can feel it in his bones. Longing, ringing clear through the writing, even if Jimin hasn’t read any of it. He flips through and sees that it bursts over with ink in various colors and doodles at every corner, little pictures and ticket stubs tucked into margins with cello-tape, a whole row of little emoji stickers sitting in the plastic slit on the back flap of the book. All the writing is in Korean—or at least some
form of it, because the words itself make no sense. Neither sentence structure or word choice mean anything beyond gibberish; Taehyung might as well have been writing down random alphabets one after another. Jimin peers and peers through pages to find some recognizable words, and sighs.

Kid was weirdly smart: this shit is encrypted.

So, then, to find a cipher key.

Yoongi has looked through this too, Jimin can tell. Even without Seokjin tipping him off that the notebook had always been a loose end Yoongi had been unable to solve, Jimin would be able to tell. The last few pages of the notebook are entirely Yoongi’s scribbles on decoding it. He’s tried character substitution in a thousand different permutations. He’s tried conversion to English and to Japanese—the two other languages Taehyung knew. He’s tried reading it backward, forward, from the middle of the book to the sides. He’s tried reading it in mirrors and tested the book for invisible ink. Yoongi’s tried a whole lot of shit, and his frustration is clearly visible in the heavy press of his pen having torn through paper.

Jimin sits back and stares.

He looks through the file until he finds the notebook listed under evidence. It had been on Taehyung when he died: it clearly mattered a great deal to him, then. He’d filled pages of it with carefully coded script— occasionally a little drawing or co-ordinates or stickers. This was something beloved, something secret; surely it made sense to work on it.

No one had been able to decode it.

Jimin takes a small sip of his coffee. Something about the encryption, the order of the letters, is familiar. He looks offhand at that photo of Taehyung again, at the mystery in his eyes and the brightness of his smile. What secrets were in this book? What had he written here that he’d painstakingly used code for the entire thing, obscuring its contents to all eyes except his own?

“Help me out here, dude,” Jimin whispers, rubbing at his temples. Taehyung just grins back at him guilelessly, trapped forever within the confines of that single picture.

The television by the counter is babbling about the Ghost murders even at this late hour. Endless warbling about how the police is not doing their job, how the killer seems almost invincible. Graphic images of bodies missing eyeballs, bones and skin sunk into themselves around the goo of liquefied inner organs. There’s no talk about their lead on the potential list of possible victims yet. For once, that news seems to not have leaked to the media.

Jimin picks up a napkin and copies down the first word in Taehyung’s notebook. He looks at it for a while, something stirring in the swamp of his thoughts, and then gives up and looks to the file again.

Requests to run it past cryptologists were denied due to the relevance of the evidence being unclear.

Jimin shakes his head. Unclear? An encrypted diary was as personal and relevant to the victim as it got. But beneath that same line, Yoongi’s added in pencil: Seokjin did a DNA swab to prove it’s his; still wasn’t enough; they just want to bury this.

Jimin isn’t stupid; he knows shit like this happens. A double-agent police informant’s murder is likely the last thing they’d want to make public. The more people involved, the more the police would have to justify ever taking assistance from someone like Taehyung in the first place. Best to just let it lie.

But Yoongi had refused to let it die. Let him die. And when Yoongi finally thought he had freed himself of it, it had all cropped up again: this death somehow connected to a serial killer, the only
avenue to legally investigate the hotel and the Ghost’s possible victims. Their superiors needed something ground-breaking, something pertinent enough to demand search warrants for the Ace Hotel. It's the only way they'd get that list of guests, and the list of guests is the only way they'd catch the Ghost.

Jimin and Yoongi would need to find that something ground-breaking.

He runs a finger over Taehyung’s photo. Why is this script familiar? He’s sure he’s seen it before. Maybe in school, somewhere?

He picks up his pen. Taehyung had been the same age as him; would have been in the same grades as him in the same years. They’d have gone through similar phases, come across similar pop culture, enjoyed similar songs and cartoons. Jimin has the faintest memory of coding…strawberry candy…something about solving ciphers to win something…All the kids had done it, this cool new thing; Taehyung would surely have known about it if he had been in school that year.

Jimin rubs his temples again. He knows this. He’s seen this, he’s sure. If he thinks back to 2006, when he was 11, Taehyung probably still 10, he’d find his answer.

2006.

Playground. Running. The molten heat of an unnaturally warm summer turning the tops of his thighs a deep brown. That was the year he’d fought with his best friend because Youngjae had called him fat. The year of that family trip to Achasan. Another to a beach. His brother’s asthma getting worse, and a resulting hospital stay. Jimin had been excited to stay overnight in that hushed, sterile place, lying awake at night to watch fluids drip into his brother's veins.

2006.

That one weird kid he’d talk to, because Jimin had no one else. Weird kid without lunch. Jimin’s mom packed a little extra for him at Jimin’s request, and the two of them would sit together during lunch break, poring over a code, hoping for bicycles. Him, and this kid, playing with this arrangement of letters, using clues printed on the back of—

“Cola. Strawberry cola,” he breathes. A new brand, a pink fizzy drink. And on each of the bottle’s flaps, a coded arrangement of symbols. Clues to solve it. And if you did—like Jimin had, like Taehyung obviously had—then you could decode the message to win something. Big somethings: cycles, roller-blades, computers. All the kids had been so into it.

Jimin chews nervously on his lip.

What were the chances?

Not too bleak, he thinks. Taehyung had been the same age as him; he would have been exposed to the same shit. It makes sense, even if it feels almost spooky. Almost like an invisible hand guiding him.

Jimin writes some words down with the alphabets arranged vertically. Then reverses them. Flips them around mirror-like, so that ga becomes na but no and ta remain same.

When rearranged, the first word reads rain.

He does it for the second word as well. Rain today.

His heart thuds.
Taemin’s jukebox plays Ella Fitzgerald and Aretha Franklin. Not Jimin’s type of songs, but he’s heard them so often that he knows them by heart, and he sings along quietly to calm his thoughts.

He works for nearly an hour, painstakingly taking each word and rearranging it, wondering how Taehyung had gotten so good at this script that he could simply write it without doing so much mental gymnastics. When he’s done, the first few sentences read: Rain today; went down to the station to tell them about Won Kyung. His liquor is spurious, he plans to sell it in crates to ships traveling abroad. Yoongi hyung is acerbic as usual but I think he’s warming up to me.

There’s a yellow smiley sticker after this.

Jimin breathes out shakily, touching a finger to the sticker. He imagines another hand moving across this page, another finger placing this sticker down on top of it. He imagines a living, breathing person writing this down, shaking a pen at one point to stop the ink from jamming, doodling a flower and heart-faced person at one corner of the page while he thought.

A warm hand. A thoughtful mind. All of which is no longer here.

"Fuck."

Jimin takes another sip of coffee, feeling feverish, a shiver in his bones and his gaze rapt on the napkins in front of him. When he can't wait anymore, he picks up his phone with shaking hands.

Yoongi picks up on the first ring, voice rough and scratchy as he queries, “Hullo?”

“It’s Park Jimin,” he says. Yoongi responds with silence. Jimin folds the napkins very carefully, places them within the pages of the notebook, and closes the notebook. He breathes out, slow, wets his lips. Then he says, clear and careful: “I have a lead.”

Chapter End Notes

Let me know what you thought. This thing is...pretty twisty...and I hope I'm leaving enough clues that coming back to it later might be fun. Also I don't know for sure this will be 5 chapters, but let's keep a ballpark number.

As always, kudos and comments appreciated <3
Seagull

Chapter Summary

Whatever’s behind him reaches. Whatever’s in front of him seeks to pull away. The warmth of the lights above is only on Jimin, the sole player that matters in the dream. He’s the only star here, the only one with a spotlight.

This is his story to make.

Chapter Notes

Warnings for graphic violence. I’ve added that tag.

Yoooo this chapter fought me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It’s always the same vague dream.

Jimin walks down a hallway. There’s carpet under his feet and warm lights above his head, and the corridor stretches and stretches. There are closed doors on either side. He’s wet, somehow, as if he’s come in from the rain, water dripping off the strands of his hair and soaking his clothes to his skin. There’s no one around as far as he can see, no sounds at all save for his footsteps and the staggered sound of his breath.

His skin prickles with warning. He’s carrying a knife, hand so tight around the hilt that his knuckles pop white. Something flickers to his left, there and then not. Something flickers to his right. He hears heavy footfalls ahead of him, whispered words.

Find me.

He surges forward. Whatever is ahead of him, running gaily into the dark, is complimented by whatever is behind him, plunging down the hall. He feels it in the cold breath of air on the back of his neck, the heavy thrum of the walls, the panic that settles bright in his chest.

Wait, he calls.Wait, don’t leave.

He reaches out to grab a hand. It’s warm, wet with rain like his own, the sleeves of a long coat sticking to the wrists. The thing behind them, whatever it is, thumps closer. Terror squeezes Jimin’s chest, rakes fingernails down his spine.

He knows what he needs to do to get away.

The epiphany is untimely. Whatever’s behind him reaches. Whatever’s in front of him seeks to pull away. The warmth of the lights above is only on Jimin, the sole player that matters in the dream. He’s the only star here, the only one with a spotlight.
This is his story to make.

Jimin swallows. Licks his lips, tentatively, as if he’s considering the choices. In truth, he never does. In truth, he always knows that whatever is at the back is too strong, too much. He cannot look around at it. He cannot face it.

Jimin sucks in a sharp breath. The hand in his grasp quivers. Four whispered words from within the dark: Jimin, please. Choose different.

He can’t. It’s impossible, and he’s too scared. He raises his knife, instead. Raises it so high, and brings it down so quick, a scream catching in his throat as he does. He watches blood rise through the lattice of his fingertips, painting his skin incarnadine.

The spotlight goes off. The world goes flat white. That’s how he knows he’s made the right choice—the lights come on, and he’s alone, and he’s safe.

Jimin breathes out unevenly. He’s still holding the knife in his hands. There’s still blood.

But it’s bright and fair and the light’s all around him, and Jimin’s alone. That means did the right thing, then. Chose right.

(Didn’t he?)

***

Jimin wakes up to a buzzing that slowly resolves itself into the hum of his phone. He rolls once, trying to locate it, wincing when something hard pokes into his stomach. His eyes already feel gritty and hot from a long night, and by the time he manages to dig the phone out from underneath him, his voice is still nothing more than a mere croak.

“Did I wake you?” Yoongi asks on the other side.

“Wha—? No. No, I was up.”

“Station in 30, then?”

“Huh?” Jimin tries to stand up and falls out of bed. “Ow. Uh. Okay, sure.”

“Are you sure you’re awake, kid?” Yoongi sighs. “I’ll get coffee”

“No, no, I can make it when I get there—”

Yoongi snorts. “You’re not a fucking barista, Jimin. Just don’t be late.”

Jimin sits on the floor for a few minutes, groaning and pinching the bridge of his nose. He thinks lightly of the dream, tossing it about in his mind like a frayed, endless thread he’s been worrying for too long. He’s never understood it, but then the ghosts that our minds make up are weird. Perhaps there is nothing to understand but his own anxiety at failing in life. Or perhaps it’s more. His therapist thinks it’s more, thinks he needs to learn how to snap himself out of it when the dream starts up. He wishes it were that easy.

He yawns slow and stuttering into his hand. It’s not even daylight out yet, the world still stuck in the warped-out, foggy hours of predawn. The wind rattles the cheap boards over his window. A car backfires somewhere on the street, and a woman starts shouting. Someone yells back. There’s the sound of breaking glass, and then loud weeping.
Fucking awful neighborhood.

He’d barely gotten any sleep the previous night. After his breakthrough with the notebook, Jimin had emailed Yoongi some screenshots, and then spent a while familiarizing himself with the case as much as he could. There are a lot of names in the file, a whole lot of cross-referencing other cases that Taehyung had worked on as an informant. Some are familiar: the Itaewon club murder, for example, and the attorney’s son who got booked for it. The gang supplying foreign drugs to schools across Mapo and some other districts. The Extraordinary that went by the moniker Angel, who’d been luring young girls into fetish porn in the area a lot of Extraordinaries called the Seam. He doesn’t know how easy it is for a young boy to infiltrate these places, doesn’t know how Taehyung did it, but the kid was uncannily good. There are even records of him running the police in circles, deciding sometimes that switching sides is better depending on how things were going for him. The police still kept him as an informant, and acted on most of his information.

Taehyung didn’t seem stupid: there are references of at least eight to nine cases in the file that he had flat out refused to help on. Phone transcripts peg him as someone who had a knack of foreseeing cases that could go south for him, and he always pulled himself out when it looked like he might get in trouble.

He was random and unpredictable and chaotic—but not stupid.

Which is why the whole Ace Hotel shit doesn’t sit right with Jimin.

He rushes through his shower, tugging his pants on even as he tries to brush his teeth. There’s a voice message from his landlord, screaming Biblical end-of-times messages for an entire minute before he reminds Jimin that his rent is due. The lock on the door is broken again—his house-mate must have gotten back drunk again. Dude works at a seedy little grilled pork place right below this building, and he’d likely sleep all day today: judging by the sheer amount of spilled soju reeking up the floor.

Jemin checks on him once—just to make sure he hasn’t choked on his own vomit or anything—but the guy’s dead to the world and snoring. Fine, then. Out on the landing, Mongshil—the building’s resident cat grown fat on scraps from the restaurant—is lying weirdly on her side scratching at absolutely nothing on the wall. He leans next to her to rub the top of her head, and she brings up a paw to attack him as usual—only the movement is too sluggish, and she looks absolutely confounded.

“Oh god, did you lick up all the alcohol again?”

Mongshil looks at him blearily. Jimin sighs and goes back inside to put out some water for her, and by the time he’s done and manages to get his door to sort of stick in a closed position, he’s already running late.

There’s a commotion at the bottom of his building, a woman screaming loud insults at a reversing car as people gather to watch. “Asshole!” she’s yelling, even as Jimin walks to his car. “Curse you! You and your thug friends—do you think you can just eat and walk out—hey! Detective Park! You—you’re police, right?”

Jemin sighs. She’s pointing right at him. “Yes, ma’am.”

“This man—this man, he’s a gang member! Arrest him!”

“I can’t just arrest him without cause—”
“He stole my food!” the woman screeches, picking up a dirty pail of water like she’s considering throwing it at Jimin. “He ate our food and now he won’t pay—”

Jimin shakes his head. Yoongi’s probably going to kill him. On the flip side, this lady serves him grilled pork on discount, sometimes feels motherly and packs up kimchi for him, and ignoring her pleas right now is just suicide. What if she bans him? What the hell will he eat? Surely Yoongi would understand: it’s food. Maybe Jimin could just walk over to the car, warn this man, get him to pay up. He’s a rookie, true, and he’s not sure he has the jaded detective aura down yet, but the guy looks like a beanpole and—

Jimin stops in his tracks, already halfway to the car. There are sparks crawling around the man’s fingertips, crackling and purple. *Extraordinary*. The guy raises his head and looks right at him. Below his chin, there’s a dark shadow of something on his throat, like a jagged scar. Something about it is so…

The car starts up.

“Hey!” Jimin yells. “Hey, wait a second!”

A flash of something like terror passes over the man’s features. He’s *still* looking right at Jimin, looking at him like he *knows* him, and Jimin starts running. The man presses down hard on the pedal and the car shoots forward. There’s a stench of burning tires and Jimin barely launches himself out of the way as the car passes *way* too close to him for comfort.

It leaves him in a cloud of dust. He slaps a hand to his forehead—he’s a fucking *idiot*, he should’ve at least gotten the license plates.

“Detective! Detective Park!”

“I’m sorry, I couldn’t catch—”

The woman shakes her head. “I saw the sparks, you might have gotten hurt. Detective Park, he was asking about you.”

Jimin feels his eyes go wide. “Asking…about me? What did he ask?”

“When you come home, when you go, that sort of thing. I didn’t say anything. Heard him talk on the phone to someone, once, something about a hotel—?”

Something cold settles in the pit of his stomach. “Ace? A hotel Ace?”

“That’s it!” the woman says, brightening, and then frowns. “Will he—will he come back, Detective Park? Is he dangerous?”

“I’ll send someone to check any CCTV in the area, we’ll catch his license plates.”

The woman’s face crumples. “But Detective—”

Jimin flashes her a smile. “Don’t worry! I’ll take care of it.”

He tries not to let on that he’s rattled as he walks back to his own car. Tries not to look over his shoulder. His skin crawls from the idea of being watched; being studied like a bug under a microscope. The lock today morning—had that even been his house-mate? Or had someone else been in his apartment, rooting through his stuff while he slept? And *why*? It’s been literally a day since this case has fallen into his and Yoongi’s hands. How the *hell* is he already being tailed?
Seokjin had said when this case was handed to Jimin that it had been complicated the first time around. The files clearly show that the case had been buried on purpose, information deliberately suppressed by higher-ups in the police itself. Yoongi, after working obsessively on this to the point where he lost his post in his team, referred to it as a *brick wall* Jimin could break his head on. And now someone was tailing him?

Jimin swallows. Strange, how they gave this to a rookie. This big case, so very important to solving the biggest case on their plates right now. Strange—or maybe this was deliberate, too? Let Jimin fuck it up, then make him the scapegoat for when the media came asking about the Ghost murders. It’s plausible, isn’t it? He’s a rookie without connections or friends in the force, working with a detective who’s known to be a disgrace. It’s a situation where nobody really loses except him. Even Yoongi wouldn’t care—he’s already on his last leg at work, if the rumors about him slacking off in his department is true.

It’s unfair. This case is unfair, the murder itself was horribly unfair, and the fact that Jimin’s straddled with it now because he’s so fucking dispensable is the *most* unfair.

He looks to the files on the seat next to him. Through the transparent plastic of the file, Taehyung’s photo is slightly desaturated, but his smile just as bright as Jimin remembers from last night.

“I’m not going to fuck up,” Jimin mutters to it, a frisson of anger surging through him. “I’m *not*.”

He already has a lead. He’s going to solve this thing if it takes everything he has. And if the other detectives turned against him? Fuck that. They don’t *know* him. They don’t know *anything* about him. Maybe he’s still bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, but he’s not dumb. He’s not dumb, and Yoongi’s not dumb, and Taehyung wasn’t dumb.

The murders need to stop. There has to be a way.

***

Yoongi has a giant whiteboard out and has filled it up with words by the time Jimin makes it to the station, very obviously upset and confused.

Yoongi spares him a glance as he enters, his own palms flush against the swell of his coffee mug, and does a double-take. Jimin’s hair is sticking up like he raked his hands through it, and he holds the case file that Yoongi had given him gingerly, as though expecting it to be ripped out of his arms any moment. His tie is askew. He collapses into Namjoon’s empty chair, not even sparing a greeting in Yoongi’s direction. His mouth is doing a little pout that would be funny if it didn’t look so fucking sad.

“Well, hullo, Detective Park.” Yoongi says, raising an eyebrow, puzzled at this sudden change of personality. “Good morning to you too?”

Jimin tilts his head in a half-hearted glare. His face looks slightly haggard, as though weighed down by the thoughts that run through his mind, doused in fear and kindling with annoyance. He says nothing—just sort of stares at his shoes—and Yoongi lets him be while his sips his coffee and writes a time-line for the case down on the board. He thinks he has an inkling of what this is about.

Yoongi had been surprised, yesterday, at Jimin’s insistence that they work on this case. At the fact that his thoughts had latched onto the idea of *justice*, of eliminating the present danger, rather than what it meant that they were handing this case off to a rookie and a disgraced cop. He’d been flummoxed that Jimin wasn’t upset, that he was actively trying to find a lead, that he had even come looking for Yoongi in the first place.
Maybe it’s cluelessness. Maybe it’s idealism.

Whatever it is, the kid *sure* looks upset now.

Jimin makes a small noise in his throat. “Sunbaenim,” he says, and waits until Yoongi grunts in acknowledgment. “The last time you worked this case, did you feel like you were in danger?”

Yoongi pauses with a hand on the whiteboard. The question seems oddly vile to him, all the syllables twisted and heavy with meaning, and he presses his lips together. “What do you mean?”

Jimin’s jaw clenches. “I feel like omething’s stuck to my shoe.”

“You think someone’s tailing you?”

“I know it.”

Yoongi runs a hand through his hair, suppressing a slow shudder that threatens to ripple through him. “Well, if it’s any comfort, you’re not alone.”

Rising to sit on the very edge of his seat, Jimin looks promptly suspicious. “You too?”

“Found a wire-tap in my living room today morning. That’s why I told you to come early,” Yoongi says. “That, and your new lead. Wanna tell me about it?”

Jimin’s worried still, Yoongi thinks. There’s a definite unhappy twist to his mouth. His fingers as they root through the files for Taehyung’s notebook are aimless, searching without really looking, mind somewhere far off. It’s a completely different picture from the eager-to-please rookie Yoongi had met yesterday. It makes Yoongi feel a little unsettled.

“It helps if you don’t think of it,” Yoongi says. “And if you sleep with a gun under your pillow.”

A roll of the eyes. “Thanks, sunbaenim, that makes me feel so much better.”

There’s a few minutes where Yoongi hangs around feeling awkward. Then he shakes himself out of it and offers Jimin a flask. He spends the time that Jimin wordlessly pours coffee staring into his own mug, as if the dregs in it holds the answers to the entire universe and then some. Is he surprised that someone’s already watching them? He can’t say for sure. This happened, the last time too. Wire taps and interferences on phone calls and faces in the crowds too frequent to be just coincidences. Yoongi had recorded his suspicions. Taehyung had obviously made a string of enemies, both amongst the law and the lawless, and it could be any of them. Perhaps it was whoever in the chain of command being pressured to close the case. Either way, there was really no point worrying about it.

“I can come by your place if you want,” Yoongi offers. “Look for recording equipment. At least you can get a good night’s sleep without fearing you’re being watched.”

Jimin’s eyes flick up. “You’d do that?”

Yoongi shrugs and passes Jimin the flask of coffee. “Not like I’m very busy.”

“Thank you, sunbaenim.”

“I feel old when you call me that,” Yoongi sighs. “Just call me Yoongi.”

“But I’m just a rookie.”

“But you make me feel like a grandpa. I got demoted down here to the underworld before anyone
could start this with me in my old team. It just feels odd.” Yoongi snorts at the unconvinced look on Jimin’s face. “Come on, kid, I’m giving you permission to drop honorifics. Take it and run.”

Jimin frowns. “Yoon-gi,” he tries, and then makes a face. “I don’t like it. Makes me feel weird. Disrespectful.”

Yoongi rolls his eyes. Of course Extraordinary gets a sweet one like this to fuck over. When Yoongi had entered the force, he’d been the problem-child rookie—always doing his own thing and slacking off with paperwork. He doesn’t think he ever made a single cup of coffee for anyone besides himself.

“Call me hyung, then. You’re not much younger than Namjoon and that’s what he does.”

Jimin makes another face at this, mouthing *Yoongi hyung* to see if it fits better. Apparently it does.

He tries it out again.

Yoongi sighs and taps the board. “Yah, focus. Do you want to tell me about the notebook?”

Jimin nods and seems to perk up a little. He opens the notebook to the front page, and Yoongi tamps down on a harsh exhale. It’s battered by now—damp-scored and pages stiff—but he remembers Taehyung carrying this around. He’d written in this thing all the time. Yoongi joked once that he didn’t seem the type to quietly sit and write, of all things, but Taehyung had just smiled and told him that he had a busy mind. Better put it all down, hyung. What if it’s useful to someone, someday?

“So he’s using a script that was part of a 2006 marketing gimmick by a cola company,” Jimin explains. “I was in school, I remembered solving it.”

A marketing gimmick by a *cola* company. How very Tae.

“Show me.”

Jimin does. It’s easy enough, once you knew how it worked, but how the fuck had Taehyung used this like a second language? Yoongi takes the notebook from Jimin and flips through it. There are easily over 200 pages of Taehyung’s cramped, neat handwriting and messy doodles. Six pages that are entirely nothing but what looks like scrambled addresses. One page of phone numbers that go nowhere. Yoongi knows every single page—he’s spent eons poring over this—and he knows there’s a lot here.

“You solved this once in 2006 and remembered it all this time?”

Jimin flushes a bit, embarrassed. “I—I really wanted a bicycle. We drank a lot of cola that year.”

“We?”

“My friend from school. He really wanted a bicycle too,” Jimin rubs sheepishly at the top of his head. “We got really good at this—traded notes in this code and everything.”

Yoongi makes a mental note to check on this story. He’d secretly paid cryptologists to work on this with no luck. And now a rookie comes out of nowhere and knows what it is with a single glance? What are the chances? Jimin seems to guess at Yoongi’s thoughts and shifts uncomfortably in his seat.

“All the kids were into it,” he says defensively. “I won an RC car.”

“No bicycle?”
“Nope.”

Yoongi hums and slides the notebook into an envelope. “We’ll give this to someone in informatics. They have image processing tools that should help us solve this fast.”

“I can drop it off on my way.”

Yoongi waves him off. “I’ll do it. Don’t worry.”

“Are you sure—”

“I’ll do it, Jimin.”

Jimin frowns a little. Yoongi turns back to the white-board. He knows Jimin’s probably suspicious at his insistence, but he doesn’t care. Judging by the few paragraphs that Jimin had translated, the notebook was more or less a personal diary. And if Taehyung’s written about him, about them, then there’s a lot in there that Yoongi wants to see first.

“Ohay, he says, tapping the whiteboard. “Let’s de-construct this bitch.”

The facts are very clear. A reported surge in Extraordinary criminal activity around the Seam in late 2015 had pinged all their radars. Yoongi remembers long nights spent in stakeouts around the worst affected regions, wondering what’s going on. He remembers Hoseok reporting that one of the bodies from a gang attack had not one, but two Extraordinary abilities. Previously unheard of. Things were changing at the Seam, changing for the worst, and no one had any idea why.

“There were some big gangs involved. The Green Dragon. The Folks. The Black Clover. The Ace, though—the hotel came under The Jade Fang.”

“I know that one,” Jimin nods. “They own a few clubs. Their leader’s the one they say is a telekinetic.”

“Puppeteer,” Yoongi says. “Yeah, that’s the one. Anyway, we sort of investigated, trying to figure out the cause—sometimes one gang pisses off the other and before you know it the whole city’s involved and taking sides. We didn’t get much headway. No one was talking, and whatever was happening was strictly hush-hush amongst all the top guns in the gangs. Then we got info that some… material was doing the rounds.”

“The video.”

“Apparently a video. We don’t know. No one in the police has seen it,” Yoongi says, and leans his back against the board. “But a lot of people I interviewed agreed on the content.”

Jimin sucks in a breath. “That it shows how to make someone Extraordinary?”

“Yes.”

“More than just the Extraordinaries would kill for that. Hell, I might,” Jimin whispers, and then flinches as he realizes what he said. “I mean—”

“I know what you mean.”

Yoongi nods reassuringly at him when Jimin peeks through his bangs, clearly trying to gauge if he’s pissed Yoongi off. It’s not entirely the most tactful thing to say—not with the case they’re currently working—but Yoongi’s heard worse. He’s tuned it out, feels about as much emotion when someone
says this as he might feel for a piece of orange rind—but he can’t ever understand it. The idea of being Extraordinary makes his skin crawl and his head spin. Having that sort of ability to lash out and cause hurt…no matter how fancy the power, no matter how much stronger and better it might make him, he’s seen and heard enough and more terrifying stories that he loathes it. It makes things unequal. Power, money, Extraordinariness—they’re all factors that Yoongi’s always suspicious of. They’re what gives you the world, but they’re also what makes you think the world owes you. A simpler world, a utopian world, would have none of the three.

People shook their heads and smiled at him when he said this. Unrealistic, they said, but sweet. Didn’t know you had an idealist in you, Min.

It isn’t idealism, though. If anything, it’s the opposite. Yoongi knows worlds like that didn’t exist. If it had, Taehyung would still be alive.

(But even Taehyung had found it funny, Yoongi’s conviction that the three things everyone yearned for was in truth the scourge of the world. Once he’d asked, sitting across the table at their usual cafe: “If you could be Extraordinary, hyung, what would you be?”

“Nothing. You know how I feel about that.”

“Oh, come on,” Taehyung had wheedled, gaze imploring. “You must have thought of one thing. Just as—as a thought experiment. For fun. Tell me.”

“Sleep,” Yoongi muttered. “I’d sleep forever, and only wake up for food, and I wouldn’t need money or work or anything to survive.”

“That’s so unrealistic. That’s not even a power. That’s just Sleeping Beauty without a Prince Charming.”

“You said thought experiment. That means I can make up shit.”

Taehyung’s little candy pout is very endearing. “Yeah, but why can’t you just say something like invisibility? Or super strength? Who wants to just sleep?”

Yoongi bit back a smile. “You tell me then, Taehyung-ah. What would you be? If you were Extraordinary?”

“I’d have Happiness. Make everyone happy,” Taehyung frowned, probably thinking up the ins and outs of this, because he just had to figure out all angles to it—Yoongi could tell. “If you’re happy, you don’t do bad shit. If you’re happy, then all of the things you mentioned—power, and money, and Extraordinariness—wouldn’t matter.”

“How the hell is Happiness a real power?”

Taehyung said, dead-pan, “Thought experiment.”

“And you think sleep is unrealistic. What the fuck, Tae.”)

Yoongi sighs. It’s unfair how sometimes you remember people so well—even if they’ve been gone longer than you’d known them.

He turns his focus to Jimin now and finds him inspecting something on the board. “It says here that Taehyung asked to see you. Five days before the incident in the hotel.”

Incident. Not murder. Jimin sure liked euphemisms more than the average cop.
“Yes.”

“What happened?”

“He asked me to meet him. It was a little weird.”

***

2015

5 DAYS, 9 HOURS, 22 MINUTES

“Please get the phone, hyung.”

“I’m eating.”

“No, you’re not. Please just get it, hyung.”

“Jin hyung, can you—?”

“I have a face-mask on. You get it, Namjoon.”

“But—”

“You heard him, Namjoon-ah. Now get the fucking phone.”

A grumble. Yoongi looks up from where he’s curled up in his chair around a bowl of rice gone long cold and sees Namjoon blearily reach for the phone. The results of last few nights’ stakeout is clearly visible in the purple shadows beneath his eyes.

He throws Yoongi a disgusted look as he answers, “Hullo?”

Yoongi tears open a packet of sauce with his teeth. His head is a buzzing swamp of halfway thoughts, all served heavy with a side dish of exhaustion. He yawns, and then jumps as Namjoon thumps his fist on the table.

“What?”

“It’s your boyfriend.”

Yoongi snorts, even as his heart skips a very unwanted, very unwarranted beat. “Who, Taehyung? Ha. *Finally.*”

Namjoon says, into the phone, “We’ve been trying to get a hold of you. Where you been, kid?” He pauses to listen to something Taehyung says and then barks a laugh. “I don’t know if I should be offended or amused.”

Yoongi holds his hand out for the phone, stifling another yawn with his hand. Across him, Jin blinks owlishly through the eye-holes on his sheet mask, clearly interested in this phone call.

“Hi Yoongi hyung,” Taehyung says, chirpily, when Yoongi barks out a gruff *hullo*, “Heard you wanted to talk to me.”

“Been long enough,” Yoongi grumps, even as his stomach does a flip at Taehyung’s voice. “I’ve
been emailing you, asking you to call me since three days ago. And it’s *Detective Min* to you, kid.”

“*Right.* Because I’m calling from a place where it’s such a good idea to let that slip,” Taehyung drawls, and Yoongi can hear a rhythmic *beeping* in the background. A rumble of trucks. *Tollbooth?* He scribbles on a piece of paper, and Namjoon looks at it and shrugs. “You’ve been ignoring me lately, hyung. You know I get lonely.”

“We don’t have your personal number,” Yoongi bluffs. “I’d have invited you to the potluck last Friday if we did. Seokjin hyung made hotpot. I made lamb skewers. Namjoon got us beer ice-cream.”

“Aw. You’re seriously the worst.”

There’s a pause then, a muffled sort of interference, as if Taehyung has his fingers splayed over the phone’s transmitter. *Payphone,* Yoongi writes down. Namjoon nods and takes the pencil from him. *Ask him about video,* he writes. They wait while Taehyung speaks to someone in the background. His voice still has that sickly sweet fake twang, and Yoongi wonders if it’s one of Taehyung’s purported “clients”—just another wrong-side-of-the-tracks john with too much cash to spare.

Sure enough, in a minute Taehyung giggles low and filthy, says something too soft for Yoongi to make out. Yoongi clenches his fist around the heavy glass paperweight on his desk. He leans forward when Taehyung uncovers his hand from the phone again.

“Sorry, hyung, something came up—I miss you! Take me on a date!” Taehyung crows into the phone. He sounds utterly false and chill as fuck. Yoongi wants very badly to punch him a bit.

“You wanna meet today?”

“Dinner?”

Yoongi flexes his fingers. “Not coffee?”

“It’s always coffee with you,” Taehyung grumbles. “Let’s switch it up a bit. There’s a new Japanese hole in the wall, in the usual street. I’ll dress fancy.”

Yoongi frowns. “I’ll dress…like me.”

Taehyung drops his voice. “I like those jeans with the holes in the knees.”

“I like your beige sweater with the long sleeves.”

“Ah, hyung. Will you wear a mask?”

Namjoon taps frantically on the *Ask him about the Video* note. Yoongi ignores him. “Should I bring my gun?”

Taehyung giggles. “You know I like the cuffs best.”

Namjoon, standing close enough that he can catch Taehyung’s voice spilling out of the receiver, makes a little gagging motion. Yoongi ignores him again. “I’ll get my Taser too. Just to make sure you’re being a good boy.”

A tinkling laugh. “I’ll be on my best behavior for you. Seven. Tonight.”

The line goes dead. Namjoon twirls the cable around his fingers, frowning gently as he thinks. “He said dinner. That’s weird.”
“Yeah. Since when does Taehyung switch things up?” Yoongi asks, rolling his neck on his shoulders and wincing when his muscles crick. “It’s coffee in the same place, same table, same time always or nothing. And he wants me armed, just not the gun. Dress casual but cover my face. It’s odd.”

Namjoon looks from him to Seokjin, deep concern settling in his eyes. “It is a bit odd—he says he’ll dress fancy, which is unusual. Taehyung dresses to blend in.”

“He does.”

“Are you going to be okay, going alone?”

Yoongi frowns. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Because Taehyung’s a charmer and you’re not invincible.” There’s something too knowing in Namjoon’s smirk. “You know you need to press him about that shit with the video, yes?”

Yoongi checks his watch. It’s nearly five. He’ll need an hour to drive to the Seam, and half an hour to get ready and make sure he isn’t carrying anything that might spook Taehyung away. He begins to pack his work bag.

“Hyung?”

“God, yes, Namjoon. I’m not two years old.”

For a minute Yoongi thinks Namjoon will bring up something that will make him flounder. Something about how Taehyung flirts so openly with him, for one. Or about how Yoongi gets antsy when he doesn’t call, when he disappears off their radar—checking every news article he can get, watching CCTV feeds from the Seam.

He’s still a criminal, Yoongi expects Namjoon to say. You’re getting in too fucking deep.

But Namjoon just purses his lips, jaw tensing, until he lets out his breath in a whoosh and rolls his eyes. “I’m just saying. We’ve interviewed everyone we can, and I can’t stand any more stakeouts. You need to focus. Kim Taehyung and his all-seeing eyes are probably our only hope.”

“Don’t say that,” Yoongi groans. “He once tipped me some info to ambush this mind-control guy running a sex ring. Then he tipped the guy’s dudes that I’m onto them, so they moved base before I even got there.”

Seokjin frowns. The mask slips a little off his face. “What was even the point?”

“He gave me a five minute head-start. Literally counted the seconds down. Kid thrives on chaos.”

“We’ll have him in the station one day. On the other side of the bars,” Jin says, sighing as he leans backward and shuts his eyes. “For now—he’s soft on you, Yoongi. Use that. Get something out of him. He has to have heard something.”

Namjoon’s smile is acerbic. “He always has. He’ll want a nice, juicy secret in return, though, so what are we willing to sacrifice?”

“Leave that to me.”

“Don’t give him anything too important.”

“He’s not dumb, Joon-ah. He’ll weigh my secret and give me one that weighs exactly the same.
What are we gonna do with something useless then, huh?"

Namjoon settles dramatically into his chair. “This world is unfair. We’re the police. Kid should be telling us everything he knows, not playing us like a fiddle.”

Seokjin stretches lazily and pats his mask back into place. “It’s that sense of right that will get you murdered one day, Kim Namjoon.”

As he finishes packing, Yoongi wonders what Taehyung does know. The streets of the area by the Han river called the Seam have been thrumming with tension for days now. There’s been fires, a riot, multiple instances of gang violence. An Extraordinary named the Crow had murdered and strung up three people on a transmission line just last night.

It is, to quote Seokjin, a fucking wild mess.

Something’s stirring all the bastards up—all the unregistered, rogue Extraordinaries clogging up the veins of the city. And the whispers of this video is the only lead they have. Is it even possible? Could normal people be made Extraordinary? Yoongi—and general science—has always assumed that they’re born this way. That the power is innate, written in the genes. How did one get made Extraordinary?

Yoongi shakes his head, trying to clear it as he waves to the others and walks out of the office. He’s meeting Taehyung in less than two hours. He has to have a clear head for that, or the kid will talk all over him, pry words out of him that Yoongi never means to say, and then disappear into the smoky streets of the Seam before Yoongi can ask him about anything that actually matters.

Things are changing. He can feel it. Things are evolving. The Seam is overflowing with violence, and Kim Taehyung’s their key to this shit—always is, always has been.

Yoongi just needs to figure out how to make him click.

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2015

5 DAYS, 6 HOURS, 43 MINUTES

Kid’s slurping a giant bowl of curry udon when Yoongi finds him at five past seven.

Kim Taehyung sits in a corner booth in the tiny shop, a tall glass of matcha ice tea in front of him, frowning thoughtfully at his noodles as Yoongi walks towards him. The shop smells strongly of meat and okonomiyaki sauce, and there’s a woman behind the counter working fire with her fingers as she grills pork. Across the street, a cart selling mandu rolls slowly forward by itself while its proprietor smokes and follows it at a lazy pace.

Yoongi’s always troubled by the display of Extraordinary ability in the Seam. In the rest of Seoul, those with powers keep to themselves, Ordinaries are more common, and the most display of talent Yoongi sees is his Starbucks barista’s attempts at bad cop cartoons on his coffee cups. Here, though…

As he had been walking towards the restaurant, a child had jumped clear from one side of the road to the other, legs pedaling in the air, and Yoongi had felt his breath catch—just for an instance—just enough to remind him how his mind still rebels against these anomalies.

He feels out of his depth. Watched and judged, deemed lesser because he has nothing in his arsenal
except his government-issued gun and some lazy memories of childhood taekwondo.

He wonders how it must be for Taehyung. Taehyung, who’s not a visitor in this part of town but a resident, who walks and talks and deals with Extraordinaries all day long. How does he stand it? How does he not break under their gazes? He must be made of sterner stuff than Yoongi.

Taehyung looks up when Yoongi enters.

It’s always like a punch to the gut, how innocent he looks. Big, curious eyes and an easy-smiling mouth, pink lips very kissable. His newly dyed red hair falls starkly into his eyes. It should make him look harder, older: undercuts and bright hair colors did that to most people. Somehow, on Taehyung, the red just makes him look young and vulnerable.

“Hi,” he says, and sounds so very fond. “Hi, hyung.”

Yoongi tries not to think of what his heart is doing in his chest, unfettered by the guardrails of bone and blood and stone cold logic. If it wants to tear its way out of his ribcage, half-drunk on whatever it is that the sight of Kim Taehyung does to him, nothing Yoongi’s brain can come up with can stop it.


Thirty minutes. That’s how much time Taehyung usually gives him.

Yoongi propels himself forward, and slides into the booth opposite Taehyung.

He frowns. Taehyung really does look fancy. He’s worn the beige sweater like Yoongi’s instructed, but he’s also wearing a thick, tight steel choker that catches light and glints. There’s a silver ring in his lower lip and another in his left eyebrow, and a large ear-cuff curves around the shell of his right ear. There’s a smattering of glitter on his face as well—gold across his cheekbones and on his eyelids, stark against his brown skin—and Yoongi gives a gentle snort as he settles into the seat opposite him.

“Are times hard for you, Taehyung-ssi? Did your rates drop?”

Taehyung pouts. “Don’t make whore jokes, hyung, it isn’t you. Do I look nice?”

He does look nice. He always does. He’s possibly the prettiest thing Yoongi has ever seen, and even Namjoon’s admitted once or twice that it’s a fucking shame he’s so caught up in the wrong side of things.

“You look alive, Tae,” he grunts, “which is a miracle considering all the crap you pull.”

“Thanks? I guess? And here I thought you might like my little choker and all.” Taehyung plays with his leather bracelets, and there’s silence for a few seconds while Yoongi tries not to look at his choker. “Ooh. Did you bring Namjoon hyung again so he could sulk in a corner and watch us?”

“No, not today. He thought it was embarrassing enough that you found him out the last time. Just you and me and Siri today.”

“I’m glad. I like Namjoon hyung. I wouldn’t want him to feel like a third wheel when he could be doing more useful things with that brain of his.”

“He’s not a third wheel.”

Taehyung waves a hand dismissively. “Don’t pretend like you wouldn’t rather it be just you and me,
hyung.”

Yoongi crosses his arms and leans against the wall. He’s not taking that bait. “Really, though, what’s up with all the glitter, Tinkerbell?”

Taehyung drops his gaze and mutters something. It sounds almost suspiciously like he likes me like this. He could be talking about a random rich john with some sort of drag fetish, but it is oddly frightening to contemplate someone like him in love. Taehyung’s a loose cannon with no true allegiances or affiliations. The day he pledges loyalty to something or someone—through affection or otherwise—is the day Yoongi needs to put a bullet in his devastatingly intelligent brain.

Honestly, he doesn’t want to. Hasn’t in a long time.

It’s not just that Taehyung’s sort of come to mean something to him. Not just that every time Yoongi even looks at him, his treacherous heart skips enough beats that it could legit be a medical problem.

It’s not just that.

Taehyung’s a hard guy to predict, but Yoongi likes to think most of his show of affection is genuine despite them being on warring sides. The idea of this bright, weird creature dying is something impermissible—like imagining shooting a puppy. Putting a light out from the world. Some horrible cheesy shit like that.

Still, if he had to, Yoongi likes to think that he would. He’s not a cop for no reason. For now, though, he lets his gaze snag on Taehyung’s expressive mouth, and the gentle spill of his firelight hair across dark, strong brows.

“How’s everyone doing?” Taehyung asks, brightly. “Seokjin hyung and Hoseok hyung—are they still dating?”

Yoongi’s still staring at his mouth. He makes himself stop.

“No,” says Yoongi, eyeing Taehyung’s matcha. He’s thirsty. He doesn’t trust this place or this boy enough to take a sip. “They broke up. It wasn’t dating, anyway. They just had an—ah—an—arrangement.”

“Like us.”

“Like…yeah. Like us.”

“Ah. I always shipped Namjin anyway,” Taehyung winks, carefully wrapping a noodle around his chopstick. “How’s Yoona noona? Does her dog still walk into walls?”

Yoongi bites his tongue to stop himself from asking how Taehyung knows all this. He knows the answer. Taehyung will just shrug and say I have friends, and Yoongi knows that’s true. Taehyung has friends. Taehyung makes friends at the same velocity and frequency that Namjoon breaks things. Which should be humanly impossible, but here they are. Namjoon’s wondered if Taehyung has an Extraordinary ability that’s some variant of mind-control, but Yoongi’s met some of these friends and they genuinely like Taehyung. Kid’s a social butterfly.

“Hoseok hyung sent me a pretty gory pic the other day,” Taehyung continues, watching Yoongi carefully. “It was so stupid—I checked my phone right before I went down on someone. Really shouldn’t have. Lost me a few easy bucks.”

He bluffs sometimes. Yoongi can accurately tell when he’s bluffing for about eighty percent of the
time, but sometimes he thinks there are layers of bluffs with Taehyung. There’s the character-building, I’m-just-a-ditz-y-pretty-boy bluffs that’s easy to see through. Then there’s the poker-faced lying that sometimes throws Yoongi for a loop. Taehyung looks simple, but he has a mind like a spike-toothed eel. Yoongi knows to tread carefully around it.

“Hoseok doesn’t have your number.”

That bright, brilliant smile. “Ah. But I have his.”

Yoongi canvases the surroundings with a practiced, careful eye. No one looks too suspicious—the patrons look normal bent over their bowls or wolfing meat off skewers, and the waiters are mostly waifish young girls. The fire-worker behind the counter is frowny-faced and looks disagreeable, but then that’s a pretty normal look in this part of the city. Or in any part of the city. Yoongi probably looks just as grumpy and disagreeable as her every morning before his coffee.

“I didn’t tip anyone off,” Taehyung chuckles, noticing him. “Don’t worry, hyung. Aren’t you eating?”

“I don’t trust you.”

“To what, poison you?” Taehyung looks miffed. “I’d never do that, hyung. I’d never hurt you.”

“Yeah? I distinctly remember you saying you have no loyalties.”

Taehyung’s gaze flicks up to meet his. “I make some exceptions. For special people.”

Yoongi narrows his eyes. “You’re being remarkably more suspicious than usual today.”

Up close, there is an ashen tinge to Taehyung’s skin. His beautiful makeup doesn’t truly mask the purple under his eyes either. When he places his hands flat on the table, his long fingers shake, and that means one of three things—he’s sick, he’s on drugs, or he’s scared.

Yoongi doesn’t know which is worse.

“And you’re very quiet today, hyung.”

“Fine, I’ll make conversation. Why dinner?”

“Didn’t feel like coffee.”

“Why the makeup?”

“I wanted to doll up a bit. Pretty clothes and makeup keeps me happy. You know that.”

“Do I? I know you hide behind those, Tae. Come on. Straight answer. What’s up with this?”

Taehyung smiles, though the tightening of his jaw tells Yoongi that he knows he’s already lost the game. “Shiseido now has just the right foundation for my skin. It’s a marvel, really. I no longer need to look like cake.”

“You’ve got a knife in your boot and a blade hidden under your sweater,” Yoongi says, and grabs his wrist as Taehyung’s eyes widen a bit. “What’s up with you?”

“You’ve been checking me out,” Taehyung says, coyly, but doesn’t pull his hand away. “It’s you who wanted to see me, hyung. I’ve got six numbers and you texted me on every single one. Mailed me twice too. It seems pretty needy when you do that, you know? Very stalker crush.”
“Stop bluffing, Tae. You’re worrying me now.”

A smear of light hits Taehyung’s choker and scatters a constellation of stars on his skin. Yoongi watches them, follows the light as it moves across Taehyung’s mouth, bobbing gently at a spot below his jaw. His gaze catches on that choker—the baroque lace edges of it, then the steel, and a little hexagonal ruby that drops right between Taehyung’s collarbones. There’s something about it. About the placement.

“Taehyung-ah,” Yoongi says, leaning forward a bit, his grasp tightening on Taehyung’s wrist. His skin is very warm to touch. Very warm, and easy to bruise. “Before I get into all that, can you take that thing off for a minute?”

“Was wondering when you’d ask,” Taehyung says, and takes a sip of the ice tea. His free hand reaches up to brush his hair away, tinkering with the clasp of the thing.

And Yoongi knows. Even as Taehyung fiddles with the clasp he knows.

“Don’t freak out, hyung.”

It’s hard not to. Hard not to feel a little frisson of fear, a little wariness. Hard not to give weight to the bad feeling growing in his chest, subtle as rain on the river, but building higher and higher, prone to flooding. Taehyung’s fingers are still tangled with Yoongi’s, and he’s chewing on his lip. It’s a nervous tic that Yoongi’s seen mentioned in Taehyung’s case file. That twists Yoongi up even further. If Taehyung is nervous…

“Please, hyung.”


Taehyung takes the choker off, slowly, never breaking Yoongi’s gaze.

There’s a scar on his throat. It curves softly, almost elegantly, like a gentle second smile. The line of stitches that holds the wound shut is a pale baby blue.

The gasp sticks in Yoongi’s chest. The wound doesn’t mar the long column of Taehyung’s throat as much as accentuate it, calls attention to it— to him, and who he now belongs to. Taehyung drops his gaze. He looks abashed, brows pulling together in vague guilt. A sudden wave of fear and annoyance tries to pull Yoongi under.

“What the fuck, Taehyung.”

“Hear me out, hyung, please—”

“The rules of this arrangement are simple. We let you be, give you some witness protection, as long as you’re not sworn to any one gang. And here you’ve gone and allied yourself with—who is it?”

“The Seagull,” Taehyung says, a little more dully than normal, puppy-eyed as he distracts himself with food. “It’s not a gang, it’s—”

“That group of hoodlums headed by the emo Extraordinary kid. I know. Why?”

“Because he can hide people.”

“We can hide people,” Yoongi says, livid. “If you wanted to disappear so bad, why didn’t you just
come to us?”

Taehyung laughs, weakly. “Last I checked, hyung, you’re still the cops. And I’m a snitch, but I’m not a snitch with a death wish. Anyway, you can’t hide me from this. I need the Seagull.”

“Hide you from what?”

“Give me my secret first.”

“What? Taehyung—”

“You know that’s how it works,” Taehyung says, instantly cold and all business, pulling his hand out of Yoongi’s grip and folding his arms across his chest. “A secret for a secret.”

Yoongi fumes. But Taehyung’s just watching him now, one eyebrow quirked and his cheeks flushed, leveling him with a blank expression.

“Fine,” Yoongi grumbles. “I looked into the man you told me about. Last sightings of him place him in Dubai. I put out an alert with someone I know in Dubai customs, and if he moves back to Korea we’ll know. That good enough for you? Now tell me. What do you want to hide so badly from?”

“The thing you wanted to talk to me about,” Taehyung says, and pushes his bowl away. “The video. The violence. They think I know something.”

Yoongi sits up straighter, leaning to close the distance between them. “Do you?”

Taehyung blanches. It’s the slightest thing: his expression barely changes, but Yoongi can tell the difference anyway. “I can’t work this case for you,” he mutters. “I’m in too much danger.”

Yoongi breathes in, harshly. He’d been afraid of this. “What do you know?”

“I know it’s real,” Taehyung says, eyes darting lightly to the side like he imagines someone is watching him. “The video is real. One of the gangs has it.”

“Which one?”

“The White Lily.”

“What are they planning to do with it?”

Taehyung squirms. “Expand? Experiment? I’m not sure. But the others want it. The Jade Fang, Clovers—they’re all after it. It’s almost war here.”

That would explain it. Yoongi nods, frantically, trying to think of who he knows in The White Lily. Nobody comes to mind. It’s not a name he knows, which in itself is rather weird, and its leader isn’t anyone Yoongi can think of instantly.

“And why do you think you’re in danger?”

Taehyung hesitates. “Hyung—”

Yoongi pulls his phone from his pocket. “Look. I’m turning off the recording. You can tell me off record. I know you trust me—”

Taehyung’s smile becomes pained. “You can’t—”
“I can’t not know,” Yoongi says, desperately. “Please tell me.”

Silence for a minute. Taehyung fiddles with his fingers, bites on his lip again. His gaze is downcast. His voice is so, so quiet when he speaks again, the smile on his mouth faltering. “Because I’ve seen it, hyung.”

“The…the video?”

“The video.”

_Fuck._ “Are there people who know you’ve seen it?”

Taehyung’s voice breaks. “Yes.”

They’d kill him for information, the gangs. Kill him or worse. Yoongi feels ice jamming his veins. It’s a struggle to speak. “I think it’s best if you come with me.”

“Thought you might say that,” Taehyung says, smiling a watery smile. “You know I can’t. I got you something, though.”

He undoes the ear-cuff. Smuggled into the hollow of the metal is a tube of paper, which he flicks gently at Yoongi. Yoongi pushes it under the dial of his watch. He can check its contents later.

“Taehyung-ah. Listen—” Yoongi starts, but then there’s gunfire. Loud and sharp, in staccato bursts—from a machine gun. Yoongi jumps up, reaching for his gun. Around him, the other patrons drop their chopsticks and rise up too, craning to see what’s going on outside.

“What the fuck?”

“Get down, hyung.” Taehyung hisses, eyes going wide. “You can’t be seen with me.”

Yoongi ducks beneath the table, and for a moment Taehyung is there with him, eyes wide and a finger to his lips. Yoongi sees booted feet moving past their table. The voices cease, everything going deathly silent within the restaurant. Someone screams from outside and is silenced in seconds. The scent of frying meat tangles with gun-smoke.

Yoongi sends a quick text to Namjoon. Just an alert, and a geotag. When he looks up again, Taehyung’s only millimeters from him, gaze very soft.

Yoongi studies his face. There’s something in it, some sort of emotion beyond any veneer of playful demeanor and parlor tricks. His assuring smile is clever and strange and just a bit melancholy—like someone studying a game they’ve lost, looking for how they might have changed things if second chances came around. Taehyung touches his jaw lightly. His eyes are made even darker by the purple shadows beneath the table. He leans in, and his breath is a warm tickle in Yoongi’s ear.

“I’m really sorry, hyung,” he says, and it’s the most honest thing Yoongi’s ever heard from him. “But I can’t work this case. You understand why.”

Yoongi thinks of grabbing onto him. The department needs Taehyung—it’s no joke how much. More than that, though, Yoongi’s known him since he joined the force two years ago. Yoongi’s always handled this—handled him. And in all that time, Taehyung’s always been chill-as-you-please and unflappable. Yoongi’s never seen him scared, never seen him try to disappear.

He doesn’t like it.
Taehyung says, “I’m so sorry, hyung. I have to go now. I’ll be in touch.”

There’s a shout from somewhere, and a burst of fire. Heat licks around Yoongi’s ankles, and then it’s ice, spreading rapidly over the floor of the restaurant. He hears metal bend and break, wood splinter, and a high, sweet voice singing. It’s all confusing—too many powers clashing, too much all at once. He feels a strange sort of heaviness in his limbs, a cloying sense of sleepiness. Someone outside yells Taehyung’s name. Glass shatters. The singing rises in volume.

Yoongi’s slightly drowsy, and he wonders if he imagines the sudden sparkle of tears in Taehyung’s eyes, the soft brush of Taehyung’s lips against the corner of his mouth. The whispered goodbye.

It probably is just his imagination.

When he blinks again, Taehyung’s gone.

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PRESENT

Jimin leans back in Namjoon’s chair, frowning as he tries to process everything. “And then the next time you saw him was…?”

Yoongi’s jaw is clenched. “The hotel.”

“Hmm.”

There’s a lot in there. The note that Taehyung had given Yoongi is another scrambled message that led to a nowhere place called the Eden House. An old building in Bucheon, it meant nothing to either Yoongi or the other investigators who stripped and searched the place inside out. The gang, The White Lily, never surfaced under police investigation. Taehyung had refused to pass on information to the police—fearing danger to himself—and for five days he’d been impossible to contact.

“And then, on the fifth day, he called and asked for protection in exchange for information.”

“What changed?”

Yoongi’s gaze is far away. “I don’t know.”

Jimin studies the time-line. 29th December, 2015, Taehyung calls for help. He’s not put through to Yoongi but to the detective on duty that night—a man who’s transferred to Ilsan precinct since. The detective patches him to Extraordinary Crimes, and it’s Seokjin who finally ends up on the call.

“He said there’s a meeting at the Ace,” Yoongi explains. “A sort of all-hands for those who might mutually benefit. The White Lily was in hiding, Tae said, but the other gangs were certain they could be found if those standing to gain worked together. He said he’d give us names of those in attendance, in return for political asylum outside the country.”

“That sounds foolhardy.”

“I’ve never understood it myself,” Yoongi says. “Taehyung knew he was in danger. Why would he offer to go anywhere near that place? But by then the chief of police and our superintendent was involved, so I doubt he had much choice. He’d offered a deal, the police had taken it, and now he had to follow through. I told him—I told him that myself. They made me.”
Jimin doesn’t call out the shake in Yoongi’s voice. “And the names?”

“We never got them.”

Jimin nods. “So that’s what we need to know, then. The veracity of this video, the people after Taehyung, and the ones who attended the meeting in the Ace. Is there CCTV in the hotel?”

“Do you think I didn’t try? All wiped.”

“And this Seagull person. Did you get a chance to talk to him?”

“In hiding,” Yoongi says, sighing. “I’ve paid half a dozen gangs to call me if there’s any news of the boy. I don’t have a face to him, nor a name. Just that stupid moniker.”

“Did you check black boxes on delivery trucks?”

“Wiped, too.”

“Fingerprints? Crime scene forensics?”

Yoongi slumps against the wall. “No identifiable prints. Section Chief blocked us on investigating further, citing we had already contaminated the crime scene during the—the unauthorized Operation.”

Jimin blows into his palms, sudden frustration coiling in his chest. “DNA? I know there are no—there are no forensic reports. Other than the meager stuff that Hoseok hyung got you. But could they have conducted DNA testing whose results they didn’t supply?”

A little shudder makes its way up Yoongi’s spine. “It’s possible. There’s no way to know, though. Not without breaking into the medical examiner’s archives.”

Jimin shrugs. “I could do that.”

Yoongi looks at him incredulously. “Don’t be silly.”

“They denied you information illegally. So maybe we should go obtain it illegally, too.”

Yoongi balks. “Where the hell is your police integrity, kid?”

Jimin shrugs again. If they had foisted this case on him, expecting him to fuck up as he thinks they did, then his integrity could as well go die in a ditch. People are still dying from the Ghost murders. If this isn’t solved, that goes nowhere, and the danger mounts. What’s one stolen case file and a possible suspension against that?

Yoongi’s glare is piercing. “This is no time for idiocy. Jimin-ah, if you do something silly like that and get caught, then this case falls into someone else’s lap. Someone who can be bribed to take the fall for mismanaging it.”

“Still—if they’ve done DNA, that would help narrow who was in the hotel—”

“The fact that you gave me a proper lead is the only reason I don’t suspect you of already having taken a bribe,” Yoongi hisses. “And honestly, I’d rather a rookie working this case with me than a compromised officer who’d sabotage me.”

“Do you have such little faith in the system, hyung?”
“Don’t you get it? My faith in the system died with this case,” Yoongi snaps. “It’s all dead ends. And if it isn’t a dead end today, it becomes one tomorrow.”

Jimin throws up his hands. “You’ve given up on this, haven’t you?”

A flash of anger crosses Yoongi’s face. “Given up?” he squeaks, swallowing convulsively. “Given up? This is just a bunch of papers and a neat little puzzle to you, Jimin. I knew this boy. I knew him. If your team is going to throw a bone at this case and me again, then I won’t let you fuck it up. Not if you want to. Not if they want you to. Do you understand that?”

Yoongi’s voice rises a little, and he seems to realize it, clenching his fists to his side. He takes a breath and lets it loose. Then he pinches the bridge of his nose and grunts, “Just…we’ll deal with it all the right way. No stealing medical reports. Okay? We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.”

“We’re in the middle of the metaphorical bridge right now. You can’t say no to every avenue of investigation I think of. You can’t go at this case with the same speed you’ve been working your other cold cases—”

Yoongi looks livid. “Park Jimin. Don’t you dare steal. Don’t you dare get suspended.” His voice cracks a little, and there’s something hectic in his face, suddenly, a maelstrom of emotions twisting his features. “This case means too fucking much to me. It’s hard enough to reopen it. Hard enough to talk about him. Don’t you dare go jeopardizing it or suggest that I don’t care for it. Do you think I want to say no to everything you suggest? I’m just trying not to be delusional!”

Irritation curdles his stomach. If they solved this, if they found enough cause to at least warrant a search for the hotel, then they could get archive records if any. Then they could be so much closer to catching the killer who mattered right now. This case is a stepping stone to a bigger one, the cold companion to a burning hot problem, and he can’t believe that Yoongi doesn’t see it that way. He can’t believe that everyone is just sitting on their thumbs, letting the murders happen, whether the victims are criminals or not. Did being from the Seam automatically make you a public offender? Is that how the system works? Shouldn’t there be justice for everyone, Seam or not?

It’s the annoyance that forces Jimin to ask it. “Is it true, then?”

“Is what true?”

“What the detectives in Extraordinary say about you,” Jimin says, breezily. “About you and Taehyung—”

The look Yoongi throws him is pure venom. “Think very carefully of what you say next.”

Jimin sucks in a slow, shuddering breath. He looks from Yoongi—with his purple-shadowed eyes and pale face, rage and sadness twisting his mouth—to the spill of photographs and papers on the desk in front of him. A creeping sensation of awfulness strikes his chest.

He’s in a foul mood today, and it’s clouding up his head. He’s not sure what brought it on—the events of the morning, perhaps; or the unfairness writ across this case files. Whatever it is, it’s impairing his judgment. He does want to unwork this puzzle, disentangle it and present it to his teammates as a little fuck you. He does want to get to catching the Ghost as fast as possible. But Yoongi is right—it’s not worth jeopardizing the case. Not when it’s only just been reopened again. Not when Taehyung’s waited so long for justice.

“I’m sorry,” Jimin says, and means it. “I’m sorry, hyung. I crossed a line.”

Yoongi shivers and shakes his head. “Fuck it, it doesn’t matter.”
“Hyung, I mean it.”

“I know. Just... stop being an idiot. Go—take a break. Look through the files again. See if there’s anything that stands out to you that we should have looked at—like the DNA evidence—which we couldn’t because of whatever happened. Maybe things will be different now, and we can try legal channels. No stealing.”

“No stealing.”

“I’ll see you in the evening.”

Up in his own team’s office, Seokjin’s monitoring a bunch of CCTV feeds in the Seam and almost all the seats are empty. Jimin walks into a wasteland of empty coffee cups and chips packets, papers strewn around and files disarrayed. Amid the chaos, Seokjin sits serenely at his desk, clacking away on his computer.

“Where did everyone go?”

“There’s been another murder,” Seokjin says. “The boss of the Black Clovers. Hoseok’s on the scene for the body. The others all went to see and scout the area for any evidence.”

Jimin turns to the door. “Oh. Should I—?”

“Oh, no. Section chief told me to tell you to stay put and work on the Starling case. How’s that going, anyway?”

“Oh, swimmingly well, hyung,” Jimin lies, dropping into his chair. He sees Seokjin look over the top of his screen at him and shrugs. “Or as well as it can, at least. Hey, can I ask you a question?”

Seokjin raises an eyebrow in question. “I don’t know, can you?”

“May I,” Jimin corrects, offering no attempt at resistance. “May I, please, hyung?”

Seokjin’s fingers fly gracefully across the keyboard. He flashes a smile. “Sure. I like questions.”

“How come Namjoon and Yoongi both get demoted but not you? What happened? Didn’t you work the case with them?”

A small chuckle spills from Seokjin’s mouth. “Oh. That,” he says, quietly. “I worked with Taehyung while he was alive. Just like Yoongi and Namjoon. I did not, however, share a like-minded obsession with solving his death. You have to remember that it isn’t Operation Starling that got them demoted. It’s not Yoongi storming into that hotel with twenty cops he could’ve gotten killed that caused his exile. It’s what followed.” Seokjin rests his elbows against the desk and yawns prettily. “The relentless flouting of rules to pursue this case. The loud accusations of information suppression. Two celebrated cops, giving undue importance to the death of somebody who—for all intents and purposes— was from the wrong side of the tracks. It was only a matter of time before I would get affected, and I had to pull the plug and ask myself to be removed from the investigation before that happened. Oh, they haven’t forgiven me,” Seokjin leans forward and says, almost conspiratorially, “But sometimes, to make sure you get ahead in life, you’ve got to keep your head down. Nod along to the whims of those with greater power than you. That’s something neither Namjoon or Yoongi seem to understand. The question is, Park Jimin, do you?”

“I thought being the police was about loving the truth.”

Seokjin winks. “But truth doesn’t make money, Jimin-ah. Nor happiness.”
Jimin plops his head down on his desk. What is Jin saying? That all cops—perhaps save for Yoongi and Namjoon—are corrupt? That the greed for wealth and prestige is the thrum at the baseline for these people?

“Even if he was on the wrong side of the tracks, he didn’t deserve to die,” Jimin says, after a long while. “Nobody deserves that. To die alone, and scared, and in pain. Nobody.”

There’s a little quirk in Seokjin’s gaze as he pats Jimin’s arm. “Oh, I agree. Believe me, Jimin-ah, I agree. There are just smarter ways to avenge someone. Getting exiled to the shittiest sub-section is a pretty sub-par outcome, wouldn’t you say?” Seokjin stands up to stretch. “I’m going to get coffee. Would you like some?”

Jimin burrows deeper into a cave of his arms. “I would like some mental peace.”

Seokjin laughs to that, loud and free. “Your wish is my command, kid.”

When he’s gone, Jimin slinks quickly to his computer, minimizing the CCTV feeds to bring up a search tool. As Extraordinary Crimes’ chief technical expert, Seokjin was the one most likely to have access to archived forensic records. Jimin keeps a look out for him as he types in Taehyung’s case number. A result pops up, and Jimin’s quick to click on it, but then a dialog box opens up prompting him to type in a password.

Jimin huffs out. Of course there would be a password.

But there’s something else weird about it. The last accessed date for the file is less than ten minutes ago, and when Jimin clicks on details, it brings up an IP address.

This computer’s IP address.

Seokjin had been checking out this file.

Jimin closes the window and pulls up the feed again, watches a cop car round a turnabout at the Seam for a few seconds before he snaps back to and returns to his chair.

Avenge is a weird word to use, isn’t it?

They’re detectives. They investigate. They solve things. They furnish justice.

Avenge is not a detective’s vocabulary. Avenge is personal, motivated by an internal push that demands vengeance.

Jimin clicks his tongue. Maybe Seokjin is just weird. No—scratch that, he knows Seokjin is weird. Nobody else eats noodles between slices of toast.

He opens the file and brings up his own search widget on his computer. Types in Seagull. That’s somewhere to start, isn’t it?

He’s met with a number of references in more than sixty case files that all go nowhere. Seokjin comes back while he’s writing the vaguest things down (‘suspect said something about being hired by someone answering to Seagull’, ‘accomplice mentioned a skirmish with a gang led by a kid called Seagull’), and throws a packet of juice on his desk.

“Get them vitamins.”

Jimin rolls his eyes but drinks it anyway. He finds himself watching Seokjin between work, and
sometimes Seokjin watches back. Jimin used to think he’s the kindest policeman in this office—
maybe still does—but he doesn’t believe Seokjin has any less of an interest in this case as Yoongi or
Namjoon.

Around noon, there’s a ruffle of footsteps and loud voices in the hall.

Seokjin looks up. “Ah, they’re all coming back.”

Jimin picks up his files. “I’m going to go work in the resting room. I can’t work here with them
picking on me.”

“Cool. I’ll cover for you. What should I say?” Seokjin looks him up and down. “It’s your time of the
month?”

“Ha ha, hyung.”

He knocks on the women’s resting room, and Wheein opens it, not even the tiniest bit surprised to
see him. “Hi, Jimin. Do you want a place to work again?”

“Yeah. Is it okay if—?”

“Oh, come in. No shame. It’s empty except for me. Yongsun’s running after some burglar in
Hannam.”

Wheein looks exhausted. She yawns and pushes a kitten sleeping mask higher up her face, then
collapses into a sleeping pad even as Jimin stands around in the threshold feeling guilty.

“Sorry, did I wake you?”

Wheein waves dismissively from where she’s face-down on her pillow. “Stupid stakeout’s messed
with my system,” she moans. “Can’t sleep even if I try. Somebody catch this fucking Ghost.”

“I can go and work in the men’s room—”

“The men’s room smells like cigarettes. You can work here. Hey, I made some kimbap. D’you want
some?”

He tells Wheein about the case while they snack. She’s not very new here—in fact, Jimin might have
replaced her rookie status—but she’s still heard of the infamy. “I tried asking Namjoon sunbae about
it when we all went for drinks once,” she says, “But he was very close-lipped about it. Can I see this
boy’s picture? Oh. Shit, he was a cutie.”

“It’s all dead-ends though. This case, I mean. Everything’s either misreported, misrecorded, or
suppressed. They don’t want me to solve it. And Yoongi hyung says he hasn’t given up, but I can
tell he doesn’t have much hope. He’s just holding on to it because it’s one more chance.”

“Are you really going to steal the medical report?”

“I’ll try bribing Hoseok hyung first. What does he really like?”

“Sprite.”

“That’s not helpful.”

“You might not have to bribe him though. He tried helping as much as he could the last time. He’ll
try again, if you talk him into it.”
Jimin thinks of the angry look in Yoongi’s eyes when he’d tried pushing him before and groans. “Yeah, maybe I’m not that good at talking.”

“You wouldn’t be chilling in the women’s room if you weren’t a charmer, Park Jimin,” Wheein says, yawning again. “You can talk. You just need to figure out how.”

Jimin continues to work after she falls asleep, looking through the case files of some of the older cases Taehyung had worked on. There’s one in particular that’s interesting to him because the information is so pertinent, so important and detailed that it defies imagination how one boy—not involved in any gangs at that point of time—managed to get it from inner circles.

Maybe Yoongi really is right. Taehyung’s more than these files and these reports that mark him as informant. He’s more than it all.

Maybe that’s where he needs to start.

With Taehyung.

He’s not sure if there’s any actual information on Taehyung beyond whatever he’s presented to Yoongi or the others. He’s not sure if anyone’s ever tried to build a story on him. Where the hell did this kid come from? How did he get to know these things that should have been impossible to know? Seokjin had tested him for the gene that marked Extraordinariness—the results were right in this file, and proved beyond doubt that he was entirely ordinary. So then how?

Wheein snores gently next to him. Jimin curls into himself and closes his eyes. His head feels clouded. There had to be an in somewhere, with this case. Perhaps when the notebook came in…But even there, Yoongi had been suspicious, insisting that he’d drop it off himself. Was it simply because he was afraid what would be in the book? If Taehyung has written about him, if the rumors are true…

He doesn’t recognize the moment he fades out of wakefulness, but he does recognize the dream when it begins.

It’s the same as always. Hallways, spotlight, carpet. Something heavy and hungry following him, dogging his footsteps, so close that he can feel its breath on his neck. So close that he knows, if he turns around—he knows he’s done for. And ahead of him, as always, was something else. Someone else.

Light footsteps and an airy laugh and wet skin.

Help, Jimin thinks. He doesn’t want to do this again. Doesn’t want to choose, doesn’t want the blood. He wants to wake up.

His government-mandated therapist—in the few times he’s met her—has tried to get him to lucid dream. Bring some sort of awareness to this nightmare-scape that he can break free of it. But it’s never really worked. Once Jimin’s in the dream, he’s in the dream until he makes his choice.

He always makes the right choice.

(Right, right, right—how do you know it’s right, Jiminie? Maybe you need to turn around. Maybe you need to look at what’s behind you, for once.)

The knife is heavy in his hand. He swallows hard. This isn’t real, he thinks. The station is real. Wheein is real. If he reaches out, when he’s awake, he’ll find her shoulder. If he reaches out, when he’s awake, he’ll find a soft blanket and a mess of papers. This hallway is only in his mind.
But his nightmare doesn’t care if he knows it’s one. It only ends when he chooses.

He reaches out and grabs the hand in front of him. It’s warm as usual, rain-damp as usual, but something else is different this time. The other person laughs and steps into the light.

“Jimin,” he says, face twisted in terror. “Please. Choose different.”

Jimin flinches, drawing into himself. His throat feels constricted, as if someone is crushing his windpipe. Black begins to stain the edges of the dream.

“Please—please, Jimin—”

“No. H-how—You—”

The thing behind him bears down. Jimin feels it—hot and hungry and angry, reaching for him. He feels it coming and he panics, and this is muscle memory from hundreds of thousands of iterations of the same nightmare. That he surges forward, that he stabs, that he pushes the hilt of the knife so far and deep into the figure in front of him that his hands are painted red all the way to his elbows.

The right choice.

The right choice.

Only, this time, the world doesn’t go white. Only, this time, he’s not alone.

The monster behind him is gone, but the body slumped into him isn’t. The blood isn’t. The knife hilt is cool in his hand, but the blood is so, so warm.

He screams. He can’t stop it, can’t stop the ugly sound ripping out of his chest, and he screams. Maybe, if he screams long enough, this will all go away. Maybe, if he screams long enough, the lights will whiten this place again, and he’ll be alone again, and he’ll know he did the right thing.

He’s still screaming when Wheein slaps him.

“Jimin! Oh my God, Jimin, wake up! You’re okay. You’re okay!”

He finds her narrow shoulders and holds tight as he squeezes his eyes shut. Tears run down his face.

“It was just a dream,” Wheein coos. “You’re okay. It’s okay. Do you want water?”

Why had it changed now? After all these months of the same thing, why did it change now?

He swallows hard and gulps down half of the bottle that Wheein presses into his hands. His throat feels raw, and he thinks he’s making a fool of himself, and Wheein’s worried voice keeps sounding in his ears asking him what’s wrong.

What’s wrong?

Jimin’s been having the same nightmare for so many months now. For more than a year.

He’s been dreaming the same thing, always making the same choice, and he’s never put a face to the boy in front of him before. He’s never really heard his voice, never been pleaded to by someone rather than a shadow in the dark.

He’s never had to stab—to kill—knowing who it was.
The boy in his dream is Taehyung.

Chapter End Notes

Hehe it makes me so happy when people speculate :D

Gimme your suspicions! Gimme them!

Some small disclaimers:
1. I love Jin, don't yell at me about Jin.
2. I have no idea how police stations work in Korea, I'm basing everything off on k-dramas here, lol
3. Next chapter will be a little longer to come around - I do a lot of traveling for work and there's a lot of that coming up, so :( 

Come yell at me on Tumblr!
“How do you feel, then, about the case re-opening?”

“I don’t feel anything.”

“That’s not what your face suggests, Yoongi-ssi. Remember: trust is the first step you need to take. Trust me, and talk to me. What does it feel like?”

A clock ticks. The AC behind him whirs softly to life. Yoongi worries a rent in his jeans.

*What does it feel like?*

Like kerosene on an open wound, Yoongi doesn’t say.

He should never have told her. Therapists do this—this nonsense of dissecting his feelings, of diving for his secrets as if in the hope for some hidden treasure that will suddenly and neatly solve the equation that is his mind. He should have kept mum about the case, and Park Jimin, and Kim Taehyung. But Taehyung’s what the whole thing is about and Yoongi’s maybe gone on a few rants about him already. Taehyung, who couldn’t leave things well enough alone. Taehyung, who got him stuck down this rabbit hole so deep he can barely imagine ever climbing all the way up. Taehyung, who blurred the boundaries between their tense, professional relationship like it was nothing more than a line of chalk.

Taehyung, who left.

“What I feel is cheated,” Yoongi says, crossing his ankles. “I was letting it go. Like you said I should. I was letting him go, and then they pulled me back.”

“I could write the department a letter.”
“Stating I’m emotionally unfit? Ha. I’m never letting go of this case now they’ve given it to me again.”

“Is that wise?”

Yoongi grits his teeth. “Nothing about this is wise.”

“This other man you’re working with—Jimin, is it? Does he know about—?”

“He suspects. They all suspect.”

“Should you tell him, then?”

Yoongi takes a deep breath. “I can’t,” he says, hating that his voice breaks, roughens. “I can’t. I—what good will it do?”

“Perhaps you could use his mental support. When you get deeper into this—now that you’ve decided you’re working the case—it’s also best not to keep secrets from your partner. Remember, I’m trained to help people in professions and situations like yours. Communication and transparency is important, and it leads to lesser risks for both of you. Maybe you need him. Maybe you can help each other. Keeping secrets related to the investigation can’t be helpful—you wouldn’t want to jeopardize Jimin, would you?”

Yoongi shudders. “No.”

Of course he doesn’t. Jimin never asked for any of this. But he can’t tell Jimin everything, either. He can’t tell Jimin about the times he met Taehyung outside of work; he can’t tell Jimin about all the nightmares his death brought; he can’t tell Jimin about what Taehyung might or might not have written in that diary. Informatics is advised to send him the processed images, not Jimin, but he’s going to have to share the diary with Jimin at some point. How, though? How is he going to let Jimin read through everything Taehyung might have written?

Yoongi’s worrying so much about all of it as he leaves his therapist’s office that he barely registers the person waiting behind the glass wall of reception. They’re immersed in a book, head down and still, and Yoongi would have easily passed them by if something about the messy hair and posture didn’t stand out to him.

He pauses, half hidden by the translucent parting, and gapes across the room at Park Jimin.

Jimin doesn’t notice him. He’s out of uniform, in simple jeans and a light denim shirt, and he wears a tired expression on his face that’s all too familiar to Yoongi. It’s not an expression that should belong on Jimin. This is the face of someone carrying ghosts, the face of someone backed up so far against a wall that there’s nowhere to come but here.

Here, to a familiar couch and a stern but friendly face.

Here, to Ms. Kwon’s office.

Yoongi’s mind races. Why, he wonders. How? Kwon is in federal employ. All her patients are prescribed her services, either by a judge overseeing a case, field doctors, or military supervisors. It’s her field—stress, post-traumatic disorders, other demons brought about by some sort of trauma that the government gives a fuck about. Yoongi’s here only because Namjoon gamed the system to get him assigned to Kwon and obtain her services for free. Assuming Park Jimin did not have his own Kim Namjoon—or a shitload of money to blow on therapy—what the fuck is he doing here?
Jimin looks up. For a moment their eyes meet, and Jimin looks as stricken as Yoongi feels. He swallows. Then he tries to downplay his shock with a weak smile, which Yoongi can’t find in himself to return.

Yoongi walks out without a word.

Outside, the sky’s a deep blue striated with amethyst. He walks aimlessly for a while, mind stuck in a carousel that seems to revolve around both Taehyung and Jimin. Then he calls Namjoon.

“What?” Namjoon asks, as soon as he picks up. “Did she break you again, hyung? Do you need me to come get you?”

“She never broke me,” Yoongi scoffs, although that’s a lie. He distinctly remembers walking with Namjoon by the river one whole night after one of Kwon’s sessions. Crashing drunk on Namjoon’s couch after another. “I need you to do me a favor, Joon-ah.”

“Anything. As long as it doesn’t involve breaking the law.”

“You’ll break the law six times before breakfast if you had to,” Yoongi mutters, pausing at an intersection. “But this isn’t that kind of favor. I need you to find out why Park Jimin is going to Kwon for therapy.”


“No, your boyfriend Park Jimin,” Yoongi snaps, rubbing feverishly at his temples. “Yes, rookie Park Jimin. What the fuck does the kid need a federally prescribed shrink for?”

“I don’t know. Sounds weird. I can look into it.”

“Look up the name of his middle and elementary school while you’re at it.”

Namjoon pauses long enough that Yoongi thinks he can hear the gears turning in his friend’s head. “Hyung. Why are you investigating Jimin?”

Yoongi looks across the bright lights of the traffic to a merry crowd watching an Extraordinary perform. The man’s limbs contort like jelly, arms and legs all tangled into each other like a knotted balloon animal. He’s fitting himself into a tiny glass box to gasps and applause.

“Because I have a feeling,” he says, and hears Namjoon draw a sharp breath on the other side. “I just have the damnedest feeling.”

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Kwon refuses to tell Jimin about Yoongi. Of course she does, and so Jimin fumes, and spends most of his session close-lipped and annoyed instead of telling her what he came to discuss: the dream. And then he does tell her, and she looks worried, and keeps asking him if he thinks the case is affecting him personally.

Which—great question.

Is it affecting him? Of course it is. Whether he wants it or not, he’s been dragged into the charade. And now Taehyung’s showing up in his head, pleading and bleeding and dying, and Jimin wants to stuff his face with ice-cream. Or go on vacation to Hawaii. Or do both.

Instead, when he leaves Kwon’s, he drives straight to the medical examiner’s office.
It’s late. Hoseok’s still there, though, sleeping in a corner in his scrubs, apparently too tired to stay up even after he assured Jimin over text that it was okay to come around. He looks very calm when he sleeps, nothing like the exuberant man Jimin has met on several occasions earlier, and for a moment Jimin stands there wondering—oddly—what Yoongi’s like when he’s sleeping. Does he still act like an angry, suspicious cat? Or is he like this, deceptively sweet and given to quiet mumbling?

He has a weird inkling that Yoongi’s the type to curl up into a ball.

Jimin shakes his head wildly in the hope of dislodging this nonsense. Then he walks through a fog of formaldehyde and strong room freshener and puts out a hand to shake Hoseok awake.

“Argh!” Hoseok yells, scrambling away as he wakes, face terrified. It takes a few minutes for him to blink and focus on Jimin. “Fuck you! I thought you were the Ghost.”

“Nope. Just me.”

Hoseok squints. “Be thankful I didn’t have my scalpel.”

“You told me to come, hyung.”

“Because you insisted. I already told you, Jimin-ah. I can’t get you any more than what is already on that file,” Hoseok says. He pretends to yawn, but his eyes are curious and alert, and so is his next question. “Why did you want to meet?”

Jimin flashes him a smile. “Because I think you can be persuaded, hyung.”

Hoseok raises his eyebrows. He folds his arms. “Persuade me, then.”

It’s this turn of events that results in the two of them ending up in a cafe. Hoseok apparently becomes way more forthcoming when presented with milkshakes and cheeseburgers, and Jimin waits until he’s inhaled half his food to even try his luck. The way to a man’s heart, after all, is quite often through his stomach, and Jimin needs to make a four-lane expressway to Hoseok’s heart if he is to get what he wants.

“You remind me of Jin hyung, you know?” Hoseok says, watching intently as Jimin pushes a plate of fries around. “Quietly sneaky. Does Yoongi hyung know you’re here picking my brain?”

“No.”

“Do you want him to know?”


“I’m not secretive.”

“No? Do you know why I came to talk to you on your first day, Jimin-ah?”

Jimin remembers this distinctly. He’d been so new, so clueless in his division, and then there was Hoseok, lounging on top of his desk as chill as you please, with a curious expression and a box of donuts. Hoseok had kept asking him questions about his university. About where he’s from, and what he’s been doing, and why he’s joining the police a year after his peer group.

“Why did you ask me all that, hyung?”

Hoseok pops a fry in his mouth. “Because I worked in Seoul National University hospital before I
moved to the ME’s office.”

Jimin’s heart stills. “Oh.”

He remembers that place. Sterile. White. Was Hoseok among the throng of doctors and nurses he met in his four month stint there? He can’t be sure. There were so many of them, and he’d been so confused. So messed up. He still can’t remember half of those days.

Hoseok looks at him cautiously. “Do you remember?”

“So Seoul National University Hospital,” Jimin parrots, like he’s trying to commit it to memory. “You were…there.”

“Mm-hmm,” Hoseok says, “So color me surprised when Seokjin hyung told me about the rookie they’re getting. Interestingly, none of the medical history you should have come with ever made it into police records.”

“Interestingly.”

Hoseok’s eyes narrow. “Did you know that?”

“No.”

“Why’d that happen, do you think?”

Jomin holds himself very still. “Someone in the department likes me?”

“Someone in the department likes you a lot, Jimin-ah. You’d never have gotten this job otherwise. There would have been psych consults and tests to declare you mentally fit, and sleep studies because of the condition you have. I don’t think you’d ever have passed. Do you?”

“No,” Jimin whispers. His stomach churns. “But believe me, hyung. I didn’t know about this. I didn’t know about my records not being accurate. This is not a conspiracy—”

Hoseok waves his hand. “I know you don’t. It’s not your fault. It was done by someone within the system, and anyway, you were just a victim. Your life shouldn’t be taken from you over something you had no control of.”

Jomin clenches his fists. It doesn’t explain why someone had taken the pain to help Jimin into the police force. He feels…played with. Puppeteered. And why? Jomin has no connections, no political backing. Jomin is no one. Who would want to risk it to help him?

Hoseok shakes his head at Jomin’s conflicted expression. “Jomin-ah, let it go. Someone manipulated your files, true. But you know what your case went like in court. The government supports you. It wants to help you. That’s why you’re seeing Kwon, aren’t you?”

“Yoongi hyung is seeing her too.”

“I know,” Hoseok says, and places his hands flat on the table. “He’s been going for a while now.”

“Because of Taehyung?”

Hoseok presses his lips together. “I know a secret of yours, Jimin-ah, so it’s fair you get to ask one of me in return. But only one. You can choose carefully.”

Jomin looks at him. He knows Hoseok holds some cards, true, but he doesn’t think Hoseok will play
them in a way that will hurt anyone. He’s not as confusing as Jin, who plays too close to his chest and doesn’t let out a peep. Hoseok is more open. Willing. Eager to help—if only someone would ask just the right way.

Jimin leans in closer. “What if I trade you two of my secrets for two of yours?”

“What if you give me two of your secrets for one of mine and a favor?”

“A favor?”

Hoseok shrugs. “Owed later. Won’t be too big. I steal a report for you, you steal one for me…”

Jimin ponders. “And then, maybe, I can give you a secret for a favor from you…”

Hoseok’s eyes twinkle. His smile is big and genuine as he pauses to take a huge bite of his burger. “Oh,” he says, and holds out a greasy hand for Jimin to shake. “You’re on.”

***

Yoongi’s bouncing a ball off the wall opposite his desk when his computer pings with an alert.

There’s no one else in the basement—Namjoon’s up at Extraordinary attending a briefing on the latest Ghost murder and he hasn’t seen Jimin since Kwon’s office. Good thing, too. The subject line reads Evidence #665E: Informatics.

Dear Detective Min, it starts, and Yoongi feels his heart surge up to his throat. Please find attached processed images of pages 1-20…

He’s waited so long for this. So long to unravel this mystery—so long to understand Taehyung wholly. Why he did what he did. Why he went to the Ace despite knowing he was possibly walking to his death. What he was like behind the layers and layers of masks.

Yet, faced with that simple attachment icon blinking at him through the screen, he still finds it a godawful struggle to click on it.

Rain today, he reads, and then squeezes his eyes shut. Maybe Namjoon should do this. Namjoon knows everything, possibly knows more than Yoongi even, Namjoon is just as deserving to see this. Namjoon will not judge him.

No.

This is his case. His informant’s case. Nobody else knew Taehyung like he did. Nobody else can do him justice.

Yoongi sighs and settles down to read.

The first twenty pages are descriptions of Taehyung’s day to day activities. *Won Kyung’s liquor is spurious. Yuri has been forcing Extraordinary girls into prostitution. There’s a new gang supplying school children with a drug that they say enhances focus—it’s exam season, this might be bad.*

It’s strange. Yoongi had always thought of Taehyung’s information as transactional. Quid pro quo. He gave them something, they gave him something—no frills and laces, no emotional baggage.

From the diary, though, it’s obvious he’d cared.

*I gave section chief Jinsoo a tidbit today on the trafficking ring, but he said it’s best to turn a blind eye because they’re protected by a party office. Sometimes I wonder who’s more corrupt, the cops*
or the gangs this side of the Seam. I should’ve given it to Yoongi hyung. Or Namjoon hyung. This is something to remember.

The remember is underlined thrice here, Yoongi recollects. Pen so heavy on paper that it had torn through to the other side. Taehyung must have been frustrated.

I helped someone get away today, reads another entry. Sometimes in this job you have to. It felt a little bad, but he gave me something in return. Bigger gossip. What’s that thing they say? Letting the little fish by to catch the shark? Or maybe only my grandmother said that. It’s still true. The thing I’m looking for, the thing I want more than anything—I can’t get it without letting some terrible things happen.

Yoongi breathes in. He knows Taehyung played games. Games upon games, making the police run in circles, offering his services to both sides. But there had been method to his madness, he discovers now. He had wanted something.

Sometimes the entries don’t make sense. I don’t know why I went and waited for you in the park in the early dawn, one says. It was still blue out, and the sky was just like back then. Do you remember? I don’t know why I waited. I know you won’t come.

And another: all our birthdays have passed this year without anyone knowing. All our birthdays and me, alone.

Was he lonely? Is that why—?

This is maybe seven, eight months before that day at the Ace, Yoongi reckons. He knows by the little cases that his name appears in. (I spoke to Yoongi hyung about that dealer in Hongdae today, or I wonder if Yoongi hyung has tracked down the Extraordinary mind-wiping people into giving him money.) There are other snippets where Yoongi appears, outside of a work context. (Sometimes he looks at me in a way that suggests he can read my thoughts. Can you, hyung? I wish you could.

But there’s nothing too incriminating, nothing that raises red flags. Not yet, at least. On page 20, there’s a comic of him and Namjoon squabbling over something. Yoongi recognizes his own caricature features, his old desk and office, and Taehyung’s typically weird way of drawing human bodies. In one corner, Taehyung’s scribbled: what’s the king of the birds?

Yoongi feels a stirring in his chest that’s a lot like grief.

There’s a rap on his desk. He looks up, and then turns the computer screen towards Jimin.

“Informatics sent a part of the diary.”

Jemin nods. “I’ll print it out,” he says, tone oddly flat. “Did you get the chief’s email?”

“I was reading this.”

“There was a tip on the Ghost hotline,” Jimin says. “We are to do a stakeout in the Seam. There’s a list of buildings they say he might hit next—all occupied by possible victims based on profiling.”

“We?”

“All of the department, in shifts, for two days. You and I are together. We have to leave now.”

“What the fuck. Can’t get one good night of sleep here.”

Jemin tugs at his sleeve. “Now, hyung. If we want to grab coffee and snacks. I’m not sitting in a
confined space with your caffeine-deprived self. Seokjin hyung warned me it’s a terrible idea.”

“Seokjin hyung is fucking right,” Yoongi grunts. “Print this out. Where’s Namjoon?”

“He’s heading out with Jin hyung. Different area.”

Yoongi snorts and stretches as he stands up. “Namjoon’s going with Jin hyung? Oh, the squabbling that’s going to cause.”

There’s a pause in which Jimin’s shoulders go a little stiff and he bounces from leg to leg. It’s like he’s dealing with something in his head, something bursting to spill out, and Yoongi’s sure of it when he says, teeth gritted, “Why? Because Jin hyung wouldn’t get himself demoted like you two?”

Yoongi stills at his bitter tone. It seems very uncharacteristic of Jimin, so out of the ordinary that Jimin himself looks surprised.

Yoongi frowns. “What crawled up your ass and died?”

“Nothing. Can we just go?”

“It’s obviously something.”

“Hyung, please. Let’s just go—”

“Spit it out, Jimin. Is this about Kwon? If it is, I’ll tell you now that yes, I go because I watched someone I know die. Because I held them while they died. It’s the kinda thing that punches a fucking hole in your brain.”

“It’s not about Kwon,” Jimin mumbles, although his eyes have gone wide and stricken at what Yoongi’s just said. “It’s about you lying to me, hyung.”

There’s ice settling in Yoongi’s stomach. “What do you mean?”

“It’s about you keeping secrets, and not furnishing full information in your case reports. If you keep accusing everyone of suppressing information, why do you do it yourself?”

“What did I lie about?”

Jimin unfurls a piece of paper from his pocket and shoves it at Yoongi. “Evidence #667D. It’s not recorded anywhere except in the digital archives. Why’s that, hyung?”

Yoongi doesn’t need to look down at the paper to know what it contains. “Who told you about that?” he asks, sharper than he intended, and sees Jimin wince a little at his tone. “Hoseok. It was Hoseok, wasn’t it?”

The disappointment in Jimin’s face is a palpable thing. “Why did you lie about the last time you met Taehyung, hyung? Why did you tell me he disappeared for five days straight? You met him. Two days before he died, you met him. Didn’t you? He asked you to. In that little note he gave you, right from his ear-cuff. The one that only said Eden House if you didn’t look close enough.”

His arms are folded, gaze narrowed. There’s a bit of hurt in his voice. Yoongi looks away.

“Ciphers and keys. Word games and invisible ink. That was Taehyung, wasn’t it?” Jimin continues. “You knew it. You knew how to read his real message. You still didn’t add it to the report. And when Hoseok hyung tested the evidence and found the chemical remnants of the hidden message, you told him to file it in the digital archives but not talk about it. I know you must have met
Taehyung. What happened in that meeting? I want to know.”

Yoongi looks at him. For a rookie, Jimin’s way more resourceful than he had thought. Getting anything out of Hoseok isn’t easy—he’s fiercely loyal, has a work ethic stronger than Yoongi’s and he’s not the kind to settle for bribes or favors. That Park Jimin has talked him into sharing this means Park Jimin can be a dangerously effective man. Yoongi files this thought away. Maybe it’s good that Jimin is like this—so curious and so driven, unwilling to leave any stone unturned. Maybe it’s really, really good. Maybe this is how they solve this case: without Yoongi’s bullshit, without the department’s bullshit.

With Jimin’s harsh, necessary devotion and hard curiosity.

Yoongi asks, “What else did you get from Hoseok?”

Jimin’s mouth is pressed into a pout. “The medical report,” he says. “All of it.”

“Of course you did.”

“Didn’t steal it.”

“You just bribed him. Same thing.”

“I didn’t pay him anything,” Jimin whines. “It’s more like an…arrangement.”

An arrangement. Of course. Jung Hoseok and his arrangements. “Good job on the fucking report, kid.”

Jimin scowls. “What?”

“Good job,” Yoongi says again, and rolls his eyes at Jimin’s suspicious gaze. “I mean it. I know I said don’t steal. I’m glad you apparently don’t listen to good advice from your seniors.”

“I don’t know if that’s a rebuke or a compliment.”

“It’s both,” Yoongi says, rolling his eyes. “You’re both a complete idiot and surprisingly useful.”

“Gee, thanks,” Jimin mutters, and then frowns again. “I’m not giving you the report until you tell me what I want to know.”

“Of course you’re not. Let’s go on that stakeout,” Yoongi says, swooping up his files, phone and gun. “Let’s go. I’ll tell you about my meeting, you can tell me about the report, and then we can discuss the diary. Sounds fair?”

If Jimin is surprised by this, he doesn’t show it. “Fair,” he says, brows furrowed and face set. “Fine. Let’s go. But start talking now.”

Yoongi sighs and thinks of protesting. But Jimin’s glaring at him now, clearly uninterested in anymore of his bullshit, and Yoongi gives in.

“I did go two days before the incident at the Ace—like the note said. I went to meet him at the usual place. But he never showed…”

***

2015
Namjoon wanted to know, when Yoongi left, where he was going.

Namjoon wanted to know, and then Seokjin wanted to know, and then the other fuckers in Extraordinary wanted to know, and—

Sometimes Yoongi thinks they all know. They *all* know that he has a soft spot for Taehyung; they *all* know that he’s let Taehyung out of some scrapes that surely merited at least a day or two in lockup. They *all* know the embarrassing secret he carries around—that he *dreams* about Taehyung, about the weirdest little things…

Yoongi isn’t a very imaginative guy. His dreams are commonplace, blunted by the edge of the daily grind. Kim Namjoon sometimes tells him—under the influence of too much soju—that Yoongi’s still just a soft thing inside a hard shell. Yoongi doesn’t agree. He thinks the worst of most people, would rather believe the world is going to hell in a hand-basket. He’s straightforward on most days, cynical as fuck on the others. He’s not given to pipe-dreams.

Which is why it’s honestly weird how *much* he thinks of Taehyung.

He tells himself it’s understandable. He knows Taehyung’s the type he likes—funny, clever, loud in a way Yoongi himself can never be. Not to mention the enigma of his existence.

It still doesn’t explain his mind’s tendency to randomly segue into *Kim Taehyung: The Shockumentary*.

There are some that keep coming back—Taehyung with a bunch of Christmas ornaments in his arms, standing beneath a giant lit tree; Taehyung in a white hospital room, leaning down to talk to someone on the bed; Taehyung walking out of a steamy coffee shop, red in his cheeks and a giant croissant bun in one hand, waving as he starts towards Yoongi.

In one, he’s giggling and pinning a giant pink cut-out star to Yoongi’s chest. It says *PORNS* in large letters. *There’s your costume, hyung*, he says, smile wide and bright and shy. *You’re a pornstar.*

In another, he’s pressing his hands to Yoongi’s heart, a little smile on his face when he says, *we’re going to make it a secret, okay? I’ll keep you safe.*

It’s weird. It’s *embarrassing*, Yoongi’s brain’s tendency to pull this shit. He wonders if it’s obvious, his thing for their most enigmatic informant. Doesn’t that compromise him? Did the others think he’d shirk duty, break the rules to screw Kim Taehyung if the opportunity presents itself? Yoongi knows cops, knows they take bets on shit like this, knows even that Hoseok’s *other* function in this department is that of a bookie. He wonders if the Yoongi x Taehyung situation has merited a point spread calculation on Hoseok’s betting tables yet.

He wishes he didn’t feel like this. If he didn’t think of Taehyung so much, if he didn’t worry so fucking much, then he wouldn’t be so antsy now that Taehyung’s running late.

Yoongi sits in his car in front of the usual cafe Taehyung meets him in. The piece of paper with the invisible ink that mentions this place and time and “*be there, hyung*” is crushed in his fist. The hands on Yoongi’s watch are ticking by. Yoongi waits an hour, and then another. He thinks and thinks of this sticky spot he’s in—nursing an affection for a criminal, conflating utter fantasy with memory, wishing Taehyung would just walk into his car alive and well and smiling so he can put his own mind at ease.

But that never happens. The evening dissolves entirely into night and there’s no sign of Taehyung.
Going back home without meeting him at the prescribed time is unsettling. Taehyung’s never missed a meeting. Yoongi’s used to his chaos but not to his lack of punctuality. It’s not like him, Yoongi thinks. Not like him at all.

*Please come,* Yoongi thinks, and is surprised at his own desperation.

It’s just that Yoongi has always had a gut for this. He knows when the cards are collapsing, when the ground gives in, when it’s all going to come crashing down.

And right now, there is an ominous feeling like an oil-spill across the lake of his mind.

Slick and suffocating. Dark and overflowing.

Any moment now, it would catch fire. Any moment now, the water could burn, and burn him with it.

*Please, Tae, just come and talk to me.*

When it finally hits midnight, Yoongi gives up and goes home.

He doesn’t sleep that night.

***

**PRESENT**

“…and that’s it? He just never showed?”

Jimin has his gaze fixed on the road. He drives skittishly, like he’s afraid of hurting other people. It’s a weird quirk for a policeman. Yoongi has noticed it when Jimin picks up his gun, as well. His eyes dart about and he stiffens, makes himself smaller. As if he considers himself a danger that needs to be mitigated. It doesn’t make sense.

A lot of things about Park Jimin makes no sense.

Namjoon had said he’d found something interesting on Jimin, but he hadn’t mentioned what. “*Not on the phone,*” he’d said, voice grave when Yoongi asked. Yoongi hasn’t met him since.

Jumin’s gaze flicks to his face. “Hyung.”

Yoongi realizes he’s been staring at Jimin. “Yes. Sorry. Yeah, Tae didn’t show.”

“Do you know why?”

“No,” Yoongi says, and licks his lips nervously.

“And that’s it?”

That’s not it. Yoongi pulls at the hem of his jacket, worrying his lower lip with his teeth.

If he doesn’t tell Jimin the whole story, if he stops *here,* perhaps Jimin would never know. It’s not like he has to know.

But then Kwon’s voice rattles through his head, loud and insistent.

*Communication. Transparency. Don’t jeopardize him.*
Maybe you need him. Maybe you can help each other.

Yoongi takes a deep breath. “There’s more,” he says. “Taehyung called me the next night. Really late. Might have been post midnight.”

***

2015

0 DAYS, 21 HOURS, 22 MINUTES

Holly’s barking is the first thing that registers.

Yoongi rolls over, frowning, pillow fluff and hair sticking to his face as he mumbles at the dog to shut up. Holly doesn’t. He puts his face right next to Yoongi and keeps going, until Yoongi realizes that he’s barking at the phone as usual.

“Oh, okay. Chill, dude,” he mutters, sitting up to fish through the blankets for his phone. Who the hell is calling this late? If it’s Jinsoo, wanting to yell at him about paperwork again…

Holly clambers up on the bed, curling satisfied into Yoongi’s lap. He sighs and digs his phone out. It stops ringing, though, the moment Yoongi clamps his fingers around it, which just figures. He sighs and presses the power button and then sits up, intrigued.

It’s from an unknown number.

Yoongi’s stomach gives a funny little leap. It’s not necessary that it’s Taehyung—Yoongi knows enough people with cause to call him from an unknown number in the middle of the night—but he hopes just the same. Knowing Taehyung’s stood him up but not knowing the reason is torture. He keeps checking cams, reports of Extraordinary skirmishes, and he can’t focus. Namjoon’s already cottoned on to him. Seokjin has been shooting him some curious looks. His Taehyung thing is a situation rapidly going south.

If only he would call.

Yoongi tries calling the number back while he pets Holly. He doesn’t even get a dial tone. Then, just when he’s about to push Holly off and try to get back to sleep, it rings again.

Yoongi leaps to pick it up. “Hullo?”

There’s a buzz of static, a colloidal ooze of crossed-over sounds. Then, in a whisper, “Hyung.”

“How?”

“Yeah, it’s—yeah. Hyung, can you—can you c-come—”

There’s something about his voice even through the bungled, staticky connection. Something awful. Yoongi’s mouth runs dry.

“Where are you, Tae?”

Taehyung takes a staggering breath. His voice cracks. “The usual.”

“Give me forty minutes.”

“Hurry.”
“Forty minutes, Taehyung-ah. I’ll be there.”

The line goes dead.

Forty minutes. It’ll take Yoongi almost forty minutes to get to Taehyung, considering the roads are mostly empty this time of the night. Forty minutes that—if he turns on his signal and drives at as much speed as his cop car allows—he can bring down to maybe thirty. He hopes that’s not too long. Hopes that Taehyung’s still waiting for him at the end of that half hour. He has to be.

*Please, God, let him be.*

Yoongi shouldn’t be hightailing it to Taehyung in the middle of the night. He should be calling someone, telling someone that he’s heading to the Seam to meet with a known double-agent. He should be getting himself cleared, obtaining approval from Jinsoo, making sure that he’s not driving into something potentially dangerous that could compromise his precinct.

But the bigger voice in his head right now is the one that worries for Taehyung. It’s the voice that adores him despite what he is, the voice that tells him that he’s right to feel this way, that Taehyung is worth feeling this way.

It’s that voice that tells him now that he’ll be safe with him—that Taehyung himself has said Yoongi was *special people*, that Taehyung has promised never to hurt him.

Promises don’t matter much to Yoongi, but he thinks they matter very much to Taehyung.

At the tollbooth, the guard gives him a significant look that’s quashed into blankness by the money Yoongi waves. He drives through the smoky streets, lights dimmed in tacit understanding of the Seam’s unwritten rules, ignoring the way the shadows at the seedy corners all look to him like toothed monsters.

Taehyung, waiting for him beneath a moth-swarmed lamppost, looks ridiculously small and lone.

“Hey,” Yoongi says, pulling over. “You okay?”

Taehyung says nothing. He walks around the car, opens the door, and climbs inside. “Go straight.”

“Where are we going?”

Taehyung’s eyes are red. Nose too. He’s been crying, Yoongi thinks, and realizes with a pang that this frightens him more than anything else tonight has tossed at him so far.

“Home,” Taehyung says. “We’re going home.”

He’s quiet for the next ten minutes, only pointing out directions. Yoongi tries not to wonder what it means that Taehyung’s willing to show him where he lives. What it means that he no longer cares who sees him, in the Seam, getting out of a police car with an officer.

He’s always been so careful. Always so secretive. What does it mean, then, that he doesn’t seem to care for his own facade; that he’s letting it crumble in front of Yoongi, swamped as he is in an over-large coat and sweatpants with tear tracks shimmering on his face?

“This is it,” Taehyung says, flatly, and Yoongi stops in front of a dark apartment building. “This is me. Come on, hyung.”

Yoongi’s not worried that this is a trap. He’s not worried about anything *but* Taehyung, who’s
holding himself so tight as he walks up three flights of stairs that Yoongi thinks he’ll break.

And he does.

It’s not spectacular, like Yoongi would expect from someone like Taehyung.

It’s quiet. It’s awful.

It’s Taehyung trying to fit his key into the door and failing once, twice, thrice—until Yoongi takes it from him and pushes the door open. It’s Taehyung stepping in to the cramped, close-walled room that smells like lemon and incense, and sinking near-immediately to his knees. It’s the heavy weight of him in Yoongi’s arms, face clamped up and fists clenched, fingers curling weakly into Yoongi’s jacket as Yoongi helps them both to the ratty old couch that’s the only furniture Taehyung seems to have.

“I have you,” Yoongi says, when Taehyung’s all but collapsed on him. He’s breathing very fast now, panicking, and Yoongi rubs a steadying hand up and down his back. At least they’re both sitting down. “It’s okay. Breathe. I have you.”

Taehyung rattles apart. His body shakes, and the breathless sobs that come out of him are so quiet that Yoongi worries he’ll choke on them. He wants to ask what’s wrong—he has to know—but Taehyung holds onto him like a lost child and he can’t bring himself to do it. He can’t. It’s almost staggering, almost incredible how this feels so right and easy—holding Taehyung, touching him, wanting to protect him. As if Yoongi’s been doing it all his life.

He rubs a hand in circles over Taehyung’s spine, cards his fingers through his hair, brushes the nape of his neck as Taehyung presses his face into Yoongi’s shoulder. Taehyung’s shoulders hitch and he curls into Yoongi with his legs thrown over Yoongi’s lap. He’s muttering something, through his sobs, and it takes some time before Yoongi finally catches it.

“I have to fix it.”

“What?” he asks, that bad feeling curdling thick in his chest. “Fix what, Tae?”

Taehyung shakes his head. “S-sorry,” he says, and then clutches desperately at Yoongi’s shoulders. “Stay. I’m sorry. I’m s-sorry, I didn’t want to c-cry. Please, please, stay—”

“I’m staying. I’ve got you. It’ll—it’ll be okay, Tae, I’ll help you. Whatever it is, I’ll—”

“Yoongi hyung.”

“Yes?”

Taehyung looks pale and exhausted, sobs still breaking out of his chest. His voice is a raspy whisper when he speaks. “Hyung. W-what’s the king of the birds?”

He’s asked this before. Whenever Yoongi’s offered help, offered him ways out. It’s a riddle of some kind, Yoongi’s figured, as everything else about Taehyung is. It’s a riddle and Yoongi hates that he has no solution for it yet.

“I don’t know.”

“Good,” Taehyung mutters. He looks almost manic, hands running crazy through his hair until Yoongi grabs them and holds them, stills them purposefully within the cage of his own palms. “G-good. I’m going to fix it.”
He’s making no sense. Yoongi tells himself that he doesn’t have to. Not tonight—not while he’s shivering and sobbing, face a tear-stained mess, blotches of color on his cheeks and his lip bitten so hard he bleeds. Yoongi wipes at the blood with the pad of his thumb and thinks Taehyung doesn’t have to make sense tonight; this doesn’t have to make sense tonight. Yoongi can just stay. He can just stay and hug Taehyung to his chest and let him get this out of his system. He doesn’t need to ask questions, doesn’t want Taehyung to answer, doesn’t want to give any voice to the worry that grows and grows in his heart.

He can just stay.

It’s a long time before Taehyung speaks again. “You shouldn’t be here,” he says, quiet. “You shouldn’t—I shouldn’t have called.”

“Sssh. I’m glad you called.”

Taehyung sounds close to hyperventilating. “You don’t understand,” he gasps. “It’s dangerous. It’s dangerous, and I—”

“You know I worry about you, Taehyung-ah.”

Taehyung pulls back to look at him. His eyes are still brimming over and the breath is still catching in his chest, but he seems more coherent than earlier.

“Why?” he asks.

Yoongi draws his breath in a long, stuttering inhale. “I can’t help it, I guess. I tried not to, told myself that you’re more than capable of taking care of yourself. You say all the time that you have no loyalties, Taehyung-ah. I tried to remind myself that all you are is my dealer in information. My insider. Always more trouble than you’re worth. But I can’t. I don’t know why, I can’t. I worry. And I don’t know—don’t know why, but I have the worst feeling—”

Taehyung says nothing. Just stares quietly at him. Yoongi knows this look, has seen it perhaps a handful of times before, and every one of those times he had—

“Hyung.”

“Hmm?”

Taehyung kisses him. It’s salt-tinged and wet and almost chaste. It’s also familiar. Yoongi always feels a clench in his chest when this happens, a sense of wrongness, but it’s not wrong because it’s Taehyung. It’s not wrong because it’s Taehyung and him. That’s right, Yoongi always thinks—they’re inexplicably, incredibly right. It’s wrong because—because it feels like the easiest thing in the world, the oldest thing in the world, and Yoongi can’t…he just can’t understand it.

He can’t understand it.

The handful of times Taehyung’s kissed him before—done more than kissing—has always been like this. He’s never been this broken, never cried, but in all those meetings his words had been sharper, gaze more cautious, a siren of something’s wrong—wrong—wrong blaring anxiety through Yoongi’s brain. Yoongi feels like he should hate himself for giving in, for letting Taehyung kiss his mouth and jaw like a drowning man, but every time it happens, it feels so right.

It feels so right, and it feels so wrong, and he wants it so bad.

Taehyung kisses him now, and he’s thinking of the other times. All the other times when Taehyung’s
words got harsh and his face more distant; when it felt like the only thing holding him together was
sheer will; when he reached out and took Yoongi’s hand and then his mouth.

Times when he’s allowed Taehyung to drag him into their usual cafe’s bathroom, letting him press
his fingers all over Yoongi’s skin, letting himself kiss Taehyung breathless. Times when he’s pulled
Taehyung to the backseat of his car, trapping him under Yoongi’s weight to touch him till he came
apart; till that far-off, awful expression on his face dissolved into soft bliss and whispered sighs.

Yoongi doesn’t know how the rumors began, how he slipped up, but oh, they’re true. They’ve
always been true.

He hopes that Hoseok and Namjoon and the lot have bet on the winning side. That they’ve bet that
Yoongi’s been fucking Taehyung. He hopes they win a lot of money.

(It’s just sex, of course. That’s what Taehyung insists. It’s just sex. It helps them both.)

(He only always insists on this after.)

It isn’t tonight, though. Tonight it’s just the two of them curled up close on Taehyung’s couch.
Tonight Taehyung only kisses him sweet, his skin hot where Yoongi’s fingers slide—across the
gentle indentations of his ribs, the dip of his back, the smooth softness of his belly.

“I won’t leave you,” he says, heart breaking at how Taehyung shudders at that. “Don’t—don’t cry.
Taehyung-ah. You’re scaring me.”

Taehyung looks surprised at that. Yoongi kisses him again and wonders why. Does he think Yoongi
doesn’t get scared? On the contrary—he’s afraid all the time. All the time. The constant baseline
thrum of his pulse rests on fear.

This job—this world—the way Taehyung had looked, the last time, pale and afraid…

He lets his lips ghost across the scar on Taehyung’s throat. Taehyung makes a sound at that, tilting
his head down to capture Yoongi’s mouth with his own again. His hands come up to cup Yoongi’s
face, and it’s all Yoongi wants to stay right here. Stay here forever, and not worry about tomorrow.
But they can’t. Even as he gasps into Taehyung’s mouth, nipping gently at his tongue, letting the
heavy intoxication of kissing this boy wreck coherence from his thoughts, he knows that much.

They can’t stay.

“I trust you,” Taehyung says, a long, long while later when they finally pull apart, giddy confusion
running through Yoongi’s head and his mouth still tasting like Taehyung, “Will you—will you trust
me?”

Yoongi tells him what he wants to hear. “I trust you, Tae.”

“I’ll fix it,” Taehyung whispers, eyes wide, possibly not all there. “You just trust me, hyung. I’ll fix
it.”

Yoongi doesn’t tell him that he doesn’t know what’s broken to need fixing. Whatever it is, it must be
worth all of this. It must be worth everything. It must mean nothing less than the world to Taehyung.

*I’ll fix it. I have to fix it.*

Yoongi doesn’t want to think of a scenario where Taehyung fails.
When Taehyung kisses him again, he doesn’t want to think of how it feels like goodbye.

***

PRESENT

“When you think he was talking about the video?”

Jimin’s parked under the cover of a tree, a few meters away from the building they’re supposed to be watching. He’s been quiet for most of Yoongi’s explanations, only asking questions once or twice (Do you remember the building where he used to live? Did he say anything about the Seagull?) and for the life of him, Yoongi can’t figure him out.

His face hasn’t changed. There’s no judgment, no disgust—only impatience and concern.

“I don’t know,” Yoongi says, cautiously. “Maybe.”

Jimin hums. His gaze is on the building, focused as he leans back in his seat. His brows furrow in thought.

Yoongi says, “I expected more of a reaction.”

Jimin looks at him. “About what? The bit where you said you’d been sleeping with him?” he shrugs and reaches past Yoongi, to the backseat, to grab a can of Coke. “But that’s what the rumor mills said anyway, hyung. I guessed it was true early on.”

Yoongi feels the knot in his chest unravel a bit. “And you don’t care.”

“I don’t think it’s my place to care.”

His voice is honest, and he doesn’t look at Yoongi when he speaks. That’s a blessing, Yoongi thinks, because Yoongi doesn’t feel in control of his own face. Everything has blurred in the last few minutes. Everything’s still blurry. He hates this. Hates feeling weak like this. Maybe Jimin knows. Maybe that’s why he doesn’t look— affording Yoongi some grace. If so, he’s underestimated Park Jimin like everyone else in the department.

“I didn’t know him,” Jimin continues. “You knew him. And here you are, more than a year and a half later, still trying to make sure he gets justice. I’m not going to brush that off by making noise over whether you were fucking him or not. You obviously cared about Taehyung. You still do. I’m—I’m sorry you were there. When it happened. I’m sorry you had to see it.”

“I’m not,” Yoongi sighs. “That’s the one thing I—At least he wasn’t alone. I was with him.”

Jimin frowns gently. He runs a hand through his hair, apparently at a loss for words, throat moving as he swallows convulsively.

“We’re going to figure this out,” he says, finally, after a long pause. “You and I. We’ll get to the bottom of all this, hyung.”

Yoongi barks a laugh. “Funnily enough, Park Jimin, I’m starting to believe that.”

Jimin nods. The smile that haunts his mouth is only a flicker—there and gone again—but it softens him so much that Yoongi manages a smile of his own. “I’m sorry I came off too accusatory, before,” Jimin says. He rummages through his backpack until he pulls out a file. “Here. This is the medical report.”
It’s disappointing. They pore over it together, making sure to keep an eye on the building as well, reading through paragraphs on cause of death and the bold negatives against Extraordinary genes.

“The wounds were made with a serrated knife,” Yoongi reads out, squinting to make out the small type in the faint light. “The murderer according to this report had to have been shorter than him. Shorter—but stronger. Organ and tissue damage consistent with stabbing at an upward angle. Basically, whoever did it, pushed the knife in and angled it upward. Or he fell forward onto it.”

“Fell forward onto it,” Jimin mumbles, voice shaky. “Hmm.”

“Yes, but that would mean towards the killer, perhaps even into them. Maybe DNA…” Yoongi flips a page, and frowns. “They did DNA. Nothing that matched the systems except mine, of course, and there was never any murder weapon, but they found DNA of someone else. Asian descent, early twenties, male.”

Jimin’s looking up and out the window, now, blinking rapidly. He takes a large gulp of his Coke.

“You okay?”

“Huh?”

Yoongi frowns. “You look a little…pale.”

“It’s nothing.”

Yoongi flips through the report again. “Why did they hide this from me? There’s nothing here. Maybe I’m missing something?”

He can’t look at the file photos. Of course he can’t. It still hurts, after all this time, to look at him like that. He passes that task onto Jimin, and leans the side of his head against the window as Jimin pores over the report once again.

There’s a car idling on the other end of the street. Yoongi watches it, yawning, wrecking his mind for something he might have missed. What could it be? All the reports look accurate. There aren’t anymore suspicious details than there already was. They’d already had DNA from all of the Ghost’s victims tagged into their systems way before 2015, so none of them had ever touched Taehyung. Why had this been hidden? What is he missing?

“I don’t see anything either,” Jimin says, sighing. He pinches the bridge of his nose. “All the details look accurate.”

“It makes no sense. Why keep this a secret, then? Why refuse to authorize me?”

“Did you ever ask Jinsoo that?”

“He said he had orders from the superintendent.”

“Did you ask the superintendent?”

“Refused to see me,” Yoongi says. “So I barged in once. He said we had to distance ourselves from the case as quickly as possible. News of this so-called video would get out, and people would get worked up. Media would have a field day. The death of one operative was nothing compared to national security. The next day I got my demotion.”

“And Namjoon?”
“Acted like an idiot and barged in demanding they revoke my demotion,” Yoongi snorts. “Ended up right next to me in the basement. The dumbass. He’s a sweet, naive idiot—thinks the world can still be fixed.”

Jimin smiles a little at that, wistful. “Maybe if there were more Namjoons,” he says, and then rummages in the backpack again. “I’m going to look at the diary.”

Yoongi watches the building as Jimin reads through it. He mumbles when he does, sounding out some words, nose scrunching, finger keeping place as he moves line to line. “Waited for you,” he reads. “Who is this, a lover?”

“I don’t know. He never mentioned any. Except for that one time, when he was all dressed up. Even then he simply said that whoever he was going to meet after me liked him all dolled up. Could have been a client.”

“Daehan in Extraordinaries says Taehyung might have lied about the prostitution.”

“I know he had clients,” Yoongi says. “I don’t know what kind. Maybe he just gave them information in exchange for money.”

Jimin’s face stills in focus. “What’s this? I see him everywhere. His name fits him. He shines outside, but he’s poison within,” Jimin reads, eyebrows raised. “Did you see this, hyung?”

Yoongi looks to where he points. It’s hidden in a corner, amid a doodle of a heart-shaped man skipping rope. The rope is made of beetles. It loops around the man’s neck.

Jimin taps the drawing. “Who’s he talking about?”

“Don’t know,” Yoongi frowns. “There was a man Tae was afraid of. I don’t know why. Some fucker who went by Roland. I kept a track on him for Taehyung. He was in Dubai then—probably still is. I never got any info on him from customs. Maybe we should look into him.”

Jimin nods and looks back at the diary. He’s on the last page, now, peering at the caricature, licking at his lips as he concentrates. “What’s the king of the birds,” he mumbles. He scratches his eyebrow. “King of the birds. King of the birds—I know this.”

Yoongi looks up and at the building. That car is still there on the other end of the street. Still idling. Engines on, and lights dimmed. Yoongi frowns.

“Somebody told me this,” Jimin murmurs. “King of the birds. It’s a wren, I think.”

“A wren?”

“A wren climbed atop an eagle, so when the eagle reached its highest limit, the wren was still higher,” Jimin says. “That’s why the wren is the king of the birds. It’s a Greek myth.”

“Who told you this?”

“A friend.”

“Same friend who you solved the code with?”

Jimin looks up sharply. “Huh?”

“Never mind,” Yoongi says, quickly. “That car’s been there awhile. It’s strange.”
Jimin squints. His expression goes from quizzical to alarmed to furious. “Oh my god,” he says, eyes bugging. “Oh my god, this is the guy who was tailing me.”


Jimin moves towards the car. He’s hidden by the cover of night, and the other guy doesn’t seem to realize he’s coming, but Yoongi curses and follows him out anyway. He flicks the safety off his gun, that feeling of ominous wrongness settling in his gut again. He wants to yell for Jimin to get back, to not be an idiot, but his voice will carry across this street and that’s likely to spook off both the car driver and whoever’s in the building that the Ghost is apparently supposed to target next.


If he can just catch Jimin, wrangle him to the ground—

But Jimin’s running too. He’s quiet and fast—faster than Yoongi, especially with all the non-exercise Yoongi’s been doing—and he’s almost at the car before Yoongi crosses even half the distance between them. And then Jimin’s slowing down, sneaking up. He keeps his gun close. Yoongi hopes he doesn’t do anything more stupid, like rap on the door or ask the guy to get out.

*Just take a look and get back*, he prays silently, inching towards them. *Just step back.*

Jimin steps back.

Yoongi’s not done breathing his sigh of relief before the other car’s door opens. The man that steps out has purple sparking across his fingers. He’s already seen them—Yoongi can tell. He’s already noticed both of them, most likely from spying on them, and faced with two cops with guns he’s decided that self defense is the way to go. Electricity curls around his torso, deadly as a viper waiting to strike. Yoongi’s heart thuds in his chest like a hummingbird.

“Jimin,” he calls, stealth be damned. “Jimin, don’t make any sudden movements.”

A bolt of electricity slams into the ground, not ten meters away from Jimin.

“Drop your guns!” the man shouts.

Yoongi hopes Jimin doesn’t drop his gun.

A few tense seconds pass and Jimin doesn’t. Yoongi keeps his grip on his own gun, and takes one step closer.

“Drop it!” the man yells again. “Drop it, or I’m frying both of you.”

Yoongi sees a flash of silver. Handcuffs, he guesses—the special kind Extraordinary Crimes uses to suppress their criminals’ powers. Jimin takes another step forward, a harsh sneer on his face.

“I don’t think you have orders to hurt us,” Jimin calls out, cocky, bluffing. “I don’t think your boss—whoever he is—asked you to fry us. Why don’t you drop the act and tell me his name?”

The man jerks a bit. Another bolt of lightning hits the ground, this time several feet to Jimin’s left. “I—I’ll hurt you if I have to! I will!”

“Oh, will the Seagull forgive you for that?” Jimin calls, and Yoongi steps close enough that he can see the scar on the man’s throat. He draws a harsh gasp. The man moves from feet to feet, face
conflicted. “Tell us his name and you can go. Who is the Seagull? What is his name?!”

The man says nothing. More bolts of purple light come crashing around them, and Yoongi notices—through the corner of his eye—that a lattice of purple has begun to form around them.

The man’s trying to trap them.

_Fucking Extraordinaries._

“Jimin,” Yoongi says, warningly. Jimin’s head whips around to take in the lattice. His mouth purses. Yoongi sees the sudden faltering in his face, the speck of doubt, and knows that the Extraordinary will, too. Sure enough, the man moves a step toward Jimin.

Jimin gasps, fear crowding his features like a sudden landslide.

_Fuck it._

Yoongi fires a warning shot.

Both Jimin and the man jump, alarmed. A flock of birds explode out of a tree, spooked into wakefulness.

_Starlings—Yoongi thinks. A murmuration of starlings._

Yoongi uses the moment of confusion to surge forward, grabbing the handcuffs from Jimin’s slack grip as he goes. He crashes into the man. He hears Jimin shout, sees lightning crackle, and feels a fierce, searing pain run up his torso. The pain is like nothing he’s ever felt—worse than a bullet; worse than a burn. It claws through him and he wants to puke, he wants to pass out, anything to make it _stop_. But he has to put the cuffs on this guy. He has to find out who the Seagull is. And Jimin—Jimin’s just a rookie, so new at this, so impulsive. Brash and brave and unburnt yet. He’s the same age as Taehyung would have been, if he were here. And if Yoongi couldn’t save Tae, then—

Black stains the edges of his vision. Purple sparks around him, bright and lovely and violent, a savage garden of light and darkness. Pain crawls up his chest again, draws a tight fist around his heart, and he gasps like a fish out of water. There’s faraway screaming, loud and agonized, and it takes him a moment to realize that it’s coming from him. He hears the sound of the cuffs click, hears the man curse beneath him, hears Jimin shout his name again.

And then everything goes quietly, blissfully dark.

***

In the moments between sleep and wakefulness, Yoongi dreams of Taehyung.

They’re not alone. There’s someone else with them, in this dream—another young man. His face gets vaguer the more Yoongi tries to think about it, but his hair is a bright silver that catches the light and glitters. He’s kneeling at the edge of the tub, head bowed low, whispering quietly to Taehyung who sits on the very lip of it. They’re holding hands. It looks quiet and intimate, and it should do something to Yoongi to see the object of his not-so-innocent desires being so openly affectionate with someone else, but it doesn’t.

In fact, if he drops his gaze, the dream gives him what he wants: his own fingers entwined with another’s, too. A smaller hand, grip strong, the cold of a ring stark against the warmth of skin.

“It’s time,” the unknown man says, gently, and nods to Yoongi. He stands up. “Count of three?”
There’s ice in the tub. Giant fucking blocks of it. The cold emanating from it carves runnels into Yoongi’s bones, and he’s wearing layers. So is the other man. It’s Taehyung shivering in just a thin t-shirt and shorts, eyes wide and petrified, grip tight on the other man’s hand.

“Remember,” the man says, and his voice is soft and beautiful, a gentle cadence to his words. “We love you, baby.”

“I know.”

When the water closes over his head, Taehyung struggles. It’s hard to hold him down. He’s bigger than them, stronger than he looks because he’d grown up doing farm work, and he fights them. Yoongi can’t look.

* * *

Yoongi wakes up to Namjoon peering down at him.

“Hi,” he says, and rubs a hand harshly through his hair. “Hi, hyung. Are you okay?”

There’s beeping. Antiseptic. Yoongi feels weird and sluggish, and his head is pounding. The sheets under him are stiff and starched.

Hospital, then.

Namjoon sits in a chair, face very close to Yoongi’s, watching him with a frown. Seokjin leans against a wall. They’re both in plainclothes.

Yoongi blinks at them for a while. His whole body aches.

“I’m okay,” he says, and watches Namjoon’s face melt in relief. “I’m fine. Just—just achy.”

Seokjin asks, “Do you remember what happened?”

Yoongi sits up slowly, burying his feet under the blankets as he goes. It’s cold here. Or maybe it isn’t, and it’s just the alarm starting to stir in his gut that’s making him feel chilly.

“Oh of course I do,” he says, scowling. “Nearly got my brain fried, didn’t I? Where the hell is Park Jimin?”

Namjoon and Seokjin exchange weary glances. Seokjin gives a gentle sigh. “We don’t know,” he
“He sent an alert. When we got there, you were the only one on the scene. His phone’s switched off, and he’s not traceable.”

Yoongi does a double-take. “Not traceable?”

Seokjin grimaces. “We’re trying…”

“And—and the man, the Extraordinary—”

Namjoon heaves a sigh. “There was no one else there, hyung. You were propped up against a street-lamp. Unconscious.”

“So they took him.”

Seokjin pushes his glasses further up his nose. “Yes, we…we think so.”

“Shit. Shit, shit, shit.”

“Extraordinaries is on it,” Seokjin says, urgently. “We’ll find him, Yoongi. He’ll be okay. They took the car, and we think we can maybe break into the car’s GPS system. Track them down.”

Yoongi breathes out harshly. This is terrible. What if Jimin’s in horrific danger right now? What if he’s dead? They didn’t know who this Seagull person was, why they were tailing Jimin and Yoongi —what if Jimin’s bluff wasn’t right, and all they wanted was the two of them out of the picture? And now they’d taken him. Yoongi’s skin crawls.

They’d taken him, and Yoongi should have done more.

He should have done more.

“Hyung,” Namjoon mumbles. “I have something to tell you. It’s about Jimin.”

***

Some days, just the thought of the Seam frightens Jimin.

This place, where he lost three entire years of his life. This place, where he might have walked these very streets, moved in and out of these very buildings, with no memory of them anymore. The smoky alleys and the convenience stores hidden amongst them, almost vulgarly neon: had he known these? The tollbooth and the river, and all the whirling, glittering traffic of Extraordinaries along the bank—how often had he seen this? Kwon often told him not to struggle too much with recovering memory of those times. The dreams were clue enough that there was bad stuff in there, stuff that his subconscious wanted to repress.

But Jimin is curious. Always so curious. So he pushes and pushes at the walls sometimes, trying to peek through.

Three years. Three whole fucking years he’d been lost.

And then he’d been found, and it had been terrible, and the government had gotten involved because it hadn’t been just him. A whole bunch of lost people, with no memories of past several years, had been pulled from the Seam. Extraordinary Crimes investigated, and traced it back to someone who called themselves the Scarab, but they never found the asshole before he escaped to some other country. There had been offers of charitable compensation and rehabilitation— as there usually was under a Compensation for Victims of Extraordinary Crime Act—but because Jimin had hated that
term—the victim—he’d taken his free therapy sessions, enrolled right back into University, and tried to go on with life.

But sometimes the thought of the Seam still frightens him.

The idea of it—that he’d done whatever he’d done with no memory or knowledge of it—haunts him sometimes. And then of course the dreams.

It had been a relief when he’d been accepted into the police force because—as Hoseok had pointed out—he’d never held out much hope for it. He had issues—the ghosts of his lost years circling back to haunt him in the form of nightmares and insomnia and his own body not feeling like his at times. Sometimes he’s afraid he’ll hurt people. Sometimes he’s nervous if they see more of him than he himself can. He knows he still has them—these demons—despite Kwon’s help. He also knows that police recruitment for someone with his sort of personal history should have involved a hundred psychological tests he couldn’t pass.

But then he had passed, and most of the tests hadn’t even been registered, and he had hoped that for once, luck had been on his side.

Luck or Lady Fortune.

And now Hoseok had told him that someone had doctored his history. Someone had altered it—for him, to help him into the force. But who? And why?

He can’t help but think this is all connected. Taehyung and the hotel Ace. His memory loss. The dream and the purported video. The gang trailing him. Whoever erased his reports and history, and then all the suppression of information on Taehyung’s case.

Everything is linked.

And at least one piece of the puzzle, Jimin is going to solve tonight.

“Stop fucking whining,” he tells the Extraordinary cuffed to the backseat. “Is this the building?”

The man says nothing. Flickers of purple still pool at his wrists, but the cuffs hold him for now, and he spits angrily at Jimin. Jimin rolls his eyes. “Do you want me to Tase you again? Give you a taste of your own medicine? I asked you a question, Lightning McQueen. Is this the building where he lives?”

The man struggles. Jimin pulls out the Taser. He raises his eyebrow and watches the man’s gaze flick from his face to the gun, sweat shining on his upper lip and throat moving rapidly.

“Y-yes,” he squeaks. “Yes, this is the building.”

Jimin smiles. “Good boy. Now, sit tight.”

He steps out of the car. This late, most of the windows in the building is dark, but there’s still a few lights on in the first floor. He passes through the door and takes an elevator up, switching out the Taser for his gun, keeping it close as he moves down the hallway.

He wishes he didn’t have to leave Yoongi there. Not right after Yoongi had taken a hit for him, gotten hurt trying to help him. All because Jimin had been stupid enough to run out of the car and after a dangerous Extraordinary. He hadn’t listened to Yoongi, hadn’t allowed himself to think before he ran, and it hadn’t been him who had gotten hurt.
That stung.

All Jimin can think of now is making it up to Yoongi. And this—this is exactly how.

He rings the bell outside the door at the end of the hall. It buzzes for a long while. No one answers, so Jimin rings again, and then waits with his ear pressed to the door. There’s shuffling on the other side, he’s sure, footsteps that stop just beside the door. He raps again.

“It’s me,” he says. “Park Jimin. I know who you are.”

There’s some more of that shuffling, and a sound like a gun’s safety being clicked off. Jimin tightens his grip on his own gun. He doesn’t think he’ll need it—doesn’t think the person on the other side needs it either—but it pays to be cautious. He inhales sharply and stands back. Hears the locks being undone.

And then the door is pulled open, and a face peers out from under the shadow of a dark hoodie.

“Hyung?”

Jemin smiles tightly. “Jeon Jungkook,” he says. “It’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

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Chapter End Notes

GUESS WHAT bitches I got a twitter. It’s awesome. Follow me for shit-post Taegi AU's and lotsa moodboards, coming soon to the hellwebz where all the cool kids are.

(All the cool kids, and then me, the awkward angsty kid. But you get the point.)

ALSO alternately, here’s the tumblr.

GIMME YOUR SUSPICIONS
Yoongi’s not pleased that he has to stay in the hospital the next day. Seokjin assures him that the Extraordinary division is pulling all stops to look for Jimin, and that they are tracking the car. Namjoon tells him that it isn’t Yoongi’s job to run after him, but it’s still hard not to do anything; to sit around and wait.

Namjoon brings him a file in the morning, leaves it on his table and then stands around looking shifty.

“What?”

“Informatics has sent some more pages,” Namjoon says. “I couldn’t read it, they were password protected. But I mailed it to your personal ID, so you should be able to see it. I thought you might want to.”

Yoongi nods his thanks. The file, he sees, contains newspaper clippings from 2015. More than 15 victims testify Extraordinary memory loss, a headline reads. Beneath is a grainy picture of a courtroom. He picks it up and flicks through it.

“Why is this stuff not in Jimin’s records?”

Namjoon shrugs. “Maybe they thought it wasn’t necessary.”

“They record it if you’ve so much as got a peanut allergy, Joon-ah. You think they’re going to leave out the fact that the new kid on the block has selective amnesia of three whole fucking years?”
“I don’t know, hyung.” Namjoon says. “He passed police university after that incident. Maybe they just let it go.”

Yoongi frowns. “He has this thing about him. Have you noticed?”

“Who, Jimin?” Namjoon hesitates. “Yeah. He’s a rookie who acts like a man who’s been on the front lines.”

“A soldier.” Yoongi muses. “You know the thing about soldiers, Namjoon-ah?”

Namjoon only watches him silently.

“They’re always following someone’s orders.”

Once Namjoon leaves, Yoongi goes through the file on Jimin. There’s more there than he’d originally thought. Jimin had disappeared from the university early 2013 and reappeared at the beginning of 2016. He isn’t the only one—there had been bunches of people, all of them who had disappeared only to reappear on the same cool January morning almost three years later. Yoongi had missed this case, had never seen Extraordinaries work it because he had still been reeling from Taehyung. He remembers those days as a mad, caffeine-propelled haze. How many people in the Seam had he interrogated? How many doors had he knocked at, trying to get any further information that could clue him into why Taehyung had gone to the hotel, who he had been meeting, and who his killer was? He’d run after Dark Web hackers to find some in-roads to this so-called video. He’d illegally employed a telepath who came with him on door-to-door investigations just in case someone was hiding something.

Anything to understand Taehyung. Anything to untangle the puzzle of his existence.

It’s honestly surprising how less information there was on Taehyung as a person. His birth-records, for sure, that said he had been born and mostly raised in a small town an hour off Daegu. Early hospital records. Then a whole bunch of nothing—a smattering of school stuff, useless school awards, and a black hole.

The next detailed report on Taehyung is the crime-scene investigation and forensics files. And that’s dry, devoid of personality. Hair, dyed red. Eyes, brown. Blood Type: O. Age: 20. Yoongi’s gone over that so many times in the last few days that he can recite it rote.

But how had Taehyung ended up in Seoul? What was he doing at the Seam? What did he want?

In contrast, Jimin is easy. Everything about him is in the file—his parents, his siblings, their house in Busan, his school information. The half a dozen scholarships and awards he won that got him through school and into college early. The few months he’d spent in a dance program against his parents’ interests before he joined Police University. Then his disappearance, a year into it.

He doesn’t remember anything, the newspapers report, from his trial later that year. Park Jimin (21) is keen to go back to school to pursue a career in law enforcement. When asked about whether he’d like to put this incident behind him, Park replied that he has no memory of it to leave anything behind.

Does Jimin still remember nothing? How does that feel, to have years of your life incised from your memory? Yoongi can’t imagine. His own childhood is only too clear to him. The mundaneness of it. The suffocating stillness to it that he couldn’t handle, with his buzzing mind and a thirst for more. It wasn’t until he’d come to Seoul at 18 for university and met Namjoon and Seokjin that he’d felt anything akin to companionship. What is interesting, though, is that Jimin—if these transcripts are
correct—had only been a year below him. And, if he’d been in the accelerated Extraordinary Police Science department, then he’d have been set to graduate the same year as Yoongi.

Funny, then, that Yoongi doesn’t remember a kid disappearing from his university.

Funny, then, that Namjoon doesn’t.

He files away that thought. He’ll have to ask Namjoon when he came around again. Until then, he had Taehyung’s diary to look at.

These next 20 pages are mostly on the cases Taehyung had been working on. Yoongi recognizes them. Especially the one where two kids he’d asked Yoongi’s division to tail had gotten killed when a drug drop went wrong. Taehyung had sent him a frantic little message to move police away from the area, that the gangs were dangerous and would kill the kids if they guessed cops were tailing them. The section chief hadn’t agreed. And before Yoongi could find a solution, the Seam’s streets had run with blood.

The next time he’d seen Taehyung had been one of the quiet, awful times. It’s here too, in the diary. *Went to meet Yoongi hyung today. I didn’t want to. It’s not his fault, I know it’s not, but it still felt weird and raw and I’ve never been very good at controlling my emotions around him. We’re so silly. Why did I think I could work with him, without feeling this way?*

That case—that’s the first time Yoongi remembers kissing him. Touching him. They’d walked out of the cafe they’d met in, and Taehyung had looked at the cop car parked on the curb, and grabbed Yoongi’s wrist. *I need you. Don’t leave yet.* Yoongi remembers hesitating. He remembers alarm and reluctance churning deep in his gut, but he also remembers holding Taehyung’s hand.

*Come with me.*

He shouldn’t have. He should never, ever have given in to Tae; should never, ever have brought him back to his place that night. But with Taehyung, all his walls kept collapsing, no matter how high Yoongi built them. No matter how much he tried to keep him out, it was like Yoongi’s mind and heart warred in different languages. He tried to do the right thing by pushing Taehyung off on Namjoon after that night. Put Namjoon up to be his handler and changed it on the system and everything. That’s in the diary too: *Hyung doesn’t want to see me anymore. I guess that’s for the best, but it feels a little more like everything I am is disappearing.* Namjoon transferred Taehyung back to Yoongi in a couple of days. *He’ll only speak to you, hyung,* he’d said. *I can’t get through to him.*

And even though Yoongi had known it wasn’t right—not fair to him, not fair to Taehyung—there had still been a part of him that had reveled at the idea that Taehyung would only speak to him.

He shifts uneasily on the hospital bed now, bones still aching, and goes back to the diary pages.

Taehyung mentions the Seagull almost offhand in one of the entries. *I told him it’s a stupid name and he didn’t listen to me then. Now they’re laughing at him, of course. Not that anyone will laugh for too long. Kid’s something else. We joke sometimes that what he does isn’t Extraordinariness as much as it is blood magic.*

They’d been friends, then—Taehyung and the boy known as the Seagull. Or at least acquaintances.

There are walls of text that make absolutely no sense to Yoongi. One looks panicked, most of the words indecipherable, and the few that do say anything understandable are frightening in how less sense it makes. *There are people I know who were Ordinary who are not anymore,* Taehyung’s
There are people I know who were Extraordinary who is so in more than one way now.

Yoongi highlights this part on his screen, pondering. Is this about the sudden increase in multiple abilities? They’d never been able to explain that. Other criminal informants came back with nothing. Taehyung himself had chosen to remain quiet on the issue when asked.

That means he knows something, the diary continues. Roland, Scarab, whatever he calls himself now—he knows something. There’s talk about a video. It cannot be true. It can’t be—there is no way. H says he’s playing games with me.

Yoongi frowns. I’ve seen the video, Taehyung had said, that time Yoongi had met him in the restaurant. This contradicted that. Had he found the video later? And who was H?

The next few pages are uncharacteristically dry. Taehyung reports daily routines, has written down phone numbers, and drawn the heart-shaped man and the beetles again.

This time, the noose has tightened.

Yoongi thumbs back through the pages, trying to find something he’s missed. This Scarab person—whoever it is—has to have been connected to all this. Yoongi had only ever tracked him using DNA and biometrics that never pinged any systems. But who is he?

And the Seagull—did he really have Jimin? How can they expect Yoongi to just sit here? Maybe he could call Jin, ask him how it’s going, if they’ve managed to put a tracker on Jimin yet. What even is the Seagull’s ability, anyway?

Yoongi thumbs back to the bit where Taehyung talks about him.

We joke sometimes that what he does isn’t Extraordinariness as much as it is blood magic.

“Blood,” Yoongi mumbles. There’s something turning over in his head, a slow awareness that creeps up like a thief, stealing his breath. Blood, he thinks. Jimin’s backpack is in the car, and the medical report is in that, but Yoongi knows Hoseok. There is a digital copy.

“Seok-ah,” he croaks, when Hoseok answers the call. “I need you to tell me something. Don’t ask questions.”

Hoseok is quiet for a few seconds. “Is this about the report, hyung?”

“Yes.”

Hoseok draws a breath. “I make no errors in my reports, hyung,” he says. There is something in his tone. Something quiet, and blooming—a frail anxiety that tells Yoongi that Hoseok’s been waiting for this call to come for years.

“It was him,” Yoongi says, not trusting his voice to give out. “It was him, wasn’t he?”

“I never tried to hide it, hyung,” Hoseok says, softly. “I’m just sorry I couldn’t tell you before.”

“H-how? Why?”

“It changes nothing. But I’m coming there. I’ll come. I’ll explain what I can.”

The line goes dead. Yoongi shuts his eyes, trying to recollect the report as he’d read it over the years, skimming over the rote, routine facts because what could he miss in that, what could be misleading in hair and eye color and height and weight? Those are all just the passive, background noise to the
greater mystery of the murder. The important bits are the write-ups, the autopsy report, the photos. He’s never found anything wrong with those, everything that was given to him impeccably detailed and accurate.

It isn’t until now—now with the word in Taehyung’s own writing circling the drain in his mind…

Blood.

The blood-group on Taehyung’s report is incorrect. It should’ve been AB. It’s O.

And Hoseok—Hoseok had said, immediately upon receiving the call, that he made no errors.

It isn’t just that. Crime scene evidence had typed it right. Yoongi remembers. He has crime scene files on his computer, can recollect it exactly as it is, and knows it had been right. So, between crime scene and later forensics, what had changed? Why had it been changed?

He remembers it like yesterday. That night. He’d been off-duty. Sitting in the quiet dark of his apartment, worrying about Taehyung, about them, about the staggering right and wrong and depth of it.

And then Seokjin had called.

***

2015

0 DAYS, 1 HOUR, 52 MINUTES

“It’s Taehyung,” is all Seokjin had to say for Yoongi to peel himself off the couch and run to tug his jeans on. “He says there are some gangs in attendance in one Hotel Ace. They’re after that video.”

“Did he say where he was?”

“No,” Seokjin sounds strangely out of breath. “Get here, Min. The superintendent is asking for you.

“The Superintendent?”

“They won’t help him without information on the gangs. Taehyung says—he says he needs our help. He’s asking for you. Please just come.”

Seokjin briefs him while drives. When he reaches the station, Yoongi runs in with his head buzzing and his heart in his throat. He remembers Taehyung, a day ago, saying I’ll fix it. He remembers how the whole night felt like being on a precipice, a precarious edge of finality to it, how terrified he’s been since. Taehyung had said he wouldn’t work the case. Why did he call them now?

In the station, the Extraordinary Crimes division is bustling with action. Seokjin is at the computers, tracking Taehyung based on cell-phone towers. Namjoon is bent over a desk, making calls to officers stationed in the Seam. Chief Jinsoo paces, and the Superintendent sits in a chair, watching CCTV feeds of the Hotel Ace.

When he sees Yoongi, Jin immediately offers him an ear-piece. “He’s only going to talk to you, Yoongi.”

“Where is he?” Yoongi asks, frantically. “What’s he—”

The Superintendent puts up a hand to cut him off. “Tell the boy that we’ll send help if he gets us the
names of who’s there.”

“That could compromise him.”

“He already agreed to give us names if we send help. I want them now. Tell him I want to know who’s in that hotel before I lift a single finger to send one of my men to him.”

Yoongi’s blood chills. “What? We can’t just ask him to go in there and find out who’s there. We can’t—”

“He’s a criminal informant, Min,” Jinsoo says, curtly. “Information is his job. Protection is the reward.”

The Superintendent nods. “Names, and then we do what he wants us to do. Talk to him.”

Yoongi grits his teeth. Through the ear-piece, the world gets muffled, like he’s underwater. Namjoon meets his gaze across the room, face pulled down into a frown. Seokjin gives his arm a squeeze, pale-faced and grimacing.

Yoongi says, “Hullo?”

It takes a few seconds of silence during which Yoongi counts his own breaths. And then: “Hyung?”

He sounds small, his voice quavering. Yoongi feels fear rake claws down his spine. “Hey. Hi, it’s me,” he says. “Where are you, Taehyung-ah?”

“Outside this hotel. I told—I told Jin hyung...I need help.”

Yoongi flicks his gaze over to Jinsoo. The man makes a weird urgent wave with his hand, as if to tell Yoongi to get on with it. “Listen to me, Tae,” Yoongi says, carefully. His heart clenches. “We’re going to send you some help, okay? Do you know—do you know who’s in the building? Section Chief says you said you could give them names.”

Taehyung breathes in, shakily. “When you tell me you’ve sent help, hyung, I’ll give you some names.”

Across the room—through which Taehyung’s voice booms magnified by a speaker—Yoongi can see the Superintendent bristle. “I want him to validate the information first,” he says. “This is a case where I can take no chances. Tell him to walk away if he can’t follow orders.”

Yoongi pulls the ear-piece from his ears and muffles the microphone with his hand. “You can’t ask him to walk in there to get you names,” he hisses. “That’s dangerous. C.I. or not, we can’t put a civilian in danger!”

“I’m not asking him to walk in there, Min,” the Superintendent says, jaw clenching. “He knows everything already. He’s playing games with us as usual, playing both sides. This case is too big, the casualties in the Seam are already too much. We’re not playing to his demands this time.”

“His demand is that you send a cop over there. How is that unreasonable?”

Jinsoo clears his throat. “I’m unwilling to send a man of mine over there without knowing what he’s walking into. Tell your double agent that, Min.”

Next to Yoongi, Seokjin’s mouth purses into a thin line. He’s still staring at the screen, Yoongi realizes, but his fingers are unmoving on his keyboard. His gaze falls blankly on the little red dot on
the map that shows where Taehyung’s location is. Yoongi thinks he looks bloodless.

Yoongi grinds his teeth and puts the ear-piece back in, trying to keep his own voice stable. “Taehyung-ah,” he rasps, “You need to give me the names first.”

A sharp intake of breath. “Hyung, please, I—”

“Just give them to us, and we’ll send help. I promise. You—you don’t have to go in, just tell us what you know.”

“Hyung, you don’t understand, there’s no—”

Yoongi pinches the bridge of his nose. “That’s—that’s the deal, Tae.”

In the quiet that follows, Seokjin gets up and quietly leaves. Namjoon meets Yoongi’s gaze again, brows furrowing. Then he puts down the phone and follows Jin out.

Yoongi presses his lips together. “Taehyung-ah, are you there?”

“Y-yes,” Taehyung says, softly. “If I give you the names, you’re going to chase after the gangs first. You’re not going to help.”

Yoongi sees his seniors exchange glances. Taehyung is right, he thinks. Of course he’s right.

“No,” Yoongi says. “No, listen. You said you trust me, right? So trust me. Just give us the names and—”

“I can’t wait for that,” Taehyung says. “I’m going in.”

“Tae, wait—”

“It’s okay, hyung.”

“What? No—don’t— fucking shit,” Yoongi rips the ear-piece out and slams his hands on the desk. “Fuck. He cut the call.”

“Damn it.”

“We have to send someone,” Yoongi says. “We have to—”

Jinsoo shakes his head. “I can’t risk an officer’s life, Min. I have no idea what we’re going to walk into.”

“But you can’t just—”

“Keep monitoring the feed,” the Superintendent says, already moving out. “Tell us if he calls again. No—don’t interrupt me again, Min. I’ve heard the rumors too. Enough of them to put you under an internal affairs investigation. I’d rather you avoid that. I need detectives here, not star-crossed lovers.”

Jinsoo’s face morphs softly into something like disgust. Yoongi meets his gaze head-on, and keeps it there until the man looks away. He only slumps into Seokjin’s chair when the two of them are gone. Dialing Taehyung’s number is useless. He can only sit here and watch that red dot move sluggishly on the screen.

Please, he thinks. Don’t do anything stupid. Not before I get to you.
Outside the department office, in the men’s resting room, he finds Namjoon and Seokjin conspiring in low tones. “…take your car,” Seokjin is saying, when he enters. “I don’t care. This is wrong, this is—they can’t just—”

“Jin hyung.”

Jin turns to him, eyes going wide. “What did Tae—did he say—?”

Yoongi shakes his head. “Jin hyung. As the senior officer in this department, how many men do you think will obey you without question if you ask them to follow me to the Hotel Ace?”

“If I cash in favors?” Seokjin’s jaw is tight. “Around fifteen, maybe.”

Namjoon goes pale. “Hyung, you can’t be serious.”

“I want them ready to go in ten minutes. I’ll take the blame,” Yoongi looks from Namjoon to Seokjin, clenching his fingers to quell the quake that runs through him. “Can you do it?”

Seokjin just looks at him, eyes blazing. “Yes.”

“Those who will come, tell them to meet me in the basement. Tell them to be discreet.”

“Wait,” Namjoon says. “Use a code. Give it to the men you trust to follow Yoongi hyung. Don’t let it leak—we can’t let the Section Chief know. Yet.”

They all look at each other. Jin’s hands clench into fists. Yoongi can’t hear over the rush of blood in his ears.

“Starling,” Namjoon says, finally. “That’s his—That’s a Seam name he goes by.”

Yoongi nods. “Starling,” he says, and looks to Jin. “Ten minutes, hyung.”

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2015

0 DAYS, 0 HOURS, 22 MINUTES

He doesn’t want them to come with. Namjoon and Seokjin, that is—doesn’t want them in trouble. The others are okay, Yoongi can get them off the hook by pulling rank and taking on blame. He can make himself the scapegoat here. It’s a good thing that seniority in Extraordinary Crimes doesn’t come with age but cases.

But Namjoon and Seokjin though.

If the seniors knew, it’d be them that would pay the price for Yoongi’s rash behavior. Cops can be smart like that. Yoongi’s certain, even as he drives to the Seam with Namjoon sitting shotgun, that he’s going to face suspension for this. Probably a transfer. He would have liked to spare Namjoon and Seokjin, but they had insisted on accompanying him. And now Seokjin’s raced ahead, leaving them behind to co-ordinate, mumbling something about canvassing the Ace’s perimeter.

As if they have time for that.

“I expected Seokjin hyung to resist,” Yoongi says, attempting to make conversation. His stomach is twisting, and there’s that bad feeling in his gut again, that spill of oil, catching flame.
“Yeah, well,” Namjoon’s voice trembles. “Jin hyung is nothing if not unpredictable. Hyung, how—how bad is this?”

“It’s bad,” Yoongi says, truthfully, and pretends he doesn’t hear the hitch in Namjoon’s breath.

The Ace looks utterly normal from outside when they get there. They storm the doors—Yoongi and Namjoon and a group of others. When the initial flurry of checking rooms and shouting out is over, they realize that the hotel is utterly, eerily empty. The ballroom looks lit, but the chairs around the oval table are all pushed back in disarray. Some lie on the floor, upturned, as if whoever had sat in it had rushed away as quick as they could. There are glasses on the table, still sweating with condensation from ice within. The reception is unmanned but looks hastily abandoned. In the main hall, there is blood spattered on the walls, in the chrysanthemum pattern of a gunshot, but no bodies.

“What happened here?”

Yoongi and Namjoon walk through the eerie quiet, the blood-stained carpet squelching softly under their feet. The other officers move around them, dipping in and out of rooms, calling out that each one was clear. Yoongi looks to Namjoon in abject confusion.

Where could Taehyung be? Is he hurt? There is something so painfully trap-like about this situation, some dark chill hanging too low over each of the empty rooms and bloodied corridors.


“Here!” a voice interrupts, from a corridor to Yoongi’s left. “Oh, God. Detective Min! Detective Kim! Help! Over here.”

Yoongi’s feet feel weighed down with lead. He turns and walks towards the officer, completely on autopilot, Namjoon silent beside him. They pause at the threshold of the storeroom the officer has been yelling from, and Yoongi steps into a tiny space that smells like dust and blood.

“He’s—he’s still breathing,” the officer says, where he’s crouched by the floor next to Taehyung. “Detective—”

It’s only too obvious he’s still breathing. The soft, struggling wheeze of it is too weak to be of any comfort. He’s curled up on his side, fingers curled into a loose fist by his head, rattling shudders quaking his body. There’s a lot of blood. Yoongi finds that his own breath stills, all his attention focusing on counting the silences between each labored breath Taehyung takes.


Yoongi’s glad that Namjoon is here—that he’s making the other officer leave. He’s glad, because his own knees are giving out and there’s ice jamming in his veins, and there’s a slow, dizzying terror bearing down on his spine like a mallet. He thinks his face is frozen, heart too. He can’t feel anything as he reaches for Taehyung. He doesn’t know where the wound is, doesn’t understand, only knows that the whole world is blurring bright and Namjoon is slipping on blood as he tries to get closer to see. Yoongi doesn’t even care that Namjoon will see them. Doesn’t even care that Namjoon—with his sharp gaze and quiet perceptiveness—will know from the way Yoongi pulls Taehyung into his arms what they have been to each other.

He doesn’t even care.

Everything in him feels like it’s falling apart, and he wants to put all of his energy into holding Taehyung together. He wants to erase that horrid rattle in Taehyung’s breaths, wants to unspill this blood, wants to unstitch the wound that dispels more bright, warm blood with each weakening beat.
of Taehyung’s heart. He wants to scream. *Who did this,* he wants to ask. *Why? What was so important that you had to come here, tonight, despite knowing it was dangerous?* He doesn’t know how to, though, because everything is a whirl around him.

Everything is raw and awful and Taehyung—*his Tae*—is drowning in his own blood.

“I told you to trust me. I’m here now,” he says, babbling, and Taehyung, limp as a doll in his grasp, still curls his fingers weakly over Yoongi’s. “I’m sorry I’m late, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, Tae—”

Taehyung’s breathing grows more erratic. His eyes shine in the low light of the room, tears caught like jewels in his lashes, and Yoongi reaches out to brush a smear of blood from his lips and chin. Taehyung’s lips try to form words, but it’s too hard and too late, and all Yoongi makes out is *safe.*

Safe.

Keep something safe? Someone?

But then a ghost of a smile flickers across Taehyung’s mouth and Yoongi realizes what it is: *it’s safe.*

*It.*

Like a secret. Like a promise.

Taehyung is reassuring him of something he cannot understand. With his words, with the smile, with the feeble squeeze of his fingers on Yoongi’s.

“Please,” Yoongi mumbles, in a litany. *Please, please, please.* “Please hold on, Tae, please—”

Namjoon’s already sprinting out, yelling to the paramedics that they’re here. Yoongi holds Taehyung and watches his eyelids flutter as he struggles to breathe. His face is dazed and scrunched up in pain, and drops of blood bubbles up at the corner of his lips.

It’s so quiet, at the end. So at odds to Taehyung’s loud, vibrant personality.

“I love you,” Yoongi says, leaning to press a kiss to his forehead. “I don’t understand it, I don’t…I just know. I love you.”

Taehyung’s eyes close. A tear tracks down his face, and then another. Yoongi feels his own chest tighten.

Yoongi’s always hated noise. He’s hated the backfiring cars in his neighborhood and the domestic clatter of roommates. He’s hated the constant whir of the printer in the station and the way Namjoon clicks his tongue when he thinks and the annoying rattle Seokjin’s snow-globe makes when he waves it around while he talks. He likes the quiet. He likes stillness.

He had been stupid.

He didn’t know.

He could never have imagined.

That

sometimes

even
stillness
has
claws.

2015

0 DAYS, 0 HOURS, 0 MINUTES


“Doesn’t matter,” Yoongi says, quietly, and watches the blood drain from Hoseok’s face. He feels oddly light, very floaty, unmoored from the world and the empty boy in his arms. “It doesn’t matter now.”

At the door, Seokjin comes to an abrupt stop. “Oh,” he says, and crumples a bit. Namjoon stills him with a hand to his elbow. Seokjin takes a large, staggering gulp of air and turns his face away.

Yoongi wishes he could break like that. Wishes he could live in denial.

He can’t, though. He has to know. He wants a name—a face—to the person who’d done this. Who Taehyung had come here to see, despite knowing the danger he was in.

“Hoseok,” he says, and clears his throat so his voice comes out clearer than a rasp. “Hoseok, we need forensics here.”

He ignores the stricken looks on Seokjin and Hoseok’s faces. Sees the way they wish he’d stop, collect his bearings, at least let go of the boy he’s holding to his chest. Sees the way they wish he’d let it end, so they can all traipline back home, defeated and dejected, and wait to be scolded tomorrow like schoolboys breaking playground rules.

He can’t end here, Yoongi thinks.

He can’t let Taehyung end here.

He can only begin.

“Full kit,” Yoongi says, and gently brushes a lock of Taehyung’s hair away from his forehead. “Quick, before we’re ordered to evacuate. Joon-ah, tell the others who came with us to look for any evidence. More than one murder happened in this place tonight.”

They leave him. Namjoon to the other cops; Hoseok to the medics. Seokjin remains standing there for a few minutes before he stumbles away, wordless.

In the heavy stillness, the sound of Yoongi’s heartbeats in his own ear sounds vulgar.

***

PRESENT

Jungkook is nothing like Jimin remembers.

This means nothing, of course, because the last Jimin had seen of him, Jungkook had been eleven.
Maybe younger. He’s a lot taller now, and built in an athletic, muscular way that suggests he clearly takes care of himself. You’d have to, to survive as leader for a ragtag gang of Extraordinaries.

He still has the round doe eyes and little mouth that Jimin remembers.

“Seagull,” he says, shaking his head. “What’s with the name?”

Jungkook smiles a little as he puts on water for tea. He still has the same bunny smile, too. Contrasted with his bruised knuckles and a knife scar on his chin, it looks completely at odds to Jimin.

“Busan’s known for seagulls.”

Jimin finds himself wandering around the apartment, looking at the files and cartons that cover every surface. There’s cheap exported liquor in most of the cartons, clearly smuggled. The files contain police information and medical records that Jungkook should never have access to. There are wires and monitors and computers too, some other equipment Jimin can’t identify, screens shimmering from every wall with shots of dark alleys or the insides of buildings.

“I didn’t think you’d be homesick,” Jimin says. “After what happened there.”

Jungkook throws him a look. The clothes he’s wearing swamps him—he looks like a little boy in them. His pajamas are worn and holey, hair still wet from a shower and curling under the thick cover of his hoodie. Jimin remembers the bright-eyed, sweet-voiced kid he used to solve puzzles with and feels an abrupt swooping emotion in the pit of his stomach.

The hands of fate reach strange places.

“I like the place still,” Jungkook says, hesitantly. “And some—some people there. Everyone wasn’t so bad.”

Jimin pauses in front of a wall. There are pictures tacked up here, red thread connecting one to the other, newspaper snippets and CCTV photos and handwritten notes all tied together in a mess comprehensible only to Jungkook. He spots Taehyung in there, smiling from a grainy dark, a big fluffy dog tucked under his chin. He spots himself, in his police uniform, awkward and unsmiling. And Yoongi—Yoongi’s there, too, making a face at the camera as Taehyung tries to get him to pose.

Jungkook doles tea into two mugs for them. “I thought of you often, hyung,” he says, and Jimin peels himself away from the wall to take the mug from him. “Like…does Jimin hyung miss me? Is Jimin hyung still doing those dumb magazine puzzles? Who’s playing arcade games with Jimin hyung? That sort of thing. Then I guessed you might have probably forgotten me.”

Jimin shakes his head. He had needed prompting to recall Jungkook’s name, but not him. Not their playground games and video arcade days.

“There wasn’t much to do when I came to Seoul. I tried to write to you,” Jungkook’s unwavering gaze on him is unsettling Jimin. “They wouldn’t let me.”

“They?”

“Before I tell you things, I want to know in what capacity you’re here,” Jungkook says, and bades him to sit down on the overcrowded couch. “Are you investigating me, as an officer? Are you here because my man told you my name and you were curious to know what happened to little Jeon Jungkook? Or are you here for—for Taehyungie hyung?”
Jimin contemplates this. He’s here because Jungkook’s men had been tailing him. He’s here because the name Jeon Jungkook, coming from that Extraordinary’s mouth, had immediately summoned images of that Bambi-eyed kid from school. He’s here because putting Jeon Jungkook together with the mystery of the Seagull’s identity—plus the code in Taehyung’s diary—had fired some synapses in his brain. Suddenly it had clicked that the Seagull could only be Jimin’s Jungkook. Jimin’s little weird friend that he watched being dragged away, at eleven, kicking and screaming because of something he couldn’t control.

He’s also here because this is one of the men Taehyung had chosen to put his trust in.

“All three, I guess,” Jimin says. “I just—I want the truth, Jungkook-ah. How do you know Taehyung? Why are you tailing me?”

Jungkook looks at the floor, slightly abashed. “I’m sorry my man hurt Yoongi hyung.”

Jimin raises an eyebrow. “You know—?”

But of course he would know Yoongi. Is there any chance Taehyung wouldn’t have spoken of Yoongi? None at all.

Jimin turns his attention to the pale circle of skin on the leg that Jungkook props up. “Did you cut your anklet off? Running around unregistered, now?”

Jungkook smiles blandly. “Of course. Can’t be an outlaw Extraordinary gang leader without breaking the law now, can I?”

Jimin remembers with sudden clarity his days in middle school. How, in between video games and comic books, Jungkook sometimes caught butterflies. The memory rises up in him like it had happened yesterday—Jungkook’s jam-sticky hands and pudgy legs, chasing after the pretty blue ones, capturing them in the cage of his fingers. Hyung, do you want to see something? In a flash of a second, he would clap his hands together to crush it. Jimin felt tears surge in his eyes the first time it happened, but before he could decipher the pang in his heart as pain at seeing something die, Jungkook would fold his hands over the dead butterfly and bring it back to life.

It was the most incredible thing.

It was the most incredible thing, and nobody noticed. Jungkook was smart about it, perhaps from having grown up in a neighborhood that watched with hawk-eyes for any sort of abnormality. He showed his little trick to no one but Jimin. And for the longest while it was just them, finding grasshoppers and beetles and moths to reanimate. They reveled in the secretiveness of it, the incredible taboo of making a dead thing alive again.

Until Jungkook’s mangy alley cat died, winter of 2008. Killed by eating the poison that someone had set out for rats.

You can’t, Jimin remembers telling him. Listen to hyung, Jungkook-ah, you can’t.

But Jungkook was wide-eyed and tearful the whole day at school, and watchful and wary the next. By evening of the next day, a Seoul institute’s leader had been flown in to come see him.

Here, the man had said, smiling a slick smile when he came to the school playground after hours. Show me what you can do.

The soft puppy that wriggled in his arms was fluffy and white. Jungkook took one look at it and his eyes welled up. Jimin felt the breath catch in his chest as the man looked up at Jungkook.
Come on, the man had said. I know you can do it.

Jungkook wailed in earnest when the man twisted the puppy’s neck. Jimin remembers the cornered expression on Jungkook’s face. At eleven, his kindness had vastly overwhelmed his understanding of self-preservation. Beneath Jungkook’s fingers, the puppy came to life again.

Remarkable, the man had said. And then a bunch of men in white suits had walked into the playground to drag Jungkook away. Nobody stopped them. Later on, Jimin came to know that his parents hadn’t fought for him. It was bad enough having an Extraordinary in the family—having one with such a frightening ability was too much for them to handle.

“It wasn’t a bad place,” Jungkook says. “Just weird. They’d teach us stuff—like a school, you know? Maths and Physics and language and shit. But they’d also make us do tests, figure out our limits, things like that.”

“Where is this place?”

“In Asan. Inside the police university. It’s government funded.”

Jimin frowns. That’s where he’d gone, too, for his police training. He doesn’t remember an Institute. But then, even to those in the accelerated program, parts of campus were off limits. The research wings and the Extraordinary Force’s wings, some of the buildings on the south side that housed special training centers, a few others that had dark windows and heavy security. Jimin had always guessed those were government secret training facilities. He’s interested to know that he’s not too far off the mark.

“I ran away from the Institute when I was seventeen. That’s how I met Taetae hyung,” Jungkook shrugs. “He helped me get out. He, and a few others.”

“What was Taehyung doing there?”

“He was taking classes there,” Jungkook says. “He wanted to know things—how long we’d been there, if we got to go home, and all. I couldn’t tell him to his face, so I taught him our code. You remember?”

“Of course. But you already know that.”

Jungkook smiles. “I told him to be careful with that diary.”

“He was,” Jimin says. He’d probably never have figured the thing out if he hadn’t already had an inside edge. “Taehyung took classes, though? At the Institute?”

Jungkook chews on his lip. “He wasn’t always a Seam whore, like the cops like to call him. He went to college at the Institute. He took Extraordinary Biology.”

This is in none of the records. Just like how parts of Jimin’s own history had disappeared from official literature, it had been wiped off any public records or sources of information they had on Taehyung. Interesting, how the connections were beginning to form. Unmarked, unrecorded Institutes, hidden in universities. Jimin’s recurring nightmares, featuring Taehyung who was connected tenuously to him through Jungkook. Disappearing records and Jimin getting into the force, courtesy of someone who knew how to make him look unproblematic. Shady scientific research on unwilling, minor subjects.

How much of this could tie back to this…Institute?
Jimin frowns and leans forward. “What happened to him? To make him end up at the Seam?”

Jungkook hesitates. His eyelashes flutter rapidly as he thinks, lips pouted when he says, “Hyung got involved with some bad shit. Had to hide. Dropped everything and ran here.”

“What bad shit?” Jimin probes. “Jungkook—you have to tell me. This is important. What bad shit?”

Jungkook shakes his head frantically. “I don’t know exactly. But something happened at—at the Institute maybe. He was—he was really devastated. A big mess. Slept on my couch for a couple of months before he pulled himself together.” Jungkook pauses a minute, looks at Jimin’s puzzled face, and continues. “I know that’s a frustrating answer. I know. But he never told me what happened. I can tell you everything else that happened, though. The stuff that happened around the time he died.”

Jimin squints. “He came to you for help.”

Jungkook nods. “I was putting a gang together, then, mostly people I’ve gotten out of the Institutes and runaway Extraordinary kids. We had a gang marker.”

“The slash across the throat,” Jimin says. He turns on the recorder on his phone as he talks, hopes that Jungkook doesn’t notice. “Poetic.”

“Hyung wanted that. I didn’t understand why, because I’d obviously not let him pledge to me. He was my brother, not someone who should answer to me. But he insisted I do it,” Jungkook shrugs. “So I did. We had an arrangement—a sort of agreement—that if the situation with the video got worse, I’d help him fake his death.”

Jimin takes a sharp breath. Why would Taehyung want the scar marker? And if he’d planned to disappear, to fake his death and slip under radar, then why had he ever gone to the Ace?

Jungkook grimaces, as if only too aware of the questions swirling through Jimin’s head. “Something changed, though,” he says, quietly. “Something happened to him, a couple of days before the shit-show at Ace. He wouldn’t talk about it, but he came here and said that the arrangement was off, he didn’t need me, he had to change his plan.”

A couple of days before the Ace would mean that that was the night Taehyung had called Yoongi. The night they’d spent together, when Yoongi had become convinced that Taehyung was breaking down, bowing under whatever stress he was in, almost manic with desperation.

Jungkook shudders and takes a sip of his tea. “So, when he said that, I got afraid. Started monitoring him. His phone, his location, who he was seeing and talking to. But I think he was onto me, because I never found anything too suspicious. I came to know about the situation at the Ace through a contact in the police.”

“Who?”

Jungkook sighs. “Kim Namjoon.”

Jimin files that away for later. “And?”

“I got there too late. Police was crawling all over the place, and hyung w-was—” Jungkook swallows, squeezing his fists against his thighs. “B-but, I thought—I could help. I could help him, of course, no one else could. No one else in the world. So I waited. I waited, and I went after the ambulance. I snuck into the ME’s office, and I put my hands over his heart, and I swear—I swear it on everything I am, that I held it there till it was beating again.”
Jimin gasps. He can’t help it. Jungkook looks at him, wide-eyed and still so, so young, and he thinks of what that night might have been like. Losing a friend, a brother, and then coming so close to gaining him again. What had gone wrong?

“He was breathing,” Jungkook says, with a shiver. “I’m sure. I was sure I’d saved him. And then I turned around, and—and someone hit me. Real hard. I don’t remember anything after that. When I woke up, I was back here. In my apartment. I checked CCTV, and—and I just saw me. Me, walking in. Me, using my key to enter. Me, telling one of my men that I was home safe, that they could leave. No one was with me. It was just me, hyung. And I don’t remember it.”

Jimin feels a bolt of ice shooting up his spine. “Mind-control?”

Jungkook shakes his head. “Usual mind-control doesn’t work beyond a range, though, does it? Taehyungie hyung liked to read about that. Amplifications and extensions. He said usual mind-control doesn’t work too far out of line of sight. And this…it wasn’t that, hyung. This was something else.”

Jimin scratches at his eyebrow. “And Taehyung?”

“I don’t know. I checked back the next day and—and I don’t know, hyung,” Jungkook’s lip trembles. “All reports, the cops…they all say he’s gone. I never saw him or heard from him after that.”

“Did you check the CCTV at the ME’s office?”

“What do you think? Wiped, of course.” Jungkook says, bitterly. “Hyung never said anything about a family, but someone paid for cremation. It was all really quick, but I went to that funeral home. They say it happened. Their…uh, their CCTV confirms it. I’d hoped…hoped it would be fake, but it wasn’t. Someone wanted him dead very badly.”

They go quiet for a while after that, both of them thinking through the tangled mess of it all. Jungkook worries a little hole on his pajamas. His gaze flicks up to Jimin apologetically.

“When they opened the case again, I looked into who was handling it and was surprised to see you, hyung,” Jungkook says. “I put a tail on you because I wanted to know what was going on. I’m sorry if I worried you.”

“You’ve helped more than you’ve hurt,” Jimin says. “Though Yoongi hyung might not see it that way. Did Taehyung ever talk to anyone other than Yoongi hyung? All this time you knew him—did you notice anyone he was commonly in correspondence with?”

“Namjoon, from the police,” Jungkook says. “Because sometimes Yoongi wasn’t around. But most commonly he’d talk to someone he called H. I asked him once and he said they were two of a pair—H and M. Taetae hyung was M.”

H wasn’t an initial, then. Code, again? Jimin pulls his phone out to make a note of it. “Do you know more about them?”

“Hyung spoke about them a lot, said they were old friends. I always guessed H is someone in the police. The times I monitored him, they seemed very in-the-know in their messages. I used to think it might be his brother—”

“Taehyung has a brother?”

“Had. He ran away from home, apparently, when hyung was little. He never said much about his
hyung but I got the feeling that they might have been in contact. He said his hyung came to see him once, here in this apartment, when he was living here after whatever happened at the Institute.”

“You never saw his face? No name?”

Jungkook shakes his head. “H is not his brother. I’m sure. H gave him information, sometimes. Places to go, people to see that isn’t known anywhere else. Sort of like his own informant. Whatever happened, whatever he came to know that made him change his plans that day, it came from H,” Jungkook rubs at the scar on his chin as he thinks. “I’d ask someone who knew them from university, maybe. They’d been friends for years, as far as I can tell.”

Jimin nods. University—that’s already a common thread that’s looping through everything Jimin has questions on. He’ll have to go back to Asan with Yoongi, maybe. Ask around as much as he can. If the Institute really is secretive and government funded, there’s a bleak chance that they’ll be allowed in. They still have to try. He thinks maybe that nothing can help in this case more than talking to people who knew Taehyung. It’s just like Yoongi had said. Taehyung is more than a double-agent and a thick, dusty file. He was a person. A complicated, secretive, unpredictable person. If Jungkook could fill in some blanks about him, how much would this H person fill?

“This case is a mess.”

Jungkook smiles—small and serious—to himself. “Didn’t think this is how I’d run into you again, hyung.”

“Me either.”

“I hope you don’t mind. I looked you up a bit, too,” Jungkook says, reluctantly. “Your—uh. Your memory loss. I was intrigued because of what happened with me, that night in the ME’s office when I went to help Taehyangie hyung.”

Jimin’s heart flutters. “And?”

“And I couldn’t find any real answers, but I found something that might be interesting to you.”

He stands up to walk over to the wall of threads and pictures. Jimin follows, curious, concerned at the grave expression on Jungkook’s office. Jungkook plucks out a photo and passes it over. It’s grainy, most likely a printout of a blowup from some wider photograph, and the background is some sort of campus festival or event.

The people in the photograph are unmistakable though. They have their arms around each other, squeezed tight. Their smiles are bright, breathless. They look young and happy, more than a little punch-drunk in love.

Jimin inhales sharply at the sight of his own face. “Kookie,” he says, head spinning, “What is this?”

Jungkook makes a small noise. “I have…I have a few more, hyung. I can show you.”

Jimin reels. He doesn’t remember this. Wherever this was, whenever this was, he doesn’t remember it. But it’s not his own face in a photo he doesn’t remember that gives him pause.

It’s the other boy.

The other boy—holding him so, so tight, big grin on his face and messy hair in his eyes—is Kim Taehyung.
Hoseok, when he arrives at the hospital, pauses at the threshold of Yoongi’s room. Yoongi raises his eyebrows, confused at him standing there with his shoulders stiff and gaze darting, and then realizes that it’s probably because he’s not alone.

“They worked the case, too,” Yoongi says, looking between Namjoon and Seokjin. “They deserve to know, too.”

Hoseok’s mouth makes the sad triangle shape. Yoongi would really eat coal-fire to never see that again. Hoseok is obviously distressed, moving from foot to foot, running a hand through his hair nervously as he walks in. He looks a mess.

“It’s okay, Seok-ah,” Yoongi says, gruffly. “Whatever you have to tell me—it’s okay.”

Hoseok tugs lightly at his hair again. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Let’s just—let’s just talk.”

“I should’ve come to you sooner, hyung,” Hoseok mumbles. “But there was no—no proof, and I didn’t want to…”

*Give you false hope*, Yoongi fills the blanks. Hoseok is right. Ever since the blood-type misinformation had caught his eye, Yoongi has been thinking of it. What if. What if Taehyung is alive? What if this is all some elaborate scheme to some end that Yoongi cannot foresee? Taehyung is smart enough. He’s sneaky enough, to pull some shit like this. But would he? And if he did, Yoongi wonders, can he forgive him?

It’s been three years. Three years, and Taehyung has never left his mind. He sticks around, flitting through Yoongi’s dreams, sometimes bright, sometimes a bloody nightmare. They say you often forget the voices of the dead before their face, but Taehyung’s voice stays with Yoongi. The rich, deep timbre of it. The slight accent and idiosyntactics. Taehyung haunts Yoongi from between case file pages and that dumb, cracked phone’s wallpaper, and Yoongi doesn’t know if he can dredge up enough kindness to forgive all this if he’s been fooled.

But he couldn’t have been.

Taehyung, for all his bizarre unpredictability, had never displayed the slightest hint of cruelty. He’d never have voluntarily stayed in the shadows all this time, watching Yoongi from a distance, and let him stew in his misery without doing anything.

Yoongi knows this. Surer than the sun—he knows this.

“I thought this might come up,” Hoseok squeaks, once he’s sitting down and the three of them are all looking at him. “Thought it might come up the last time when you were investigating, too, but back then I was too nervous about it to even *do* anything. This time, I had Jimin pull up something for me.”

Yoongi sighs. “In return for the report?”

Hoseok’s eyes narrow, and he looks straight at Yoongi. “Report, and information. I thought he deserved to know about that meeting you had with Taehyung. Don’t you?”

Yoongi concedes that. He watches as Hoseok pulls out of his bag a laptop, a USB drive, and a file of what looks like photos and notes. He passes the file to Yoongi, and then opens the laptop. “I thought
the files were wiped,” he says. “They were, the last anyone checked. But I asked Jimin to pull this as a favor for me, no explanations, and he got someone to do it. And surprise, surprise. They’d not been wiped after all. Just…buried.”

“Me,” Seokjin croaks, in surprise. “Jimin got me to do it.”

Namjoon raises his brows. “Why the hell would you help anyone?”

Seokjin gives a breathy sigh. “Wasn’t too hard. It was just under a basic cryptographic wrap.”

“Still. Why would you help?”

“Can’t I just do a good deed?” Seokjin asks, but Namjoon just raises his brows further. Seokjin throws his hands up. “Okay, fine. He said he’d get Yoongi to do my stakeout.”

Yoongi turns to him sharply. “So you and Namjoon didn’t actually go on any stakeout?”

Namjoon looks at the floor, a nervous flush working up his throat. “Never mind that,” he says. To Seokjin he asks, “But did you watch it?”

Seokjin rolls his eyes. “It’s twenty-two hours of Hoseok’s people cutting up corpses. Why would I watch it?”

If Namjoon doesn’t believe this, he says nothing. Hoseok clears his throat. “Anyway. I have the video.”

“What are we watching?”

“CCTV feed from the ME’s office. Early in the morning of December 30, 2015.”

The video flickers to life. Yoongi sits up, trying not to let the discomfort within him show on his face.

In the video, Taehyung lies on a bloody gurney, still and lifeless. One hand dangles off, curving towards the ground like he’d dropped it midway to seeking warmth. The other is folded across his heart, over where the knife wound that had killed him is. The low quality video washes him out, but the fading color in his skin is still present at the time this video had been taken.

Hoseok reaches to press fast-forward. Seokjin, standing beside Yoongi, takes a slow, shuddering breath.

The video jumps through time-stamps. Around an hour must have passed since the beginning when Hoseok pauses. The time-stamps say 2 AM. They watch as the door opens, and a person enters. He’s wearing a loose hoodie, face covered in a mask, and his gaze immediately goes to all the camera locations.

He’s something of a professional criminal, then, Yoongi thinks.

The man approaches the gurney. His hands are shaking. Yoongi notices that he’s wearing gloves, which might explain lack of DNA evidence suggesting a third person. The man reaches for Taehyung’s hand, holds it for a minute before he shuffles closer to press his arms over Taehyung’s chest.

Two things happen next. One, Yoongi notices Taehyung take a bit of a stuttering breath. His heart jumps—it could be a trick of light, it could be rigor mortis, but hope is a fucking overexcited traitor
and it’s crashing through Yoongi with the force of a small planet.

The second thing that happens is a third person entering the frame.

The newcomer carries a steel rod. Hoseok’s breath hitches in his throat as the man in the hoodie turns around. The newcomer hits him hard on the head, quick and clean and fast enough that Hoodie falls instantly to the ground. Steel Rod then drags him away, out of frame. Then he’s coming back, casually swinging the rod, pausing at the gurney to press two fingers to the pulse point at Taehyung’s throat. And Yoongi thinks—no, he swears—that Taehyung’s chest is moving with the breaths he takes.

He swears it’s true, and he can barely breathe.

Steel Rod takes hold of Taehyung’s chin, forces his face this way and that. He leans over, as if to listen to his heart. And then he pulls the gurney out of the frame, too.

“What the fuck,” Seokjin says. He sounds odd, voice very high, a thrum of horrified panic running clear through it. “What the fuck.”

Several seconds pass. Then Steel Rod steps into frame again, only this time his shoulders are slumped. He’s staring at his bloody hands in horror, it looks like, shaking his head and falling to his knees.

Namjoon clears his throat. “That’s…that’s you, isn’t it?”

Hoseok looks up, his face crumpling. “I don’t—look, I don’t r-remember. I woke u-up right after and that kid—the one I knocked out—was on the fucking floor, bleeding. I had the rod in my hand still. I kn-knew it was me, I’d hit him, but I didn’t remember, but I swear I didn’t know anything about Taehyung. I wanted the video to see—to see for myself what I did that night—b-but it’s more than I thought, it’s so much more—”


“Nothing! Nothing happened—I just—Hyung. Hyung, believe me, he was gone. I checked right after because I was worried the hoodie kid had been there to steal a body or something, and he was d-dead, okay? He wasn’t—I wouldn’t have missed it if he was breathing.”

“But then the blood type you observed in the autopsy was wrong.”

Hoseok slumps. “Yes.”

“Hoseokie,” Namjoon whispers, “Why didn’t you tell us?”

“Because there was no proof to it! If I told you—if I had told you back then, you’d never have believed me. What would I say? I blacked out and knocked some kid out, and then sat in a corner freaking the fuck out until he woke up again and ran out the door? That the body on the table looked like Taehyung—was Taehyung—but then the blood type was arbitrarily wrong and didn’t match the crime scene? Everything happened so fast. Do you remember that cremation? There wasn’t even a mourning period.”

“They didn’t even try to track down his family,” Namjoon says, an edge to his voice. “I remember.”

Hoseok shudders. “I was—I was scared. I didn’t want to think about it, I was too scared. And then it was over, and the cremation was done, and we couldn’t cross-check if we wanted to.”
Yoongi opens the file to the photos. They’re all from the ME’s office, and all of them are unmistakably Taehyung. Or is it? How incredible—how insane would someone have to be, to fake something so intricate? They’d need a transformationist, or an illusionist. They’d need a second body to camouflage as Taehyung. And they’d need to do this all in…the forty-five seconds of empty screen before Hoseok woke up from his stupor and stumbled back into the frame, confused and upset.

Because the Taehyung he had held in his arms in the Ace had been the real deal. He’s sure of it. The Taehyung in these photos though…

And now, looking through a lens of doubt, Yoongi spots anomalies. “The scar,” he says, quietly. “The scar on the throat, it…it’s wrong.”

Namjoon crowds in. “The Seagull’s marker, you mean? There’s a specific ritual to it. They pack the wound with a sort of ash before suturing it shut. Some say it’s a natural deflector to some of the more mental abilities.”

“Where does he get it?”

“It’s a natural entheogen, from a plant. Grows in the wild a lot. But mostly college kids smoke it, like weed. We had a ton of it in Asan, hyung, if you remember—”

“Yoongi,” Seokjin snaps, “What do you mean it’s wrong?”

Yoongi looks back to the photos. There are multiple things wrong here, he thinks, as he looks closely at the shadow of it marring Taehyung’s long, bare throat. It’s too thin, for one, Yoongi thinks. Also, the edges of it blur, strangely. Yoongi’s snagged his teeth on the sharp taper-points of that slash, pressed his lips to each of those tiny baby blue stitches. He knows it’s wrong. The shape is wrong. Whatever trick they’d used—transformation or illusion—to create the doppelganger, they hadn’t been able to properly recreate this.

“So maybe—maybe the Seagull kid’s weird ash trick works,” he says. “And maybe…maybe this isn’t Tae, it’s an impostor. Another body, made to look like him. Still doesn’t explain who the hoodie kid was, what he wanted, or how Hoseok was…compromised.”

“Or the why of any of this,” Hoseok mutters. “Would Taehyung—would he do this?”

Hoseok’s gaze flicks up to Seokjin when he talks, and that’s when Yoongi notices that Seokjin has been just standing there, fists clenched and a far-off expression on his face, panic running a tender riot across his features. “He wouldn’t,” Jin says now, swallowing hard. “Taehyungie wouldn’t. Not on his own volition. And even if—if he’s alive, and out there somewhere, he’s not hiding on purpose. Something—something must have happened. Something awful.”

Yoongi narrows his gaze. “More awful than death?”

Jin laughs, bitterly. “If you think death is the worst thing that can happen to you in this world, Min Yoongi, you’re more idealistic than I thought.”

“Oh, no, I don’t think death is the worst thing at all,” Yoongi says, still carding through the photos. “There’s so much worse. Chronic, endless pain. Solitary confinement. Relentless torture. Grieving for a loved one.”

For the last bit of this, he makes sure to meet and keep Seokjin’s gaze. Jin just huffs. But his beautiful face is still marred with some secret hurt, and Yoongi’s slowly getting an inkling of what it could be.
The weird panic the night of Operation Starling. The running off first to the Ace, leaving the rest of them—even Yoongi—behind. The way Jin had just disappeared—when Namjoon and Yoongi were canvassing the area and raiding the hotel—only appearing gasping and breathless again when Yoongi was holding Taehyung in his arms. The way he’d pushed the case away after, unwilling to even really look at it, bowing out of it all and leaving Yoongi and Namjoon to face the music. The way sometimes, when Yoongi accesses the shared files on the computer, Taehyung’s file picture shows it’s been last accessed by Kim Seokjin.

“You ran after the murderer that night,” Yoongi posits now, and watches Seokjin go pale. “The night of the Operation, you ran after the man who killed him. You couldn’t catch him, but that’s where you went, because you got there earlier than us and you saw him leave. You left earlier than us because you couldn’t wait a moment longer. You knew Tae was in danger and he…he mattered to you, didn’t he?”

Hoseok sighs and folds his arms across his chest. Namjoon places his own hand very lightly on Seokjin’s arm, giving it a gentle, assuring squeeze.

“Is he family?” Yoongi asks, disbelieving. But Namjoon and Hoseok and Seokjin are all deliberately not looking at him now, and he snaps. “What the fuck, hyung.”

“We were estranged,” Seokjin says. “He—is—was—extended family. That’s all. It doesn’t matter.”

Hoseok nods at this, like this is a story he’s heard before. Namjoon’s mouth tightens in annoyance at the lie or plain disbelief—Yoongi can’t tell which. Lies, Yoongi himself wants to say. He mattered to you. But Yoongi only presses his hand to his eyes, lets the dark ground him. He’s tired of lies. He’s tired of all of this, and he can’t fight Seokjin on this right now. But if Seokjin takes his silence for proof of Yoongi’s belief that he had never met or talked to or spent time with Taehyung, then Seokjin doesn’t know him at all.

“Does anyone else have any fucking secrets they want to confess to? Like secret family or blackout episodes?”

Namjoon sighs. “I think we should focus our efforts on finding Jimin, first. And then we can re-group, re-look at this, dig into what happened in this video and how.”

There’s a heavy, horrid silence then. Yoongi feels like his foundations have crumbled. Taehyung could be alive, could be somewhere in this world, could possibly be saved. Or he could be dead, and Yoongi’s hopes are but ashes. He’s never felt pain like this after that night at the Ace, like there is a stab wound in his own heart. Jimin too, currently occupied the same Schrödinger situation—dead or alive or worse, with the Seagull or someone else, in the Seam or elsewhere. Hoseok had been taken over by some strange power once and had been last to see Taehyung alive—whether he remembered what he did with Tae or not. Yoongi doesn’t want to think of the possibility that he could have undone the hoodie kid’s gift. Yoongi doesn’t want Hoseok to think that—he’s clearly already torn up about the situation without adding a murder to the equation. And Seokjin—there are lies in his explanation of his relationship to Taehyung. But Taehyung himself had never mentioned him, had never seemed particularly interested in Seokjin, and Yoongi doesn’t know what to think.

Strangely, oddly, who he needs the most right now is Jimin.

Jimin is all tangled up, too, what with his past and the clear burial of his records to get him into police. But at least Jimin himself is a blank slate. Jimin himself has only helped—never hurt the case, never misguided him, never held back information.

He can’t do this without Jimin.
He’s wondering if it’s not too early to demand a discharge from the hospital to go look for the kid when his phone rings. It’s an unknown number.

“Hullo?”

“Yoongi hyung? It’s Jimin. We need to talk.”

“Jimin?” Relief balloons up in Yoongi so quick he thinks he’ll burst. “Where the fuck are you?”

“I’ll explain,” Jimin mutters. “It’s just—you have to come alone. To the Seam.”


“I’ll text you the location.”

“Are you—are you safe?”

There’s a bit of an interference, and Jimin sighs. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine. Just—I need to talk to you. I found something.”

“Me too.”

Jimin lets out a slow breath. “Okay. See you soon. I—I’ll wait for you.”

Yoongi looks up from his phone to the other three staring at him.

“That Jimin?” Namjoon asks. “Is he alright?”

“Yeah. He wants to meet. At the Seam.”

“At the—”

“Doesn’t matter. I’m going. I’m taking this with me,” Yoongi says, sliding the photos and files into his own backpack. “And the USB.”

Hoseok looks at him sadly. “Do you think—”

“I don’t know what to think, Seok-ah,” Yoongi mutters. “I’ll see you guys.”

Yoongi rarely believes in miracles. He’s been raised to see the world through a cynic’s eye, and then the job’s pushed him to trust nothing but cold hard facts. It’s surprising then that Hoseok’s video has lit in him not terror, not torment but hope—small and hesitant as a baby bird learning to fly—but hope nevertheless. He cradles it to his chest, all of it, messy and confusing as it is. Won’t let go of it—not until all this is done and dusted, all of the threads untangled, and he either has Taehyung alive with him or not.

He’d almost given up, he thinks. He’d almost let it all go. This time, though—this time he’s not alone.

Jimin had said it. He and Jimin—they’ll figure it out. They’ve already come so much farther to the truth this time than ever before. They’ve already learned so much more.

There’s danger—but when is there not when it comes to Taehyung?

Yoongi sighs as he lets himself out of the room. He’ll meet Jimin. They’ll go over the evidence. And then—and then.
I’ll fix it this time, Taehyung-ah, he thinks. We’ll fix it.

***

Jimin’s night has gone strangely.

The photograph gives him immediate mental fog. What does it mean? Is it a doctored photo, something created by some malicious entity on the Internet trying to misguide the investigation? But he thinks Jungkook would know the difference, and for all that Jungkook is Seagull and an unregistered Extraordinary, Jimin trusts in him. At least he trusts that Jungkook isn’t lying about his relationship with Taehyung.

Of course, Jungkook could have other intentions. Could be the murderer, for all Jimin knew. Still, his story makes sense. The things he’s saying makes sense. The blackout he’s described, during which his mind belonged to someone else, is exactly what Jimin remembers when he thinks of those lost years.

So—the photograph. It takes them a bit of image processing to identify the background as a campus ground in Asan. That makes sense in a weird way. Taehyung and Jimin had both been students in that general vicinity in that year—they could have known each other. But Jimin ransacks his memory and finds nothing. His first year in university is…surprisingly blurry and eventless.

“That’s strange,” Jungkook says. “It was right before your blackout years, so you should remember it with the most clarity. Right, hyung?”

Jimin thinks harder. It is strange, he realizes, because some of the events are clear. Some of the classes he took he remembers perfectly. But what had his first-year dorm looked like? Who had been his friends? Where had he spent his time after class? He has the faintest memories of kissing someone, dancing in a crowded room, and one clear, crisp memory of scaring himself shitless on a roller-coaster. Holding someone’s hand—he was holding someone’s hand. But he tries to creep past that memory, push past his own fear and exhilaration of being on that ride, and finds that the person next to him is faceless.

“I can’t remember. Why can’t I remember? Why did I never notice—?”

Jungkook squeezes his hand. “It’s okay, hyung. Just…try. Do you remember your first day? First month? Where does it become unclear?”

Around Christmas, Jimin thinks. It becomes unclear around Christmas. He remembers a party…remembers a room full of people…someone tripping over something and someone making a loud joke about it. He remembers a giant tree, mistletoe, walking around with a beer-induced haze and slamming into—into—

(There’s something behind him.)

—and whoever it is, whoever the person is, they turn to him with a smile and says, “Oh, hi. I know you! You’re Park Jimin. A friend of yours is a friend of mine.”

(There’s something behind him, something that creeps. He feels it, heavy and lumbering, bearing down on him. He’s walking down a hallway in the dark. The carpet is bloody.)

“What friend?” Jimin asks, but they just smile. It’s a funny little smile, square and wide. They’re wearing a beret, which is cute, and a sweatshirt with a sleeping cat on it. Jimin’s never seen them before. Do they go to the police university, too?
(The thing behind him reaches. There’s something in front of him, too, reaching from the dark. Something that laughs. Jimin, Jimin, Jiminie—hi!)

“He says you like strawberry cola,” they tell him. Quiet, conspiratorial. Jimin feels his heart seize. “Wanna meet me outside? Let’s talk!”

(There’s a knife in his grasp. The thing behind him is right at his shoulder. He has to, has to, has to—)

“Jimin, hey, meet my boyfriend.” Square Smile is saying, dragging someone towards him. “He’s shy.”

(—make the right choice. Jimin sobs. Taehyung steps into the light, gaze anguished. No, he says. Choose different. Jiminie, please. You have to.)

Square Smile’s boyfriend is cute, too. He has a dumb elf hat with bells on. He’s trying to squirm out of Square Smile’s grip, grousing about too many people.

Too many fucking people, Taehyung-ah, let’s go.

(Jimin raises the knife. The sour breath of the thing behind him hits the back of his neck. He shudders. I can’t. I can’t, I can’t, I can’t. Can’t look back. Sorry, Tae.)

The scene changes. He’s somewhere else, somewhere quiet, dark all around him and wrapped in someone’s embrace. “Jiminie,” they say. “I’m sorry. You have to forget.”

(He grabs for Taehyung’s warm, rain-spattered hand. Pulls him toward him. It’s almost a hug, this—almost nothing more than soft comfort. Except for the knife. Except for the blood. Except for the soft wail that he’s not sure isn’t his own.)

“Jimin hyung?” Jungkook asks, urgently. “Hyung? Hyung, can you hear me?”

Jimin sees his face, blurry and haloed with the lights around his head, but he’s also seeing Taehyung’s smile at the same time, hearing his cry of pain at the same time. It’s too much. There’s too much running through his head, all entangled, memory and madness and mystery. He feels it all swirl into blankness, sees Jungkook’s concerned gaze, hears his voice fade as he falls.

There’s darkness, but only for a while.

When he wakes, it’s morning.

He’s still in Jungkook’s apartment, but it’s empty. The screens are gone, the monitors—everything is gone. Jimin sits up and gapes. There’s absolutely nothing: no sign of Jungkook, no clue that he had ever been here except the dust bunnies, and the scrapes and scratches made by the furniture on the now bare walls. There’s nothing at all—the place has been wiped. Jimin struggles to his feet and walks around, mouth open in disbelief. Why? He wonders. Why would Jungkook run from him, after helping him?

On the floor near the door, trapped beneath a little broken snow-globe, is a USB, the printout of that photo, and a note.

I’m sorry, the note says. I can’t stay. I hope this helps.

He expected this, of course. Jungkook is in a criminal gang, leads the gang—he can’t fraternize with the police. To top it off, he’s an unregistered Extraordinary. He was always going to disappear,
vanish into the mist the moment Jimin wasn’t looking, but Jimin would have liked a goodbye. He would have liked an old friend to help him navigate this mess.

But maybe Jungkook has given him more than he could have asked for.

Jimin sighs. His phone is gone, he realizes. His wallet and all his money is still there, and so is his gun.

He struggles to his feet, head whirling. Stumbles out of the apartment, USB and photo and note all clasped in his hand, and walks until he finds a pay-phone.

There’s no one he can trust with his dreams. There’s no one he can trust to help him figure this out, but if he has to pick someone to call right now, his mind goes to Yoongi.

Yoongi’s lied to him, sure. But that lie still came from a place that wanted to protect Taehyung, to make sure he got the justice he deserved. Jimin can understand that. He can understand Yoongi’s dogged determinedness to see an end to this thing.

He’s feeling much the same.

He sighs and dials Yoongi’s number. Yoongi answers on the third ring, sounding weary. “Hello?”

“Yoongi hyung,” Jimin says, clutching the photo tight in his hand. “It’s Jimin. We need to talk.”

Chapter End Notes

BOY I’m never writing angst again owwww

Me: I will finish this in 6 chapters
Also me: HAHAHAHAHA fat chance loool. Maybe in 8.
Also me: What about a prequel set in college encompassing all these older events huh? HUHHH? I could do Tae POV I miss my bb :/

Here’s a clue because one of you brilliant people theorized this on Twitter: the chapter names DO mean things. This one’s called ravens. Tweet or comment if anyone figures out why.

Follow me on twt where I fangirl about my boys and cry about this #murderfic and occasionally post shitty AU threads and ideas. Now you can also yell at me on curiouscat. I am diversifying socially. It is v exciting.

As always here, of course, is the tumblr
Y’all really keep me going, this fic is insane on my brain cells, it feels like exercise and I hate exercise

GIMME SUSPICIONS
Chapter Summary

The past is a strange landscape. The present is worse.

Chapter Notes

(This was beta-ed VERY quickly because I have to travel the next few days; please forgive typos

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In the afternoon light, the cafe where Yoongi used to meet Taehyung looks alien to him. It’s just at the borders of the Seam, past the tollbooth, and not a lot of people that live in the Seam go there. The menu is one of the problems—very American-style—and portions are smaller sized than normal. Yoongi’s pretty sure the locals ignore it. Not many in the Seam will spend money on coffee when they can spend it on rice. But the cafe itself is positioned smartly: Seam enough without being Seam, at a cross-roads, appealing to Extraordinary enthusiasts who want to get close to the hot spots of illegal activity without actually being in the line of fire.

The first time Yoongi met Taehyung here, after being assigned as his handler, Taehyung had worn a mask and thick, amber-lensed aviators.

“Really?” he’d asked, sliding into the booth across from him. “Top Gun? Are you looking for chances to redeem yourself, pilot Mav?”

Taehyung watched him for a fraction of minute—something faint and incomprehensible twisting his expression—and then recovered with a smile. “Take me to bed or lose me forever, Yoongi-ssi.”

Yoongi bit his lip to keep his smile in. Taehyung sighed.

“You’re supposed to say show me the way home, honey.”

“I’m not calling you honey.”

“I’ll settle for baby, then.”

Yoongi remembers laughing at him. He remembers the apprehensive way Taehyung had watched him, seen it melt like ice under sun over the course of their next few meetings. A good thing, Yoongi used to think, because his higher-ups were forever pressuring him to gain trust with Taehyung. Not a good thing, he thought later, one night with Taehyung asleep in his bed, the lavender light from the street outside splaying soft on his bare back.

They’d gotten too tangled up too soon.

And now—if Taehyung was still alive, somewhere, where does that leave them? It’s a selfish thought. It’s a self-centered, egotistic position to even think from, but he can’t help it. I love you, he
thinks, thinking back to that night, trying it again for fit because this is the first time he’s been able since. Still do.

Jimin’s sitting in a booth half-hidden from the rest of the cafe due to its taller than usual seat-backs. He has a drink, a photo in front of him, and a consternated look on his face. Yoongi tries not to let the relief show on his face but thinks he fails anyway. Jimin’s young, he’s bright, he’s brash. He’s too much like Taehyung. It’s hard to imagine losing him to this case, too.

Jimin’s expression falters when he looks up. “Hi hyung,” he says. “Found this place easy?”

“Yeah. Turns out I’m a return visitor.”

“You know Taemin hyung, then?”

“We’ve met,” Yoongi says. “Do you come here often?”

Jimin nods. “Only all the time.”

Yoongi squirms a bit in his seat. It shouldn’t be weird that Jimin had called him here. Shouldn’t be odd that it’s the same cafe he always met Taehyung. It’s just that there are too many coincidences lining up for it to be nothing. “I used to meet Taehyung here.”

Something ravaging filters slowly through Jimin’s expression. His throat moves convulsively. “Oh,” he says. Then: “Did he ever say anything about…me?”

“Who, Tae? No. Why? Did you know him? Is there—are you not telling me something?” Yoongi leans forward in his seat. He doesn’t care if he’s talking too fast, if Jimin’s looking at him with wide, conflicted eyes. Everything is awful and wonderful and horrible and he just wants answers, for once. He just wants to know. “Do you know—know where he is?”

Jimin looks stricken. “Hyung, I—w-where he is? What do you mean?”

Yoongi forces himself to lean back. His heart is still going too fast; hasn’t stopped since he saw that video. Hasn’t stopped since he saw Taehyung breathing on that gurney, dead and then not, gone forever and then not. Yoongi feels like there is a hot melt of metal in his chest, burning through him, and it’s all he can do to sit still.

“We found something,” he says. “Tae…Taehyung died at the Ace, but he was brought back. Back to life.”

Jimin bites his lip. “Yes. I—I know. The Seagull.”

“The S—what?”

“He’s a necromancer,” Jimin says. “He was—is—a friend of mine. The cola friend. His name is Jeon Jungkook.”

And then Jimin tells him everything. If it had been strange to watch it through an adulterated CCTV footage, it’s even weirder hearing it from the Seagull’s perspective. Something snags in Yoongi’s mind when he hear of Taehyung having taken classes at the University. Something sharp and jagged tears through the rice-paper veil he throws over the bad stuff, and he thinks he needs to re-look, but there’s something stopping him.

A wall.
The more he tries to recapture that feeling, the farther it gets from him, until he has to stop Jimin to start taking notes.

_Institute_, he writes. _Extraordinary Biology._

The words swim through his brain and slam against that wall and don’t get anywhere.

_Taehyung_, he writes. _Taehyung, Taehyung, Taehyung._

“He gave me this,” Jimin says, once Yoongi fills him in on how it was Hoseok under mind-control who had hit Jungkook, how he’d somehow swapped bodies, how the blood type was then erroneous. Yoongi takes the photo from Jimin and flips it over. It shows a younger looking Taehyung and Jimin at a party somewhere, smiles bright, looking so, so happy. “I don’t—don’t know what this is. It…triggered something.”

Something sticks painfully in Yoongi’s throat. He says nothing. An inexplicable urge rises in him to touch the photo. He does, swiping the pad of his finger quickly over their faces. Across him, Jimin makes a small noise in his throat, a strangled little thing that could pass for a sob.

“Hyung,” he says, and then nothing. Yoongi nods. There’s something weird and electric between them now. It’s like waiting at a threshold of an unknown house without an invitation, and they’re both terrified. Jimin’s fingers shake. He takes a sip of his drink and watches Yoongi with the eyes of a cornered animal.

“Triggered…what?” Yoongi asks, carefully.

“A memory, maybe,” Jimin’s voice is hesitant. “You know about my memory loss?”

“You think you knew him,” Yoongi breathes. “From before.”

“I saw…saw him at a party. In my dream. Vision. Whatever. He was—he was loud. Very smiley.”

Yoongi lets his breath out in a slow exhale. “But you don’t remember him.”

“No,” Jimin’s voice is raspy. “I can’t—no matter how much I try, I…I can’t place him. Can’t place this photo.”

“He could be alive,” Yoongi says. “Taehyung, he…”

“This man with the mind-control,” Jimin says, hastily. “Whoever he is, he’s the one that knows. If we can track him down—”

“Where do we even start with that? He doesn’t show up in the CCTV. Your friend, the Seagull, has been trying to track him down. Did he have any luck?”

“He investigated it, yes.”

“And he found nothing,” Yoongi mutters. “Where do we start?”

Jimin holds up a USB. “With this,” he says. “Jungkook gave it to me. I don’t know what’s in it, but it has to be a lead.”

Yoongi nods. For a while they sit quiet, drinking and thinking, both of them lost in the swirl of their own thoughts. Yoongi keeps trying to push at the wall in his head. _There’s your costume, hyung, you’re a pornstar._ Taehyung, walking in his head across a quad, dressed oddly in pajamas with a weird blue bathrobe hanging off his shoulders. Taehyung, sitting on a high table in what looks like a
lab, legs crossed and frowning as he works on a laptop. Taehyung, pressing his hands to Yoongi’s heart: secret, secret, we’ll keep it a secret. Forget. You have to forget.

And now, a flicker of something else. Someone else.

(“—meet my boyfriend. He’s shy. Yoongi hyung—hyung—meet Jiminnie. He’s a first year!”)

Yoongi looks at Jimin and Jimin looks back. Does Jimin have funny thoughts, vignettes, dreams like this? Yoongi already thinks he does. He’d just mentioned one. Did Taehyung tell him about secrets too? Did he ask Jimin to forget, too? Are there photos of Yoongi and Taehyung—like this, like the one Jimin has—of them holding hands or smiling or doing something weird and young and stupid?

Why had Taehyung kept so many secrets? Where is the common link between everything that had happened to him and all these unmoored, fantastical memories living within Yoongi and Jimin? Had Taehyung known Jimin before? How did the university fall into place amidst all these loose threads?

“Did you come here often?” Jimin asks, quietly. “When you were meeting each other?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t know if I did,” Jimin says. “I don’t remember. It’s all just a blank void. Three years, almost. Maybe parts of before, too. I don’t like it, hyung. I don’t like knowing what I could have done in those years. Who I could’ve hurt.”

“You didn’t hurt anyone.”

Jimin’s face flushes red with anguish. “You don’t know that. You don’t know that, hyung. What if I hurt people? What if I killed them?”

“You didn’t hurt anyone,” Yoongi says. “It wasn’t you, Jimin-ah. Whatever happened to you—whoever took over you—it wasn’t you. You were just an instrument for their twisted work. You were a victim. You didn’t hurt anyone.”

Jimin’s jaw clenches. He clutches his glass tight. “Would you say that even if—if it was him I hurt?”

Yoongi narrows his gaze. “What do you mean?”

“H-Hypothetically,” Jimin grits out, “If it was me who stabbed Taehyung. If it was me who pushed that knife in hard enough to rip through bone. Would you still say I’m a fucking victim, hyung?”

Yoongi balks. “But you didn’t.”

“W-What if I did?”

Yoongi feels the panic racing in his veins, the breath whistling in his lungs. No, he thinks. No, no, no. Jimin is looking at him with wide, tearful eyes, hands clenched so tight on the edges of the table that his knuckles are white. His face is pale, bloodless, leached off color. His chest heaves in terror.

“What if I did,” he starts, and then falls into a litany. “What if I did, what if—”

“Stop saying that. You didn’t. You can’t have.”

“I know how it felt. I know how it felt, doing it—I know h-he—I don’t want to hurt him,” Jimin says, painfully earnest, pushing his hair out of his eyes and reaching across the table for Yoongi’s wrist. “I don’t want to. I have to, though. Everyday I have to—I have to—”
“Jimin, calm down.”

Jimin just shakes his head. “I’m making the right choice,” he whispers, and something about that snags in Yoongi’s mind, too. “I’m making the right choice. I can’t—can’t look back, I have to hurt him, I have to hurt Taehyung every day and I—”

Jimin’s grip on Yoongi’s wrist is painfully tight.

“I think it’s real,” Jimin whispers. “I think it was real, hyung, I did it. I—I stabbed him, I—”

“Stop saying that. Jimin—you have to stop. Look at me,” Yoongi snaps, and Jimin raises his gaze skittishly to meet his. It doesn’t last. He looks away again, horrified and guilty and lost beneath whatever terrible things are running through his mind. Yoongi pushes himself out of his seat and into Jimin’s, pulls his hand out of Jimin’s death grasp to grab his shoulders and shake.

“Fucking look at me. You didn’t do it. You didn’t. Okay? Even if—even if it was your hand that did the deed, even if it was your knife that took his life, you didn’t fucking do it. Do you hear me?”

Jimin just gulps. His pupils are still blown wide, panic racing across his features.

“You don’t understand,” he whispers. “He keeps begging me, hyung. In my dreams, he keeps—oh, God, he keeps saying please but I just…I just stab him over and over. Every time, I—”

“Ssshh,” Yoongi says, and curls his palm softly over Jimin’s shoulder. That’s really all it takes for him to break, at least momentarily, his face pressing wetly into Yoongi’s shoulder as soundless sobs wrack his frame. Yoongi wonders how long he’s been keeping this in. Ever since the memory loss? There’s a sharp burning ache in his throat that he pushes down. Along with everything else: all the exhaustion, the ugly pain, the anger.

Jimin exhaled. “I know you l-loved him. I don’t even fucking remember. I’m s-s-sorry, hyung, I—”

“It’s not your fault,” Yoongi says. He feels fierce about this. It can’t be Jimin’s fault. It can’t be.

“Look at this photo.”

Jimin makes a horrible, choking sound. Yoongi gives him a hard, angry shake.

“You fucking look at this photo, Park Jimin, and you tell me you’d have done that to him on purpose.”

He doesn’t know who he’s trying to convince, Jimin or Yoongi himself. Jimin’s breath hitches. There are silent tears running down his face now, and he clutches at that photo like it’s a lifeline. He looks and looks at it and slowly calms, sipping in gentle breaths, head still against Yoongi’s shoulder. He breathes. Yoongi lets him be. His hand has slipped to the smooth curve of Jimin’s spine over his thin shirt, but he doesn’t care. His own thoughts are racing anyway. If it’s real—if Jimin had stabbed Taehyung—

Yoongi’s skin crawls. The motherfucker that did this…that crawled into people’s heads and turned them into nothing more than meat puppets to play with…How dare he. How dare they violate autonomies like that, make good people into monsters like that. How dare they. If Yoongi could get them in his grasp, he’d fuck them over hard enough to annihilate them.

“Y—you were in my dream,” Jimin whispers, a long while later, voice cracking. “You were—you were there, too, hyung.”

“What am I doing in yours?”

“We,” Yoongi says. “We are drowning him. Taehyung. In ice. In a tub.”

Jimin looks subdued now, smearing his tears on the backs of his hand, slowly pulling himself up to sit straight. His brows furrow. “What does that mean?” he asks. “Why would we do that?”

Why any of this? Yoongi is feeling at now; a slow tug in his soul, a growing awareness that he’s caught up in something vast and confusing and full of massive repercussions. Jimin, too. They’re flies in a web, but who’s the spider? The Scarab? The Ghost? Tae, himself?

“I don’t know,” Yoongi says, grimly, and holds up the USB. “But we have this. Let’s go find out.”

***

Jimin brings them back to his apartment. If Yoongi is surprised at the location, he doesn’t show it. He parks across the street and they walk up the grimy, dimly lit stairwell. Flyers for masseuse parlors and Madame Yuri’s brothels hide the cracking cement beneath yellowed paper. On the first landing, a kid sits with blood on his lip and a yo-yo methodically slamming against a wall. He whimpers and crawls away when he spots Yoongi’s badge and cap.

“It’s not much,” Jimin says, ignoring how the next landing reeks of soju and tobacco. “After I regained my memory, I went home for a while. Around a month, maybe. My parents hovered a lot. Appa refused to help me pay any more tuitions for police academy. Said it was too risky, and that if I wanted to get myself killed, I’d have to do it with my own money.”

Yoongi hums. “Sounds tough.”

“Did some odd jobs and took some loans. I’m still paying it off. This place is very Seam adjacent, but at least it’s fucking cheap.”

Mongshil is rolling about on her back when Jimin reaches his landing, licking furiously at her paws. He fits his key in the lock and then realizes the door is jammed; it takes him and Yoongi slamming into it with their shoulders to break it open.

“I live with this other dude. He works in the restaurant below. He’s not around much. When he is, he’s mostly passed out drunk.”

Yoongi says nothing. He makes a beeline for Jimin’s old, bust-up personal laptop, and Jimin busies himself with getting a couple of lukewarm colas from the beat up mini-fridge. When he comes back, hands still shaky and heart still painfully fast, Yoongi’s just plugging the USB in.

“No password,” Yoongi says, waving a hand at the laptop. “Lazy.”

“My flatmate uses it sometimes. Throws it around if he can’t remember it.”

“Sounds like a piece of shit.”

“Piece of shit that pays half the rent.”

Jimin’s throat feels nasty and dry from all the sobbing. The USB whirs as it reads. Yoongi just sits there, steady and beady-eyed, shoulders slumped. Gaze on the laptop like this is going to spell out the answers to life, the universe, and everything.

A command box pops up. Answer a question, it says. Win access. There’s a little smiley and a tiger
“The fuck is this.”

“Taehyung being Taehyung,” Yoongi says, sitting up straight. He presses ENTER and comes across another dialog box. “Who’s the king of the birds?”


Yoongi does. The screen lights up with a giant animated GIF. _GOOD JOB_, it says. A unicorn circles it, spewing rainbows. There’s a weird squeaky sound effect repeating on loop.

Jimin gawps. It’s uncanny in their present states of exhausted focus. He looks at the unicorn for an incredulously long time, as though waiting for it to start speaking to them in a grave, deep voice. Yoongi seems to be doing the same, lips parted and eyebrows raised. In about a minute Yoongi recovers, cursing as he jams the ENTER key repeatedly. Nothing happens. Jimin takes over and tries to reboot the laptop. When it switches on again, the unicorn and those letters are back, taunting them in giant cartoon font. The squeaky noise begins grating on Jimin’s nerves.

“Virus?”

“More like a macro on infinite loop,” Jimin mutters. “We must have answered wrong.”

“King of the birds,” Yoongi says. “I don’t know. Eagle? That’s an important bird, isn’t it?”

Jimin frowns. He presses ESCAPE and ends back on the screen with the question. The cursor taunts him.

_Who’s the king of the birds_. Jimin tries half a dozen birds he can think of, and Seagull and—

“Hold on,” Yoongi says. “Let’s think about this.”

“Maybe an albatross,” Jimin says. “They have large wingspans…”

Yoongi blows out his cheeks. “It’s a trick question. The times he’s asked me this before, he always asked _what_. Not _who_.”

Yoongi begins trying names. He tries Taehyung, and Jungkook, and then his own name. Then he hesitates.

“Well, go ahead,” Jimin says, through a rattling breath. “Try mine.”

Yoongi does. Near immediately the screen blacks out, and a video player starts up. Jimin makes a small, confused noise.

There’s a bit of a blur at the beginning, some crackling as the camera is positioned by awkward, fumbling hands. And then it focuses.

Next to Jimin, Yoongi nearly drops his laptop because it’s _them_.

All three of them.

Yoongi hits the pause button. Jimin feels his hand crawl slowly into his own, and takes it without thinking. It doesn’t feel weird. It doesn’t feel strange at all. And in the video— _in their_ video, as well— Jimin is holding Yoongi’s hand. Sitting on Jimin’s battered couch, Yoongi’s face is shuttered and jaw clenched. He doesn’t look like he remembers how to breathe.
“We have to watch,” Jimin whispers. “This is—we have to watch.”

“I don’t remember this.”

“I don’t either, hyung. When I tried—when I pushed myself to, last night, it felt like my own mind was assaulting me.”

Yoongi throws him a heavy look. Jimin feels like he’s underwater. As if time has stopped in this room. Everything is shaded a flimsy, odd green by the light filtering through the blinds, and he can hear Yoongi’s heart thrum in wild panic. He himself feels uneasy, head spinning and the beginnings of nausea creeping up his gut, but he’s dealt with this before.

Jemin knows what it’s like: losing memory and then realizing you’ve lost it. Yoongi doesn’t have that knowledge. He’s shell-shocked, the hand in Jimin’s clammy, and a shiver runs up his spine as he stares at the frozen image on the screen.

The timestamp at the corner is a date in 2013. Their faces are so, so young in this. Taehyung stands center, hair pulled off his face with a headband, one arm around Jimin’s waist and the other at Yoongi’s back. The two of them are crowding him, and Jimin doesn’t require profiling expertise to pinpoint the dynamics in this picture.

The most doted upon, beloved, clearly cherished one is Taehyung. He’s the glue, the sun around which their orbits align. He’s the mid-point—their center, their axis.

Jemin shudders.

It makes sudden sense to him why this investigation has always felt like a three-man affair. Why at every juncture, every clue and lead has somehow been through Taehyung himself—dead or not. Almost as if he were guiding them. Sticking close, showing the path.

It’s Jimin, and Yoongi, and Taehyung. It’s always been.

“Hyung,” Jimin says. He doesn’t really trust himself to speak.

“Y-yeah.” Yoongi’s voice is raw. He reaches forward and thumbs dumbly at the play button.

Their younger versions look somber. The background looks like a classroom, of some sort, but it’s late at night. Younger Yoongi looks disheveled and dazed, like he’s so bone tired he’d just like to drop dead. Younger Jimin is in what looks like a muddied suit. Younger Taehyung has a bruise on his cheekbone, and his knuckles are raw and crusted over with bloody scabs like he’d been throwing punches.

It’s clear they’d been in trouble.

“O-okay,” Taehyung breathes out, in the video. “Log, Project M, Day 66. We have a problem.”

Younger Yoongi rolls his eyes. “Yes, Captain Obvious. Why the fuck are we doing this, anyway?”

“Um. So,” Taehyung pushes at his headband unnecessarily. “At 20:20 today we lost Subject D. We’re...unsure how but he attacked us, broke a window, and ran. This is—this is obviously not good.”

Younger Jimin’s eyes are wide. “Taehyungie,” he says, “We need to tell the authorities. This is out of our hands.”
“W-what do you mean? We can’t tell anyone!”

Younger Yoongi and Jimin exchange glances. Yoongi clicks his tongue. He tries to reach out to turn the camera off, but Taehyung blocks him.

“No. There has to be a record.”

“You record everything.” Younger Yoongi says. “For what, exactly? What if all this gets out, huh? What happens to us then?”

Taehyung purses his lips. “What if we don’t remember.”

“What do you mean?” Jimin reaches for the camera this time. Taehyung’s eyes are scared when he grabs his wrist to stop him. “Taehyung, enough is enough. We have to tell someone. This is—”

“—before his disappearance, Subject D was exhibiting multiple abilities and—”

Younger Yoongi squeezes his arms around Taehyung’s waist. “Tae, listen—”

“—we tried to contain it, but we’re not sure of the process still, and the Professor intervened—”

Younger Jimin gets hold of the camera. Taehyung tries to grab it back. There’s a bit of scuffling, and the video shakes messily. Over the noise, Yoongi and Jimin hear Taehyung say again, clearly, what if we forget. He sounds close to tears. Younger Yoongi curses. The video shuts off.

Yoongi and Jimin stew for a while in silence. What does one even say to this? Taehyung had been right: they had forgotten. Jimin’s not sure whose handiwork that had been. He’s not sure of a lot of things. What strange experiment had Taehyung worked on? Who’s Subject D? Why is Jimin the king of the birds?

Yoongi asks, shakily, “What other stuff is there on the drive?”

There’s pictures. Tonnes of fucking pictures, of the three of them. Yoongi’s fingers shake as he clicks through them. Pictures of them on some mountain, on a beach, in their dorms. Pictures of them at parties and in an amusement park. Soft, grungy, drunk midnight pictures. There are some by a pool, all of them in shorts, Taehyung sticking his tongue out at the camera as Yoongi grins quietly with his head pressed sideways against Jimin’s. There are some on the back of a truck bed, stars above and blankets piled on them, Jimin struggling to get them all in frame, Taehyung so much more gentler in sleep, Yoongi poised with a marker to draw on Tae’s face.

Stupid pictures.

Stupid, silly, young pictures.

There’s one more video—a minute long—that’s mostly just Jimin and Taehyung giggling as they break into Yoongi’s room with a giant cake.

“Happy birthday, hyung!” Taehyung shrieks, and Yoongi—sleepy and surprised and terrified—shrieks too, jumping half-naked right out of bed. Jimin nearly drops the cake and camera and saves both by a feat of magnificent reflexes; his reward is a giant smack on the lips courtesy of Taehyung.

“Stop, stop, you’re on camera—” Jimin protests, and Taehyung says, Look, I’m into that, and Yoongi calls him exhibitionist while licking frosting off his long fingers.

It ends there.
Jimin realizes he has his hand out, palm open, as if that would help him recapture that time. The time that had clearly existed. The time when they had all known and loved each other.

“Fuck,” Yoongi says. He sounds raw, awful. He leans into Jimin wordlessly, unthinkingly, and Jimin leans back. Everything feels fragile and breakable—even the air itself. The only real thing is the heat of Yoongi’s shoulder bleeding through his jacket. “Fuck. I don’t remember. I don’t remember him. I don’t remember you. I can’t—How did this happen?”

Jimin shakes his head. His mouth feel numb when he speaks; he’s almost slurring to get the words out. “D’you think—do you think he remembered?”

Yoongi’s eyes are wide with fear. “Tae? Yeah, I—I think so. His diary. Things makes sense now, in his diary. Waiting for friends that don’t come, birthdays that pass by without remembrance….”

Jimin’s insides twist. “Shit. That’s messed up.”

He looks at the picture they’re currently on—Taehyung in a red sweater, throwing a peace sign at the camera, hugging a giant tiger plushie while Jimin hugs him from behind. Jimin is smiling wide and attempting to bite Taehyung’s ear. It’s cute—sweet and young, the grainy quality doing nothing to hide the fact that they’re both clearly in love. Jimin feels awful about the whole situation—awful about the idea of Taehyung remembering them while Jimin and Yoongi have forgotten him. But the emotion in the picture itself leaves him cold. He doesn’t know what it’s like to love Taehyung. He doesn’t love Taehyung. He doesn’t even know Taehyung. He doesn’t know what it is like to love Yoongi, either, and Yoongi seems to be thinking the same because he won’t meet Jimin’s gaze. He’s shivering, focus turned inward, pale hands clenched tight in his lap. In a while he sits up and doesn’t lean into Jimin again.

“I don’t know what to do,” is the first thing he says.

Jimin runs a hand through his hair. “I think it’s obvious what we need to do.”

Yoongi looks at him. “Yeah?”

“Go back to the place where it began. Go back to Asan, and the Police University, and find out whatever it is that Taehyung had been doing there. Whatever it is, it had to be illegal. He didn’t want to go to authorities.”

“Whatever it is, we were all involved. We were—we messed up somehow. We messed up.”

Jimin nods. “That’s what I’m afraid of.”

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Yoongi falls into a pondering silence for a long while after that. Jimin disappears into the kitchen to make ramyun and Yoongi slumps on the couch. The ceiling is covered with entire atlases of waterscoring, mold biting the edges of the walls. He keeps his gaze on one of those patterns and tries to calm himself the way Kwon’s been teaching him to. He wonders if she’s taught Jimin the same thing.

It’s funny how a couple days ago he’d thought that he and Jimin only shared an office and a therapist. An office, a therapist, and this murder case. The murder case of a boy they’d both, apparently, loved. Now, lying on this couch, Yoongi thinks they share a lot more. The same university. A bunch of lost overlapping memories. The same maybe-dead boyfriend.

What else do they share?
Yoongi sits up and pulls Jimin’s laptop toward him. The Wi-Fi in here is spotty, but police files don’t take much to access if you have the right permissions. He pulls up the internal cadet tool and types Jimin’s name. Most of what comes up is shit he already knows—hometown and education and personal information and all that—with the glaring absence of the years he lost and the trial and any information on all that. He clicks through Jimin’s medical files from his recruitment and finds most of it satisfactory, until he comes to the test for Extraordinariness.

It’s classified confidential.

He quickly clicks on through to his own file, then a few others he knows in the department. Nobody else’s file is confidential, then why Jimin’s? He’s not an Extraordinary, that’s for sure. The force wouldn’t make one a detective, and if he had jumped through that particular loop somehow, there was still the matter of him being unsupervised and without an ankle tracker. Jimin himself has never mentioned abilities, but how is Yoongi to know for sure?

He goes through a couple more policemen’s files—including Namjoon’s—before he pauses on Seokjin’s. His report on Extraordinariness is confidential, too.

There are connections sparking in Yoongi’s mind that doesn’t make sense to him. Seokjin had tested most cops and informants for this—why is his own file confidential, then? How did that affect the veracity of his reports? If he lied about himself, then he might have lied about the others. He might have lied about Taehyung.

Yoongi dials Namjoon, then changes his mind last moment and disconnects. Something about all this is adding up strangely. The way Namjoon had looked when Jin mentioned his relationship to Taehyung. How he’d already known. How much else did Namjoon know? They had been at school together; if Yoongi and Jimin didn’t remember Taehyung, did Namjoon? Did Jin? The whole world couldn’t have forgotten that Yoongi and Jimin had known each other at university, could it? But that meant Namjoon and Seokjin had been hiding things from him from the very start. Just like Taehyung. They had all been hiding things from Yoongi—and now Jimin—and for what?

He calls Hoseok instead.

“Can you override confidentiality settings on medical reports from the examiner’s office?” he asks, before Hoseok can even get a word out.

“What? Hyung—”

“Hoseok-ah, can you or can you not?”

“I can’t!”

“Well, do you know anyone who can? And don’t say Jin hyung, because I don’t want him involved.”

“Hyung, where are you? Did you talk to Jimin? Did you—”

“Do you want to make up for the shit you kept from me for the last two years or not, Hoseok-ah?”

Hoseok inhales sharply. Yoongi feels his stomach twist. It’s unfair and opportunistic, what he’s doing, but he tells himself he has to. He has to. For Taehyung, for himself, for the sake of truth. “I—” Hoseok starts, voice quavering, “I can probably access it from the director’s computer.”

“How much trouble will you get into?”
Jimin chooses this minute to come back into the living room, two steaming bowls in his arms. He gives Yoongi a pointed look when he sees Yoongi on the phone.

“Fine,” Yoongi says, hastily. “I’ll text you details. Quickly, please. And don’t tell anyone else. Not even—not even friends.”

Jimin perches on the edge of the couch and offers one bowl to Yoongi as Yoongi disconnects. Yoongi texts Hoseok for Jin’s and Jimin’s files, and then plays with his noodles listlessly. He doesn’t remember the last time he ate, but he can’t work up an appetite. Everything feels pointed, tiny little knives to his heart. He can’t trust anyone, not even his own memory, and it’s as if all of the world is just slipping sand beneath his toes, unstable, capable of being stolen by the sea any moment.

It’s not a good feeling.

“Who was that?” Jimin asks. “Why are you looking up Kim Seokjin on my laptop?”

“Hoseok,” Yoongi says. “And because Jin hyung never tells the whole story about anything.”

Parents, Yoongi reads sideways on the page. Deceased. Siblings: one, undisclosed.

Something nags at the back of his mind. He pushes it away to focus on whatever Jimin’s saying.

—think we should look up buildings in the university campus. See if anything triggers our memory. Jungkook said Taehyung went to that Institute.

Yoongi minimizes the police portal to open up a browser. Jimin leans back as he puts his legs up on the couch, and Yoongi finds himself peeking at his ankle. No signs of tissue damage, no whiteness where the ankle tracker could have been, no chafe marks or scars as he’d observed in other Extraordinaries. So—either a bang-up spray tan job or Jimin’s never had cause to wear a tracker.

“This building might as well not exist on main campus photos. If it’s a secret government thing…”

“Namjoon knows a guy who could look it up on the Dark Web. All the government conspiracy nuts end up there.”

Jimin cocks a brow. “Why aren’t we asking Namjoon, then?”

Yoongi shrugs. “Because we aren’t,” he says. “Lucky for us, I know where he lives. Can’t be too far from here.”


My own brain is lying to me, Yoongi doesn’t say. My own memories are lying.

Instead, he bows his head over the bowl and focuses on the simple, mindless task of eating. Feels Jimin’s worried gaze on the back of his neck. Doesn’t give in to the itch in him to scream, for once. He’d thought he’d found hell once, in the days after Taehyung when every door closed in his face and every lead was a dead end.

He’s not sure if ignorance wasn’t better than this.
Yoongi brings them to a derelict building located somewhere within the Seam. There’s a sort of club in the basement, which is going loud by the time they make it there. Music thumps and flickering neon bleeds through every edge. Jimin feels the antsy, itchy feeling of being in this part of the city start up again in his bones, and keeps close to Yoongi as they stagger through the club’s clientele. Yoongi insisted on changing up their outfits and wearing masks, and they left their guns behind. Guns can’t help them in here anyway.

“Don’t take anything they offer,” Yoongi had said outside the club, eyes darting from person to person, licking nervously at his chapped lips. “Place is fucking insane.”

“Are you serious?” Jimin had scoffed, nearly yelling to be heard over the music. “I’m not a child.”

But the club is like the Goblin’s Market, and Jimin feels exactly like the sweet young girl lured to the sweetness of their wares. There are the standard deals—drugs of course, and pills, and sex. But this is an Extraordinary bar, so the other things on offer is magic. Mind magic, to soothe the turbulence in his head. Dream magic, to take away the nightmares. A beautiful woman on a shimmering swing high up on the ceiling is offering conversation—“Anyone you want, honey, I can look like them. Marilyn Monroe? Cleopatra? Your favorite idol? Anyone you want, for a whole hour.”—and Jimin sees Yoongi’s gaze flick up to her, full of curiosity.

What is he thinking? Is he wondering about the trick used to swap bodies in the medical examiner’s office? Or does he feel tempted, by her kind voice and her promises? What if she could look like Taehyung, for an hour? Would it help?

It could, Jimin thinks. It could possibly help. If he could talk to Taehyung for an hour, Jimin would say he was sorry. Sorry I hurt you. Sorry I keep doing it, even if it’s in my dreams. Sorry I don’t remember you—us.

“Move,” Yoongi says in his ear, so close that his breath tickles Jimin’s skin. “There’s nothing she can say to help you.”

They leave the writhing, thrumming floor behind for a flight of stairs leading downwards, into a basement. Grimy lanterns swing from the ceiling. The walls smell like dust and something darker, something earthy and herbal. With a little start, Jimin remembers that he knows what this is.

Talon.

There was a lot of it passing hands in university. Because everyone had been afraid, after Jimin’s whole case, about mind control, being forced to do things against the will. And this drug—Talon—burnt or worn like hemp or smoked, apparently deflected mental abilities like those of the person who had taken Jimin.

Yoongi seems to make this connection too. He sniffs once and then walks quickly down the stairs.

At the bottom, there’s a bunch of arcade game machines, pachinko booths, and game consoles. There’s a lot of loud ribbing and laughing, people at nearly every screen, but Yoongi passes them by and heads deeper in. On the very edge of the basement is a little area separated by glass, and Yoongi raps on it.

“Who the fuck is it?”

“Min Yoongi,” Yoongi yells back. “Open up, Wonho.”

The guy who opens the door can’t be much older than them, but he’s built and wears a leather jacket straining at the shoulders. When he smiles, sparks of fire run along his fingertips, and Jimin gets
antsy enough that he almost looks away. Almost. He’s learned long ago to substitute showing fear with showing strength. He steps up instead, shoulder to shoulder with Yoongi, and catches his first glimpse of the room behind.

It’s a hacker’s den. Screens all over, wires snaking criss-cross, servers breathing technical white noise into the air. Mainframes and boxy monitors and stacks of computer paraphernalia litter the space. Jimin counts six—seven, including Wonho—people in there, most of them in hoodies, although there’s another who wears leather and is currently sitting sprawled on the floor, typing on a bulky, self-constructed, weird-ass looking laptop.

“Youngi-ssi,” Wonho says, smirking. “What can I do for you?”

“I’m cashing in one of those favors you owe me.”

Wonho’s eyes crinkle in delight. “I don’t owe you any favors. I owe Taehyung some, but last I heard, kid’s been dead two years.”

“You’ve heard incorrectly, then,” Yoongi says, and rummages in his pocket. “How about I give you something, and you transfer all the favors to me?”

Yoongi pulls something out. It’s the USB with the CCTV feed that Hoseok had given them. Jimin feels a slow crawl of anxiety rattling up his spine. Why is Yoongi spreading this info around? With these strange, wrong-side-of-the-law people? The guy sitting on the floor is looking at them now, too, curious, and he sets down the laptop as he stands up to pad closer.

“Did he fake it?” he asks. “Taehyung, did he fake his own death? Sly bastard.”

Yoongi shakes his head. “We’re not sure yet. You’ve heard of the Seagull?”

The man with the laptop snorts. “Heard of him? That fucking runaway necromancer kid? He’s a little Eel.”

“Kihyun means to say that he’s a bit of a black spot for us. Kid’s good at being a digital ghost. Hard to keep traces.”

“If I give you his name, can you tell me something of where he came from? Specifically looking for the time-frame of 2008 to 2013.”

Jimin grabs at his sleeve. “Yoongi hyung.”

“Yes?”

“We can’t put him in danger.”

Wonho laughs at this, full and loud, shoulders shaking. “Min Yoongi, have you got yourself a rookie? Can’t put him in danger. If you’re a gang leader in the Seam, you’re always in fucking danger. What’s your name, uh—”

“Park Jimin,” Kihyun supplies, helpfully, now playing on his phone. “Just looked you up. Impressive school records, impressive university records, black hole in between. Care to elaborate? Oh—hey, never you fucking mind. You’re one of the victims from that whole mind-control mess.”

Wonho gives Jimin an appraising look, eyes widening. “Really? That’s cool. Still don’t remember anything?”
Jimin frowns. Yoongi clears his throat. “We’re on a schedule here. Do you want this maybe interesting video or not?”

A ghost of a smirk plays at Wonho's lips. “Do you want this maybe interesting video is not how most of our professional dealings start. You sound like you’re offering me amateur porn, Yoongi-ssi.”

Yoongi gives a gentle snort. “It’s what you get. So take your amateur porn if you want it.”

Yoongi holds out his hand, the pen-drive sitting center. Wonho and Kihyun exchange glances for a second before Wonho grabs it, an inquisitive look on his face. “Only because we’re curious about Tae,” he says, shrugging a shoulder. "Seemed pretty strange, yeah, the way he died? The Taehyung we knew would never walk into that hotel.”

Yoongi’s face is frozen. “Strange.”

There’s a bit of charged silence, during which both the hackers’ gazes zero in on Jimin. His blood runs cold, and he shuffles further into the dark. Do they know? Do they, somehow, see through him? Had they always known it had been him, most likely, his hand that held the murder weapon?

Kihyun gives him a slow once-over. “Always did think Tae went in there to bail out a sweetheart.”

“Yep,” Wonho agrees, eyes fixed on Jimin's face. “Love, and all that.”

Yoongi’s head also snaps to Jimin at this. Of course, Jimin thinks—of course it made stupid sense now a third person was pointing it out, didn’t it? Because what if he had been the reason Taehyung had walked into the Ace? What if Jimin had been both bait and the ambush? How convenient, how elegant: bring the boy to someone he loved, someone who didn’t remember him. Bring the boy to someone he loved, and have them wield the knife, too.

Jimin’s gut churns. He’s thinking of that stupid photo—the one where they’re smiling, at a party. He’s thinking of that stupid photo and wondering if Taehyung had been surprised by the knife. If he had been heartbroken.

But of course, if Tae had remembered them and they didn’t, he’d been living with heartbreak a long while.

The hackers exchange glances again. Jimin clenches his fists. He thinks Yoongi notices because he says, in a low voice, “We’ve been making small-talk long enough. May we get to business now?”

Wonho’s face breaks into another smile. “Oh. Of course! Come in, why don’t you?”

There are four others, Jimin notices, working on the computers. He’s not sure what they’re trawling through and what information is passing via them to those that may buy their services, but he knows it’s powerful, the shit that goes down here. Potent enough to bring down business empires and Extraordinary mafia lords. Sneaky enough to manipulate credit card companies and pyramid schemes. The last member of this motley crew is sitting in a corner, eyes closed and legs folded into a lotus position. He has on bright pink headphones.

“Shownu gets us information a different way,” Wonho says, winking as he catches Jimin’s gaze. “This way. Come on.”

They sit at a circular table, Jimin and Yoongi together, the other two to either sides of them. Kihyun’s blocky laptop switches on, and he uses a connector to wire it to a larger screen. “Now,” he says, folding his arms. “What would you like to know?”
Yoongi starts off instantly. “There’s a place only known as the Institute inside the police university in Asan. I want to know what it is and what it does.”

Wonho smirks. “Easy peasy.”

Jimin has never seen the browser they use. He’s never seen the kind of websites they pull up either—some are basic HTML, hidden information buried under proxy IP addresses and left to float in the Dark Web for only the most curious to find. Others are full color—high graphic forums, cryptocurrency and community worlds, virtual taverns where information trades hands faster than light. There are Extraordinary websites that can only be broken through by solving a mind-to-mind puzzle: for those, Kihyun calls Shownu, winking at Jimin when he leans in with his fingertips to the screen and pulls up wildly flickering code that dissolves into full webpages when he’s done.

“Ah,” says Kihyun, after twenty minutes of this. “Here it is.”

They both lean in. Jimin and Yoongi sit back, letting them do their job, simultaneously both dreading and anticipating it.

“The place you’re looking for burned down in 2013,” Wonho says, a few minutes later. “Massive explosion. Authorities called it an old records building, but it was entirely destroyed and no one was allowed in during the aftermath. Casualties as many as fifteen have been officially reported, but there’s no news of any deaths anywhere in public records. It's all very hush-hush.”

Yoongi narrows his gaze. “Explosion?”

“Blown up,” Kihyun clarifies. “It isn’t even just a gas leak or anything—it was blown up. NIS agents found traces of explosive material at site. This is not a public report—they filed it as highly confidential. But the place was blown up. It says they suspect a student.”

“Students,” Wonho points out. “The explosives were bought off a Deep Web site. The name used in the purchase order was Ravens.”

Ravens.

Something flits through Jimin’s memory. He blinks against a rising tide of it, fighting to stay in the present, but it creeps up on him anyway.

(Birds are fascinating, aren’t they, Jimin-ssi?)

Jimin chews nervously on his lip. Yoongi shifts next to him, leaning in, eyebrows furrowing as he stares at a file photo of the burnt down Institute.

“Can you tell me what the Institute actually was?”

(Birds are so interesting. There are birds in mythology. The wren is the king of the birds—)

Kihyun nods and begins typing again. “Trying to match the sequence in this report to something in their earlier archives. The NIS has an odd way of archiving…”

(—one of the greatest natural phenomenon is a starling murmuration. Crows are amazing, too. They’re all over mythology—)

“These files keep saying it’s an old records building. There has to be—ah!”

“It—ah, it was a research facility. Extraordinary Research. There were labs in there—government sanctioned. They ran human experiments on captive Extraordinaries. Trying to enhance them, or brainwash them, or make them into perfect weapons.”

Yoongi looks pale. “Weapons?”

“It says defense here,” Kihyun says. His mouth curls in distaste. “But who knows? Could be offense. Could be high-profile hitmen. We know America’s got their perfectly honed Extraordinary killers.”

Wonho pulls up a file. “I have a roster here, of agents in training for the government’s Extraordinary Containment Service. ECS, if you will. Mostly scientists and biologists. They were the ones who studied or worked at the Institute.”

“Agents in training?”

“They signed non-disclosure clauses,” Kihyun reads, flitting from one report to another. “They were recruited early. As early as 14, sometimes.”

"Catch them early," Wonho mutters, "Train them like little super-soldiers."

Kihyun nods. "The program is called Eyrie.”

Yoongi leans forward. “Show me the roster.”

Wonho does. Yoongi’s finger traces a path down the names, searching, searching. He stops at Taehyung, Kim, his face white.

Jimin stills. Taehyung had been at the Institute—just like Jungkook had said. It had existed, and he had been there, as an Intelligence-sponsored student, training to be a secret agent. And then, if the video they’d seen was anything to go by, Taehyung had not kept the lab and the Institute a secret. Because Jimin and Yoongi had known. Back then, before their memories had been changed, they had known. They had all been part of something, something big and frightening, something crazy enough that the Institute had been burned down to the ground for it.

What had they been doing at the Institute? What was awful enough that it required to be destroyed?

“No,” Yoongi hisses, loud enough that he startles Jimin. “I would never have gone along with this… not with human experimentation. I couldn’t have. It doesn’t make any sense. If we knew—if you and I knew, Jimin-ah, how could we have gone along with it?”

He looks rattled. Jimin shudders a bit in empathy. It’s no big secret--Min Yoongi’s general aversion towards Extraordinaries. He hates the inequality, hates the power distance it brings. He’s afraid at the prospect of losing agency, the way Jimin had for two years. The way it’s becoming clear now that Yoongi also had, to some smaller extent.

Had that agency been taken away by Taehyung? He’s clearly the one suggesting forgetfulness in the video. If he had destroyed their memories…if it was him holding the key to this part of their past that lived in some locked box in their heads…then how much of this game fell under his mastery?

They had all been caught up in something while at university, Jimin surmises. Taehyung had most likely removed their memories of it. Perhaps by himself, perhaps using some Extraordinary under his employ. And then he had portrayed himself a double agent, kept working the Seam, and disappeared, around the same time Jimin had come back to himself. He’d somehow faked his death
in the process—or miscalculated and actually died before Jungkook got to him. Maybe the two of them had planned it. And after Jungkook revived him, had he disappeared from the Medical Examiner’s office on purpose? Is he still working, in some capacity, for some shady intelligence wing of the government? Could he do that—to people he seemed to have loved or at least liked? Because that means all of Taehyung is a lie, careful and constructed, and Jimin feels awful thinking that. He feels awful for Yoongi, who had—if it was possible—fallen into Taehyung a second time.

Or was there something more sinister than Taehyung at work here?

*Scarab.* Whoever that was. If Taehyung had been scared of something, it had been him. If he had been hunted by something, it had been him. But who could it be?

“The Ravens,” Jimin says, abruptly. “Is there anything on the NIS’s archives about them?”

Wonho nods, and the two of them fall back into crawling through Korea’s top intelligence agency’s most confidential digital records. Jimin feels queasy. That voice—Taehyung’s voice—still booms through his head, repeating the facts of mythology.

*Odin and his ravens.*

*Huginn and Muninn.*

*Thought and Memory.*

Huginn and Muninn. H and M.

Jimin feels like he just touched a live-wire.

“I need to see his diary.”

“Informatics sent us a new file. I went through it earlier. Nothing in there except information on cases I worked with him. Whatever is there, I don’t understand.”

“Hyung, just show me.”

Jimin thumbs through the pages they have on Yoongi’s phone. *H says he’s playing games with me,* says one paragraph. And then again, two pages later, *spoke to H today, he says it’s best to disappear. I don’t want to disappear. Not yet. And again, a couple more pages after: H says he’s getting closer to figuring it out. If we can only get W in range. I think I might know how to do that. Dress up, show up, wait.*

Jimin turns to the hackers. “I need to speak to Yoongi hyung alone.”

They shrug. Both of them get up and move to another table. Across the room, the one that broke through the mental firewall watches Jimin with interest flickering in his gaze. Jimin wonders what his Extraordinary ability is. Mind-reading? Thought manipulation?

“Look at this,” Jimin says, urgently. “Jungkook said this person H knew everything. He gave Taehyung information. They were communicating as frequently or more than you and Tae did.”

Yoongi looks. His expression changes as he does, slowly morphing from confusion to further confusion. “Who’s W?”

Jimin sucks in his breath. “Me. I think.”

“I have a theory,” Jimin says. “Bit far-fetched, but everything fits.”

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Jimin’s theory implies that Taehyung had removed their memories. That Taehyung had either pulled the strings behind a lot of what had happened. That he had then either disappeared post-revival as pre-planned, or been forced to because of whoever he had been scared of.

It had all started in school, started with that shady Institute that had burned down. Started with hidden people in hidden places doing terrible, terrible work. Monsters forming under madmen’s hands; weapons shaping under greedy fingers. Yoongi and Jimin had gone along with him—willingly or because they had half-information—and it had all come back to bite them somehow.

Jimin thinks it was Taehyung who had destroyed the Institute. He thinks the Ravens refer to him. He thinks—no, *knows*, he says—that if Taehyung was M, for Memory, then H was Thought. And if Taehyung was an Extraordinary with the powers of Memory, Jimin says, then the mysterious H was most likely a telepath.

“But he isn’t,” Yoongi mutters. “Extraordinary.”

Although—he wonders—if he couldn’t trust his own head, how was he to trust a report that could easily be fabricated? Amongst a maze of lies and misinformation, what is one more lie?

His own memories are lies.

He tries to match those photographs to those flickers of dreams he’s had about Taehyung, and finds it matches up easily. A party. A Christmas tree. They stick in his mind like grainy, vintage polaroids, and he finds he can easily fit Jimin in them. Finds himself watching Jimin when Jimin isn’t looking, panicking, thinking in a loop that goes *do I know— do I know— do I know you.*

Yoongi had *known* him. Yoongi had *cared* for him. He feels the absence of those memories like an incision, a swathe of scarred tissue, still tender to touch.

And Taehyung.

Twice dead—once in his arms and once excised from his older memories. Twice loved—once in open innocence, once in secret. If he *is* alive, if he *is* a hard liar that dragged Yoongi into something he can’t ever see himself doing, then at least Yoongi wants to see him once again.

To know. To ask.

*(How much did you lie? How much was an act?)*

“I don’t know any telepaths,” he says, rubbing his chin. “I don’t remember Taehyung ever mentioning one.”

“It needn’t be someone in the Seam,” Jimin muses. “If it were someone in the Seam, the information they were giving Taehyung would be things he could have obtained himself. You know how Taehyung is so well known in the Seam. His informant would have to be *at least* as popular to get into things even deeper than Tae had. Do you know someone like that?”

“There’s no one that comes to mind,” Yoongi says. “Are you thinking police?”

“Police or government. Maybe someone else in the Eyrie. Give me that list again.”
Yoongi looks at the diary entry while Jimin goes through the list. *Dress up, show up, wait,* he reads. What were the chances Taehyung was talking about that day—that dinner date in the restaurant, when he had shown up all dolled up? That day when he had gotten that scar, the scar it’s creator himself said Taehyung had no real reason on insisting for? Was that meeting meant to be a trap, an ambush, for someone? For Wren?

It didn’t make sense, though. Any profiler worth his salt would read that situation thus: Taehyung had *clearly* been waiting for someone much older than Jimin. He had *clearly* been afraid, or at least wary of them. When Yoongi had explained it to Namjoon, Namjoon had said that he thought Taehyung might have been waiting for an unwanted admirer. Someone with deep pockets and connections. Someone he feared but desperately needed. His clothes, his jewelry, his demeanor—it all pointed to that. It couldn’t be Jimin then, mind-control or not. Couldn’t have been *just* Jimin.

“The guy with the mind-control,” he says, “They didn’t find him in any registries, did they?”

Jimin shakes his head. He’s still going through the list, brows furrowed. “None of us can remember his face either, so that’s a challenge.”

There’s a little cough from across the room. Yoongi looks up to see the big, brawny mind-worker saunter up to them.

“You need some help remembering things?” he asks. “I can help.”

Jimin and Yoongi exchange glances. Yoongi is wary of these men, wary of *any* men with power running through their flesh and blood like a live-wire, and he twists bodily away from Shownu’s offer of fixing their *heads.* He remembers the man hacking into shit, breaking down mental firewalls to sneak into hidden crawlspaces within virtual webs. The thought of him rifling through the contents of Yoongi’s *brain* is horrifying.

Jimin, however, sits up straighter. “How?”

“Jimin,” Yoongi says, warningly. “Don’t.”

Jimin just clenches his jaw. “I want to know, hyung,” he says, stubborn as always, curiosity widening his gaze. He turns to Shownu, resolute. “How can you help?”

“I work with energy fields,” Shownu shrugs. “Manipulation, mutation. Whether that’s tech firewalls or the firewalls in your head.”

Yoongi scowls. “No,” he mutters. “No, Jimin, It’s too dangerous.”

“If I remember,” Jimin says, “If I *remember,* hyung, we most likely know who’s behind this. We’ll know if I really went to the Ace that night. We’ll know about *us*.”

Yoongi shakes his head in sudden terror. He’s imagining the worst. Jimin thinks he can handle it, but if the intensity of whatever he had had with Taehyung was anywhere *near* what Yoongi had felt for him, then how do you *live* with knowing you hurt someone you loved? Voluntarily or not—how do you survive the memory of their blood on your hands?

How haunted would you become?

“We don’t know what’s been repressed, Jimin-ah,” Yoongi says, reasonably, willing his voice not to shake. “We don’t know if you want those memories. Don’t let him get his hands in all that.”

“I don’t need my hands,” Shownu interjects, before Jimin can reply. His pupils are pinpricks, face
devoid of expression, as if he’s seeing something inward and far away. “You dream of a hallway. A monster. A boy you love. You always choose to kill the boy than face the monster. That’s your firewall.”

Jimin looks at him, gobsmacked. “What?”

“Someone put that in your head. It’s conditional programming—an if/then loop. If you kill the boy, you repeat the loop. If you kill the monster…” Shownu trails off. “It’s very well done, a professional job. I’ve only seen this with some Extraordinaries working in the government. Especially stealth operatives with access to confidential information. They have firewalls—put in place by their officers. Once activated, they keep the information in their brain on lock-down.”

“Like a biological password-controlled file,” Yoongi mumbles. “Seriously? Who can do that?”

“Extraordinaries with telepathy. Some Extraordinaries with other mind-abilities. It’s a difficult job.”

Telepathy. Yoongi feels his heart skip a beat. “H,” he says, turning to Jimin. “If Taehyung and H were working together, and we follow your theory, it makes sense. One of them took our memories. The other put this firewall up in your head.”

Jimin crosses his arms. “But for what?”

“Could be anything,” Shownu says. “Protecting sensitive information. Making sure you won’t break under interrogation. Making sure mind-control can’t get past it to peel your secrets from you. Memory manipulators can’t destroy memory, only mask it. My guess is that if you or anyone tried to access the part of your brain that still remembers everything, you’d immediately trigger the dream.”

Jimin nods. Yoongi wonders if he’s thinking of the day before, when he had tried to break through to his memories of Taehyung. When he’d been with Jungkook and had tried to access the masked past. It felt like my own mind was assaulted, he’d said. I couldn’t.

Jimin gulps. “What if I—what if I kill the monster? How does the if/then conditional work then?”

“I’m not sure, but I think…I think if you choose different, you can probably recover your memory.”

“If I choose different…” Jimin whispers. Fear swamps his features. “If—if I choose the monster, I can, I can—”

“I can help you. If you want. I can help.”

Jimin looks pale. His fists are clenched so tight that his knuckles look white, and Yoongi thinks he might hurt himself. He reaches for one hand and Jimin relents, splaying his fingers open to squeeze Yoongi’s hand. He looks awful, sweat starting to bead along his brow, face leached completely bloodless. Yoongi feels a shiver run down his spine.

“You don’t have to,” he says. His voice comes out strangely high and pleading. He’s thinking of all those photos, and that video with the birthday cake, and imagining what it might be like to remember Jimin. To remember Jimin and Taehyung, to remember everything and then also realize how it’s been ruined. How it’s been broken. How do they know what’s under that wall? How do they know it won’t be too much?

Yoongi can’t let him do this.

“Please, Jimin-ah, you don’t have to. We can figure this out. We came this far, we learned this much, we can figure it out.”
Jimin grimaces. “I think I have to. I deserve to know.”

“You have one, too,” Shownu says, turning to Yoongi. “Never been activated, but it’s there.”

*Never been activated because it wasn’t me that was kidnapped by a mind-controlling freak.*

“Someone probably made it as a protective mechanism. With consent.”

“With consent?”

“It’s delicate work. Unless they had you strapped to a metal table, the only way they were going to put it in your head is if you agreed to it. It’s also temporary—it will fade over time. I don’t know how long, but some of your lost memories leak through, don’t they?”

The tub. The drowning. The party. Yoongi shudders. Remembers Taehyung asking him, in a riddle: *what’s the king of the birds, hyung?* Had he been testing? Checking to see if the dam still held? Checking to see if Yoongi remembered yet?

Jimin asks, “Why would we agree to it?”

“I don’t have all the answers. But if you want to, you can find out.”

Jimin nods. His gaze flicks to Yoongi, resolute, but Yoongi doesn’t know what to say anymore. Practically, he knows Jimin is right. Remove the firewall, break through to the memories, and they’ll know who H is. They’ll know why Taehyung—if it had been Taehyung—wiped their memories. They’ll know themselves.

But Yoongi doesn’t feel practical. He feels afraid, willing to stop Jimin from doing this if it meant he would be safe; if it meant one less thing from his convoluted past dying or hurt or tortured. Willing to stop Jimin because he’d known Jimin—and Taehyung had known him—and maybe—maybe some impossible part of him believes that the only reason he’s still going at this case is because of Jimin.

Jimin can’t leave, can’t check out of this, because Yoongi needs him. He’s never going to say that. He’s never going to be able to say that, just like he never could tell Taehyung what he felt until it was already too late.

It’s almost a welcome respite when his phone rings.

It’s Seokjin. Yoongi looks at the screen for a while, considering. Then he decides against it, and disconnects. It’s not halfway back to his pocket when it rings again.

“Who is it?” Jimin asks.

“Jin hyung.”

“He must be worried,” Jimin says. Yoongi hesitates. “It could be about the Ghost.”

Yoongi sighs and picks up. “Hyung?”

“Where are you?”

“In the Seam,” Yoongi says. “Why?”

“Need some backup,” Jin says. “Out on a Ghost lead, I think this might pan out.”

“I’m in the middle of something,” Yoongi mumbles. “Isn’t there anyone else?”
“No.”

Yoongi frowns. This is not weird at all, he thinks. “Hyung, what’s going on?”

Seokjin sighs. “I’d really like you to come here now, Yoongi-ah. It’s important.”

“Are you hurt? Is something wrong? Where exactly—”

“I’ll text you the location. You should come.”

Yoongi grits his teeth. “Hyung, please just tell me—”

But Seokjin’s already terminated the call. Yoongi scowls at his screen for a moment, resisting the urge to pull at his hair. What the hell did Jin need him for, now? Did he know Hoseok had been looking into his file? Did he even really have a lead on the Ghost? Yoongi shakes his head, trying to dislodge the thoughts rattling around within. Jin had known Taehyung; and known him more than as an ‘estranged family member’, Yoongi was sure. Jin had bolted to the Ace that night. What is he up to now?

His phone buzzes with a text. Yoongi opens the location on Maps and sees that it’s only fifteen minutes away, and deeper into the Seam. What’s Seokjin even doing there, alone? Everyone usually went that deep in with reinforcements, a partner, and at least one Seam contact able to offer protection. Unless, of course, Jin had some sort of protection.

“We have to go,” Yoongi says, making his decision. “Jin hyung needs me, you’re coming with.”

“I’m staying,” Jimin says. “I’m staying, hyung. I need to know.”

Yoongi heaves a breath. “It’s staying, hyung. I need to know.”

“That’s a risk I’m willing to take.”

“It’s not a risk I’m willing to let you. This is not a choice for you, Jimin-ah,” Yoongi says, his voice hardening. “It’s too dangerous.”

Jimin’s face looks pained. “Don’t be like this.”

“You’re my junior officer. You’ll follow rules.”

“Book me for insubordination, then, hyung,” Jimin says, stubbornly. “This is more than just about solving the case for me and you know it. It’s years of my life. I need to know.”

Yoongi throws up his arms in frustration. “You could be putting yourself in danger. You could get hurt. Why don’t you fucking understand? It’s not a little flesh wound that you cauterize it and hope it heals. It’s your mind.”


Yoongi doesn’t have anything to say for that. He crosses his arms and fumes instead, and Jimin’s face softens.

“I think I’ve been in danger for a long while now, hyung,” he says. “This is going to change nothing. Please just let me do this. Let me understand. It’s not fair that I have to keep wondering if it was me he came to the Ace for. What role I played, voluntarily or not. It’s just not fair.”

Yoongi looks at him. Really looks, wondering if the answer to Taehyung’s long-ago question—what
would you be if you were Extraordinary, hyung—is truly the ability to see the palimpsest that makes up a person. The past is a strange landscape, and the present is worse.

Yoongi trusts this boy with the gentle face as a cop. As a partner, with equal investment in this case. He trusts this boy, maybe, in terms of general moral alignment. Jimin is driven, he’s stubborn, he’s both self-effacing and remarkably selfless. Yoongi doesn’t know what to make of all the other layers that make up Jimin. The police university brat who had—apparently—smeared cake on Yoongi’s office. The quiet-voiced man in his dreams who had helped him hold down someone else underwater. The missing person, the survivor, who doesn’t remember two years of his life.

If only it were as easy to read people as it was a book. He would understand Jimin. He would understand Taehyung. He would understand Seokjin, and Hoseok, and everyone else who’s been dragged into this case like moths swirling giddily towards fatal light.

As it is, Yoongi can’t even figure himself out.

“At least wait,” he rasps out. “Wait until I get back.”

Jimin purses his lips. “I’ll try.”

Yoongi nods, and Jimin smiles a little.

“It’ll be okay, hyung,” he says. “It’ll all be worth it. We’ll know the truth.”

Yoongi’s never minded not knowing the truth—if it meant no one he cared about was getting hurt. Taehyung always gave him half-answers and he didn’t mind. Seokjin has been shady for years now and he doesn’t push. His first instinct, faced with Hoseok’s lies, was to reassure him that this didn’t change things, it doesn’t have to hurt anyone.

If he could, he’d drag Jimin out of here. Take the choice away. But he knows what it’s like battering at walls to get to the bottom of something, to be turned away and dragged down and sabotaged at every insistence, and he can’t do that to Jimin.

“I’ll be back,” he says. “Please just wait.”

He already knows Jimin won’t. They don’t have a lot of time, and this place is not the most safe or pleasant waiting room.

Not your decision, he tells himself. All he can do is get back as quick as possible.

Yoongi walks out.

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They all sit with Jimin in the center of the room, big fucking circle, like they’re about to perform a ritual to summon the dead or something.

In a way, Jimin thinks—they are. If they succeed, then it’s a resurrection for whoever Jimin used to be before the wipe. It’s a new man that will exist in place of him, bolstered by both past and present, whole at last.

Shownu sits the closest to him, frowning as he stares right at Jimin. It’s discomfiting. Jimin tries not to look away, but he feels vaguely hysterical, laughter bubbling up in him and full of nervous energy.

“Yep, it’s a protective mechanism. Possibly employed to keep what’s in your head out of the hands
of someone.”

“The mind-controller.”

“Possible. They kept activating it, which is why you probably still dream of it without triggers. They were maybe hoping that, given enough iterations, you would rather face the monster—and your memories—than kill the one you love over and over. But your response is conditioned, too. Someone taught you to *always* kill the boy. Either that, or your memories are terrible, and your subconscious knows to avoid them actively.”

Jimin shudders. “You can do that? Teach someone to choose one terrible thing over the other?”

“It’s a program. You are the machine it’s working on. It’s possible, alright. Like I said, though—delicate work.”

“Can it…can it affect me as badly as hyung thinks it might? If I break through it?”

“I don’t know. Some of your memories are already leaking through. How are they?”

“Most are okay. Just—you know. Flickers of them both. But it’s not enough to tell.”

Shownu sighs. “You know how to make it enough, though.”

“Yes.”

“I can bring the dream to you again. I can help you kill the monster. If you want to try. I’m curious.”

Jimin sighs. It’s not that he doesn’t get Yoongi’s opposition to this. Who knows what exactly is hiding beneath the wall? What if there are terrors beyond just what Jimin suspects? But Yoongi doesn’t understand. What Yoongi’s lost—his memories of Taehyung, his memories of Jimin—are vestiges of the past he can live without. Whatever he had had with Taehyung he had regained later, replaced the old with the new. Whatever he had had with Jimin he had substituted for a working relationship that he could be satisfied with. It’s not the same for Jimin. *Two years and a possible murder* is too much of a gap to plaster over. It’s too much of *nothingness* to live with. He feels like there’s a yawning gap between who he used to be and who he is. His body feels too big for him, and there are empty spaces in himself that he has to fill.

“I want to try, too,” Jimin says, and licks his lips nervously. “I don’t think waiting helps. He’ll just—he’s only going to freak out more if he has to stand around watching.”

Shownu nods. “You should probably lie down.”

The others stay, too. Jimin would normally be made overtly conscious by the scrutiny, from being treated like a curiosity, the way it had been in the initial days in the Seoul National Hospital after he’d been freed from the Seam. But there’s something about these people that don’t feel invasive. Perhaps it’s their odd, mostly-virtual existences, in this little basement cave beneath that psychedelic club. Maybe it’s the fact that he knows they’re transient. He thinks they, like Jungkook, will know to disappear after this. Two lone cops looking into things way above their pay grades is bad juju in the Seam. They’d do well to never speak or acknowledge it. Jimin will most likely never see them after this.

“Do it,” he says.”Get it over with.”

“I’m not sure what will happen, Jimin-ssi,” Shownu warns. “You could stay under for too long and not wake up. Your memories could hurt you.”
Jimin grits his teeth. “Or I could be fine, and we’d have solid leads to chase. I’ll stop feeling like a piece of me is missing. Please just do it.”

Shownu nods. “Okay. If you’re sure. Here we go.”

His fingers feel cold against Jimin’s temples. Jimin watches the ceiling, the ugly nubs of concrete and the peeling white paint, and waits to feel something. His fingers feel tingly. His ankles feel oddly exposed and cold. He feels the others’ eyes on him, and blinks against the brightening of the light in the room. Why is it getting bright? Bright and hot. Bright and hot and suddenly quiet, the hum of the machines fading, the ambient noise of keys clacking and servers whirring fading into stillness.

Jimin heaves a breath and finds himself standing vertical.

The knife is in his hand. The hallway is in front of him.

There’s panic, as usual. He walks down the hall—as usual—and the thing chases him as usual. Taehyung laughs in front of him, as usual. But there’s also something else. Awareness, of someone else. Someone whispering to him that this is only a dream. It’s only a dream, Jimin-ssi, the monster can’t hurt you. Jimin shakes his head and runs anyway. Feels the thing’s breath at his back and its growls raising his hairs. Feels the rain-wet skin of Taehyung’s arm, sees his smile and then his terror, hears him big.

Jimin, no. Jimin, choose different. Jiminie, please, you have to.

He’s so beautiful, Taehyung. Prettied but sharp. Gloss-slick mouth and heavy brows. His hair is blond and curls spiky against his cheekbones. His rain-spattered skin sparkles in that blurry, dream-logic way, and Jimin wants to reach out and wipe the droplets from his cheek. Wants to grab his hand and say I remember you even if he doesn’t.

Taehyung is so, so beautiful and he’s so very afraid, begging Jimin, telling him no.

Choose different, Jimin. Choose the monster.

And the monster, as always, reaches. Clawed and pitiless, its breath rank at Jimin’s neck, talons sharp as it drags cold at his ribs.

It’s only a dream, he hears. Only a dream. Choose the monster. It can’t hurt you.

Jimin’s fingers clench hard on the knife. In front of him, Taehyung flickers a little. His face glitches. Jimin draws in a breath that catches at his throat, and reaches out again. A dream, he thinks, and his fingers pass through Taehyung, as if he’s nothing more than a ghost. Only a dream.

But when he makes his choice, when he decides to turn around and sink his knife into the monster, it’s Taehyung who stops him.

What are you doing? He asks. What are you doing, Jiminie?

“Choosing different,” Jimin gasps. “Isn’t that what you—that’s what you want. Right?”

Taehyung shakes his head. His uncanny prettiness is gone now, replaced by something more mellow, something softer, a face Jimin is so infinitely familiar with. Are you sure? He asks. Is it safe?

Jimin reels back. The clawed thing drags its talons useless across his back. Taehyung’s mouth twists into a grimace, and Jimin thinks of what Shownu said. Someone taught you to always kill the boy. To protect your memory, and hence your secrets.
“Why?” Jimin wonders, but this creature in his dreams is nowhere as complicated or clever as the real Taehyung. It’s only a little mental program, following its infinite scripts and routines, failing and fading now that Jimin has created a condition, an exception it cannot handle.

*Is it safe,* it asks again, one last flicker of something like guilt. He’s gone the moment Jimin turns. The moment Jimin raises his knife to stab the monster.

*(Careful now, he hears Shownu say. Careful now, Jimin-ssi—)*

But he has the knife, and he feels hate surging through him like lightning. This creature, that has tormented him for so long. This *nightmare* that has made him stab a boy he once loved a hundred times. This…this *thing*.

It rushes through him, ugly and barbed, and Jimin screams. Rushes forward. His knife slips deep into the bone and flesh of the thing, the carcass-rank mass of it, and he twists it hard.

The monster screeches. Its claws drag uselessly against Jimin’s skin, no more potent now that it’s purpose has fallen apart.

The dream shatters. The hallway around him disappears, sugar in fucking water. Dark rushes in its place, thick and cloying, and he turns in place, trying to see.

There’s nothing.

“Hullo?”

Somebody laughs. Jimin twists around, but it’s still dark around him. Still so, so dark, but then it begins to dissolve. Begins to become a place—a party, all Christmas Tree bright and beer stink, music blaring through the speakers. Jimin looks around in wild confusion. Panic wraps around him like a thin layer of metal soldering to his skin. His head feels hazy and he keeps hearing laughter, and he’s not looking where he’s going. He’s not looking in front of him, so he stumbles into—

“Oh, hi. I know you! You’re Park Jimin. A friend of yours is a friend of mine.”

Taehyung. Square smile. Cute beret. The most sober person in this room.

This is how they met.

This is memory.

Taehyung’s smile is wide and sweet, eyes sparkling as he says *hey, meet my boyfriend.* Yoongi rolls his eyes when he’s dragged to the light. Rolls his eyes and tugs at Taehyung’s sleeve, makes a show of wanting to leave, but his eyes pass over Jimin with interest. *He’s talked about you,* Yoongi says, when Taehyung finally forces him to address Jimin. *About some academic interests you possess.*

Taehyung beams. “Let’s not discuss that now,” he says.“Come with us for a drive?”

Taehyung puts out a hand. Jimin hesitates, looks behind him—but the darkness of *now* has all but faded to the pleasant, muted shades of the past, and he’s so, so curious. In the memory, in the past too, Jimin had hesitated, not used to smiley boys and their grumpy boyfriends talking to him about *Jungkook*—his missing friend, the friend whose disappearance had made him *want* to be an officer in the first place.

But curiosity wins now, and it had won then.
Follow me, Taehyung says. Come with me. Even in memory he looks warm, skin like honey, cheeks lightly flushed from the cold and a sly smile playing at his lips.

Jimin reaches out to take his hand.

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Seokjin’s waiting for him by a bunch of old, dilapidated warehouses where Yoongi knows the runaways hang. Taehyung had spoken about this place, once, back at the beginning when he and Yoongi had worked on that drug-drop case that got those kids killed.

Warehouse A to F is okay, he’d said, drawing little blocks on an empty space in Yoongi’s map of the Seam. Kids come there to chill and smoke pot. Warehouse G is unsafe. Don’t go in Warehouse G, hyung.

Warehouse G, Yoongi had found out later, was an execution ground.

Big gangs used it to discreetly dispose off the people they didn’t want around. A man with a truck came by in mornings and dragged the bodies away, never to be found again. It was impossible to remember that man’s name or face or truck number—fog settled over everyone who tried. Nearly every cop in Extraordinary Crimes had tried. Bubble Face, they called him now. Bubble Face who moves bodies.

What a morbid job, Yoongi thinks. Carting unknown dead to secret graves. Having no one and nothing remember you.

A part of him connects even this to Taehyung, to his slow but strengthening realization that the reason Taehyung had wanted to work with Yoongi was probably because he didn’t want to be forgotten. Not really, not by the people he once knew. His diary is proof.

Went to meet Yoongi hyung today. I didn’t want to. Felt raw and weird and awful.

And then, somewhere else, almost hidden in blocks of text: I don’t know how to keep away.

When he asked that riddle, when he got afraid or upset and sought for comfort with Yoongi, had he wished he could take it all back? Had he wished to be known, really known, the way he used to be? If Taehyung had been behind their memory alteration—and Yoongi thinks he was, thinks Jimin is right about that—then he had perhaps been the one most tortured by it.

Yoongi hates that.

Across the street, Seokjin’s car’s windows are rolled up and tinted dark.

Yoongi doesn’t wonder too much about what Seokjin is doing here. He doesn’t wonder too much about anything. His mind is an echoing blank as he parks in a secure spot and walks warily towards Jin’s car. He keeps his hand on the gun but his thoughts are on the boys. His boys.

Where is all this going to go? How is all this going to end?

Hoseok had sent him the files. He had chanced a look at it in the car, at Seokjin’s and Jimin’s both. Seokjin’s said, against the column for Extraordinary Ability, inconclusive. That in itself is weird, but weirder still is the Notes section. Currently tests negative. Single previous record from a teenage accident tests positive. Could be a filing error from back then. Recommended for duty with concerns.

Jimin’s file is blank. Every field blank. Test results, blood work for the Extraordinariness testing,
Yoongi had sat in his car, looking at that for a while. Someone was either protecting Jimin or using him somehow. Someone with good intent? Someone Yoongi knew, in the force?

He walks to Jin’s car feeling heavy, tired, as if he’s walking against gravity. Keeps his gun safety off and his hand on the stock as he raps on the window. Jin rolls it down.

“Get in.”

He doesn’t look hurt. Yoongi slides into the shotgun seat, leaning back against the upholstery. Jin’s lit an electric cigarette, and he looks straight ahead.

“So,” Yoongi says. “What’s so important?”

“There’s a new murder,” Seokjin says, quietly.

“A new—who?”

“Jade Fang’s So Daeyong. You heard of him?”

“One of the right hand men,” Yoongi nods. “Had he been at the Ace that night?”

“Yes. Along with two others from Jade. Jeong Yongjae and Bang Cheonghwan. Do you know those names?”

“Not particularly. Why? Are they dead, too?”

“Not yet.”

Yoongi scratches lightly at his jeans over his knee, thinking. “Hyung,” he says, “Why do you know these names? Did we get it from the hotel?”

Jin sighs and passes him a sheet of paper. It’s clearly been creased and uncreased a lot, pored over, read and reread until it was a mere few creases from tearing. Yoongi smooths it out on his lap. His heart thrums rapidly. He runs his gaze over the names and none of them are familiar to him—other than the victims, of course, and those are already slashed out. So Daeyong isn’t scratched off yet, and Yoongi’s considering the why of this when he realizes it’s not the names Seokjin’s waiting for him to notice.

It’s the handwriting.

“This is Taehyung’s writing.”

“Yes.”

“He gave this to you,” Yoongi guesses, head reeling. “When?”

“That night at the Ace,” Seokjin mutters, his face turned away. “I’ve had it all along.”

“Hyung,” Yoongi says, and then has to rapidly swallow against the hundred questions trying to crawl up his throat. Why did you say nothing? Why didn’t you give this to me? To the investigation? Why did you hold onto it for so long, when so many were dying? Who is Taehyung to you? He settles for the one least frightening in its capacity to hurt his heart. “Who do you work for?”
Jin laughs at this—his usual crazy, squeaky laughter. There’s an edge to it, though. A faint sadness. “I don’t work for anyone except the police, Yoongi-ah. You have it wrong.”

“Why would you hold onto this, then? You misled the investigation. Are you the one hiding reports and wiping records, hyung? What is it all for? Why…”

Jin blows out his breath in a sharp exhale, gaze settling on Yoongi as he takes the list back. Yoongi doesn’t stop him. He doesn’t care about the Ghost—not anymore. Perhaps he’d never cared. He cares about Jin, though. He cares about what Jin has to say. The ugly swell of betrayal is stuck in his throat, a hard lump, and the rest of his questions dam up against it.

“I held onto the list because he told me to. Keep it to yourself, he said. And I have, because if there’s anything I ever knew about Taehyung, it’s that he doesn’t do things without a plan.”


Jin takes a deep breath. “He’s my little brother.”

Yoongi nods. He knew that, he thinks. Knew it the moment Seokjin gave him the list. Perhaps knew it last night, after Jimin said Taehyung had a brother, after he saw Jin’s reaction to that video. Everything fit, didn’t it? The way he’d bolted that night, his refusal to both work the case and really let it go…

Jin looks at the street in front of them when he speaks. “I left home as a kid. Extraordinariness—the dangerous kind. Didn’t think I’d see Taehyung again but he found me. I don’t even know how. He found me, and he was 16. Said he was in a program, then, learning amazing things—”

“Eyrie.”

Seokjin looks at him, surprised. “Yes. How did you know?”

Yoongi shrugs. He doesn’t feel like explaining, so he just presses his hands together and asks, “And then?”

“I was in university. Third year. I couldn’t believe I’d gotten away with it for so long—an Extraordinary in police university, eating and sleeping and training with all the ordinaries. Have you heard of Talon?”

“That weird plant. The Seagull’s ash-marker plant. Yeah.”

“‘It deflects mental abilities. Do you know what else it does? Fools Extraordinary testing,’ Jin smiles a little at this, glittering and sharp. His eyes blaze when he turns to Yoongi. ‘I’d left my family and run away because of my ability, but I wouldn’t let the system push me into the Seam and turn me to crime. It’s a fucked up system, anyway. Most Extraordinaries can’t hold jobs, can’t get housing, can’t get into schools. Why do you think so many turn criminal? I joined police university only because I wanted to have the satisfaction of fucking the system over. That’s all. I heard about Talon from someone in the Seam and tried it out. I passed the test. It was the funniest thing to me then that I got into police university. That’s how Tae found me. Hiding in plain sight, using a weird little drug to keep my disguise up. He was very interested in that drug, too.”

Yoongi frowns. Taehyung insisted, Jimin had told him, earlier that day. Jungkook said he insisted, he wanted that mark.

“So, what? You fooled the department when you tested Taehyung, too? He was Extraordinary, and
“Ah, no,” Seokjin says, shaking his head. “Taehyung wasn’t Extraordinary. I was the only black sheep in the family.”

Yoongi scowls. “So his test wasn’t a lie? You didn’t screw around with the results?”

Seokjin shakes his head. “I didn’t have to,” he says. “But we digress. I only spoke to Taehyung sporadically when I was in school because he was so busy with Eyrie. And then the place he studied at blew up, and he fell off the map for a while. I didn’t know what happened—just that he had survived, he was upset, and he’d run away to the Seam. I spoke to him again a month or so later, and he was crashing at a friend’s apartment. He said I needed to keep our relationship under wraps. He had a plan, and it depended on me being his insider in the force.”

Yoongi opens his mouth, but Jin cuts him off again.

“Before you ask me, Yoongi, he told me as much about his life and his problems as he did you. I know what you know. We met, sometimes, for dinner, and I made him stay over a couple of times I thought he was upset—you know? The bare minimum he’d let me do, as his hyung. But I know only what you do, and I don’t know what happened to him at school. What happened that he did any of what he did next—from being a double agent to walking into the Ace that night.”

Yoongi doesn’t know if he believes him. Silence rears up between them, angry, monstrous. Yoongi sits there with his hands crossed and finds he can’t really look at Jin when he asks the next question.

“Did you know about the Seagull reviving him?”

“That was the Seagull? In the video?”

Yoongi nods, sullen and defensive. “Did you see him after that? Did you know if he’s alive?”

This is the crux of the matter, isn’t it? If Seokjin knew and he didn’t tell Yoongi, if he let Yoongi believe all this time that Taehyung was dead, then his explanations don’t matter anymore. Why would anything matter against that?

Yoongi peeks at him, and Jin’s face is hard, his mouth a puzzle. His shoulders fall as he exhales. “I swear I didn’t know. Not until I saw the video.”

Yoongi nods. Is he relieved? He’s not sure. He feels a brusque irritation towards Seokjin, that he’d kept the list so long and never delivered it to Yoongi, that he’d let the case go cold, that he was still misleading a major investigation.

What did Jin even want? To personally avenge his brother? Why keep the list to himself for so long? Yoongi squeezes his eyes shut. Everything is a nightmare, he thinks. Everything is a nightmare, and he can’t wake.

“I—I didn’t work the case because I had to be in Extraordinary Crimes to hear about the people on this list. I had to have that job profile to be able to keep tabs on these assholes, to wait for them to slip up on what really happened that night. I’ve managed to speak to half a dozen of them after that night, but none of them knew a thing. None of them even remember that night.”

“And now they’re dying.”

“Now they’re dying.”
“Why didn’t you say anything?”

In response, Jin passes him his phone, open to a chat screen. The number is unknown, just a series of digits with a strange area code that means nothing. There’s a few texts from it, all following the same pattern.

A name, a time, a place.

The very last one reads Sa Daeyong, 23:45. Warehouse G.

Yoongi looks at his watch. It’s 23:23.

Every part of him goes still, from his heart to his fingers frozen around the phone. From his breath to the quiet routine of blood in his veins, it feels like—he simply goes still. Yoongi looks to Jin through a frantic blur of thoughts and connections and counter-connections, and he can’t understand.

He can’t understand.

“You knew before the murders happened. When and where and to whom they would happen. You knew.”

Jin rubs his hand across his face, pressing his knuckles momentarily to his eyes. “Yeah, I knew.”

“You—did you go to these places? See them die?”

Jin kind of laughs, a scratchy sound. He fiddles with the electric cigarette, spinning it around and around in his fingers until he nearly drops it. “I let it happen,” he says, finally. “This list is all bastards. Criminals. They’d tortured people and torn apart families and sold drugs to children. They were who we should be able to stop, as cops, but we could never hope to. Because of the way of the world. Because of the power they hold. I thought, what does it matter if they die? So I went to each location. I cleaned up after. Made sure there was no evidence of any sort to be found. Not DNA, not blood, not fingerprints or hair or any of that sort. Not that it was required. The killer is meticulous.”

Something about this doesn’t fit. Yoongi waits for his heart to calm, for his voice to become steady enough that he can speak without wanting to shout, and spits out, “That makes you an accomplice to murder. You know that, right, hyung?”

Seokjin looks weary. “It’s either that or give the list up, let the investigators dig into my personal files, and find my old records.”

“The one from your teenage accident.”

Jin pushes a hand through his hair. There’s something lurking in his gaze now, a soft, wounded thing, and he looks at Yoongi with a tired sort of acceptance. “Do you know what my ability used to be?”

Yoongi shakes his head. He swipes a hand across his damp forehead. His watch says 23:38 “I could do what the Ghost does. Burn through people. Crush their bones, collapse their lungs, turn their organs into mush.”

Yoongi can’t seem to speak above a whisper. “But it’s not you, is it? You’re not the Ghost.”

“No. But if they look into me, and they find that, and they know I had the list—it wouldn’t be long before they connect me to Taehyung and declare that I’m the Ghost. That I killed these people. It’s
too much of a perfect story, isn’t it? Wronged older brother avenging his lost dongsaeng’s death.”

Yoongi stiffens. Put like that, he thinks, it is a good story. He’d believe in that story. Add Extraordinariness to the mess, and his own xenophobic lenses would immediately respond to it with faithful aversion, and he’d be just as quick as anyone to condemn Jin.

That’s just the way of the world.

Jin swipes his hands clean on his jeans. His knee jogs compulsively. “You can hate me if you want. I refuse to let them screw me over again, Yoongi-ah. That’s why I’ve been helping the Ghost. These are people that will leave the world a better place when it dies—why should I pay the price for their deaths?”

Yoongi breathes in slowly. Something feels ripped viscerally in his chest. “Why do you think the killer contacted you? Because they knew you’d help?”

Jin doesn’t answer. He only looks at his watch, a pinched expression on his face. Yoongi does the same.

23:42.

Yoongi flinches. They have to get out there, they have to stop this murder. Bastards or not, Yoongi can’t morally condone someone dying such a painful death.

“Who is it, hyung?” he asks, urgently. “Who is the Ghost? Why did you bring me here, tonight?”

Jin begins to get out of the car. “I don’t know. I’ve only ever caught glimpses…never their face. But when I saw the video last night, and I…Things connected. And if I’m right…if I’m right, I’ll need your help.”

Yoongi follows him out. The wind is cold outside, biting and loud. The car rattles a bit in the gust. His clothes aren’t nearly enough to keep out the chill but he doesn’t think this is the kind of cold that layers can keep out.

This cold is in his bones.

This cold is knowing that Jin’s been helping a killer. This cold is knowing that he’s Extraordinary—always been Extraordinary—and he’d fooled all of them forever. This cold is knowing that the reason why Jin hadn’t been demoted along with him and Namjoon had been because he’d known more, had chosen to stay on with that huge lead in his hands and left Yoongi to flounder in the dark.

And he knows.

He knows the world gives Seokjin no choice; that the promise he’s made his brother ranks above Yoongi and Namjoon’s case frustrations; that Yoongi himself would have turned on Seokjin if he’d learned about the Extraordinariness any other day.

He knows. He knows he can’t really blame Jin, not for all this, but it still hurts.

“Come with me,” Jin says, and his voice sounds resigned, raw, chewed up and spit out. “Just this fucking once. And then if you want to tell the team, tell the police or the entire world or whatever, it’s alright. Just come with me to Warehouse G.”

Then he starts walking, almost taking the short distance at a run, and Yoongi doesn’t think anymore.
He follows. He’s several stages past exhaustion now, and he doesn’t know how this will end well, but he follows.

Their feet on the broken concrete sounds odd, like rain on metal sheets, maybe.

23:44.

Jin bursts into the warehouse. His gun is out, his eyes are wild, and he’s breathing hard when Yoongi slots himself close to him. They stand, shoulder to shoulder, peering into the gloom.

It smells like spices and old blood in here. There’s one slat open on the roof, through which moonlight falls in a thin stream. Jin’s eyes—uncharacteristically bloodshot and darkly ringed—meets Yoongi’s in the murk just for a few seconds before they both surge forward.

23:45.

There’s a scream from somewhere. They move, quick and scanning the area, Yoongi squinting against the dark to make out any moving shadows. The screaming is agonized, horrifying—Yoongi feels a horrific chill in his bones at it, and resists the urge to close his ears as it keeps going on.

On and on and on—until it cuts off abruptly.

His shoulders shake, and his breath begins to escape him in a wheeze. He feels raw and irrational, the animal part of his brain yelling at him to get out. He feels sick; damaged and drowning in flat-out terror. It’s hard to put one foot in front of the other and walk towards where the screaming had come from.

Seokjin stays close to him, jaw clenched and sweat sticking his hair to his forehead. He’s cautious and soft-footed, eyes trained to the dark, a nervous twitch in one eye that he tries to dislodge by blinking too much.

They reach the end of the first hall, and there’s a door. Seokjin and Yoongi exchange glances. Yoongi nods, feeling miserable and wrenched and scoured on the inside, a shivering starting up in his legs as he prepares to slam his shoulder against the door.

Seokjin gives him the signal. 1, 2, 3, he signs, and at 3 the two of them ram into the door, as hard as they can, and stumble into a room.

There’s a body on the floor.

That’s the first thing Yoongi sees—a body on the floor. It’s collapsed the way the Ghost’s other victims are collapsed, boneless and crushed, only vaguely in the shape of a human being.

Yoongi feels a hard knot of something stick in his throat. His stomach churns horribly and frissions of tension crawl through his skin. He wants to turn away, to stumble back out and throw up and then collapse somewhere, sleep until he can wake up and all of tonight will somehow make sense.

But the body’s not alone.

There’s someone in here with it. Yoongi catches a glimpse of black clothes—jeans and a hoodie, pulled down to hide the face, the hint of a mask.

The person sees them and staggers back, just a quick stumble, before they turn to flee.

Seokjin steps forward, gun raised in front of his face, teeth gnashed together, a hollow stare on his
face. He looks like he’s having trouble breathing, too. Looks like he wants to slide down the side wall too, and just sit awhile, get the world to stop going like a carousel, get his mind to stop spinning in circles.

But when Jin speaks, hopeful and worried and terrified all the same time, he sounds clear as a bell. His voice ringing loud and brilliant and vibrant into the heavy silence of this deathly place when he says:

“Tae?”

Chapter End Notes

THIS FIC IS AN EXERCISE IN PATIENCE I HAV BEEN WAITING TO WRITE THIS LAST BIT SINCE CHAPTER 1

WOW this thing is so dramatic that when I write it I imagine some pretentious dark noir street with the sound of rain and smoke everywhere and far-off gunfire and some Artie Shaw type dark jazz. I realized the other day that this fic is massively inspired by Bioshock 2, in terms of how it makes me feel inside. It is fucking depressing af an I love you guys for sticking it out w/me when you could be reading fluffy, happy fic where nobody dies. I will write fluffy fics soon. For now stay with me in angstopia.

Follow me on twt where I fangirl about my boys and cry about this #murderfic and occasionally post shitty AU threads and ideas.

As always here, of course, is the tumblr

GIMME SUSPICIONS
Phoenix

Chapter Summary

“It’s just me,” he says again. “You can stop now.”
Some people believe in miracles. Yoongi’s never understood them. Now he stands here, a fist of permutations in his hands, and hopes for one.

Chapter Notes

Okay, kids. **CONTENT WARNING** time. This chapter has glossed-over descriptions of consensual sex between maybe-minors (depending on whatever you consider minors in your country. they WOULD be minors in mine, so I’m putting up the warning). It’s not very graphic but I feel uncomfortable without the warning, so.

Also, **TRIGGER WARNING**: I am not sure how to warn for this because the use-case is muddled. But just in case: some themes in this chapter merit the tag of suicidal ideation, even though it's part of the bigger storyline and isn't NECESSARILY about that. Just to be safe, here's a warning.

Fuck, ok, this sounds heavy. I promise the angst is nowhere NEAR as bad as the last couple of chapters. Also, wow, I am really excited to see what y’all think about this, because we’re in home-stretch territory now.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#).

Once, when Yoongi was little, he’d climbed a hill a small way away from his house on a gray afternoon. Everything was doused in green, in that strange fairy-light color the world took on when the sun and the impending rain conspired. He’d climbed up and the trees had been bent over with the weight of raindrops. From far away he could see the rain, moving towards him, a huge hazy iron-colored curtain swinging in the direction of the hill. The sky was heavy and dark, but within the trees the world was still green, and there was no time to run for proper cover.

When the rain had hit, it had flattened the grass and drenched him in a single, glancing blow. Storms in cities never punched you in the face like that. Storms in cities are tame, stopped by tall sides of buildings and glass and concrete.

Storms in cities are a soft clawing of blunt fingernails. Never a fist in your face.

*This* one, though.

The air outside the warehouse is already crackling and dark with energy when Yoongi chases the Ghost out. Seokjin follows him, impeded for a second by the body in his way, a shout ripping from his throat as he threatens to shoot.
He won’t shoot.

The horizon splits in two with light and rain hits them both like a physical blow. Yoongi keeps his eyes on the hooded figure. He keeps his eyes on them and his feet moving, and forces himself to think of nothing.

Seokjin shoots wildly to one side, in an arc far enough to miss. It makes the Ghost change direction. Yoongi grits his teeth with the understanding of what Jin’s doing. He shoots again, far and wide, to another direction this time, and then another. With the fifth gunshot, the game is won.

They run into a dead end.

Yoongi stops, breathing hard, stopping a few paces away. The rain bends around the Ghost in a bell shape, electricity crackling in their fingers. It grows and grows in their hands, a ball of energy, hungry and hot and shatteringly dense. Yoongi doesn’t need to look any closer to know that it could rip this place apart. Pull a crater into place where he’s standing, immolate him in a single rush of powerful heat and charred skin. The warehouse behind Yoongi could split, bow like wet rice paper, and crush Seokjin beneath its beams. It could all be over in a few violent, hiccuping seconds.

“Stop,” Yoongi says, taking a step forward, wincing at the legs of electricity that hits the ground around him.

The world is warped violet, with the shadows and the rain and the crackling energy in the Ghost’s hands.

“Please just stop.”

The light frays, drawing back gentle, still potent enough to crush Yoongi like an origami puppet if it wanted to. The sky yawns and cracks above them. Storm hums in Yoongi’s veins.

He walks forward, mouth dry, body shaking, one hand held out like he’s trying to approach a wild animal. Seokjin makes a muffled, warning noise behind him. It’s lost amid the fuzz and flux of lightning glinting in the Ghost’s palm.

“It’s me,” Yoongi says, and now that he’s close enough Yoongi can see him, tears evaporating on contact with his skin. His eyes are wide, bruised circles that look too big for his face. The lightning gives him a soft, muted luminescence, a ghost in vintage film.

Yoongi finds himself close enough to touch. He is aware, the whole time, of the power crackling in a web around him, the air singed and scented like burnt sugar. Heat envelopes him in a choke-hold, burns his throat, crawls in spike-ended ripples over his skin. It’s hard to even breathe, and his exhaustion is catching up with him, but he doesn’t stop.

Doesn’t think he can stop, consequences be damned.

“It’s just me,” he says again. “You can stop now.”

Some people believe in miracles. Yoongi’s never understood them. Now he stands here, a fist of permutations in his hands, and hopes for one.

Surprisingly, he gets his wish. The ball of lightning flickers out. The rain keeps coming down. Suddenly it’s not a dangerous criminal in front of him—just a small, dry figure, head bowed and eyes shut.

“Yoongi,” Seokjin says, a warning in his voice.
Yoongi doesn’t listen. This is Taehyung, he thinks, and Taehyung can’t hurt him. He won’t hurt him. Nothing else about this makes sense—not the lightning, not the fact that he’s the Ghost, not the fact that he’s actually, truly alive. Nothing else makes sense, but Yoongi’s sure Taehyung won’t hurt him.

He’s wrong.

He takes a step forward and Taehyung smiles, low and feral, odd light flickering in his eyes. His teeth glint, lips pulled back in a snarl, fist slamming out in a sudden tremble of heavy power. Ribs of crackling energy spill outward from him, biting at Yoongi’s hair, jagged lightning missing him by a bare inch as he throws himself sideways.

“What the fuck—” Seokjin starts, then yelps and falls backward when the lightning shoots for him, white-hot and crackling.

Yoongi gasps, hands stinging at the contact against rough ground, mind spinning. The world breaks apart in fractals of light and dark squares of sky. Shards of broken concrete curve up from the ground in deadly spikes, pulled from the earth with a sound like a dying scream. Behind Taehyung, the warehouses walls crack and begin to fold, as if being crushed by a heavy weight from above.

Seokjin raises his gun and it’s whipped from his hand in a second, tossed across space as if a hand had physically slapped it away.

Yoongi’s blood roars in his ears. A run of little sparks dances up his hand and he crawls away, squeezing his eyes shut against the pain, biting his lip hard enough to draw blood.

He doesn’t—doesn’t—doesn’t understand.


This should be impossible. Nobody held abilities this way, like a pocketful of little tricks, whipping a new one out every-time. Nobody should have an arsenal like this, each ability stronger than the one before.

He can’t understand it.

Jin is yelling something. A name, maybe, or a plea. It’s hard to tell. Yoongi can’t think through the fuzz in his brain. There’s maybe footsteps, he thinks, running in his direction, and Jin is across him so it can’t be him, but Yoongi’s gaze is fixed on Taehyung.

Is he even in there? Yoongi doesn’t know this person, does he? The Taehyung he knows would never.

But then, does he even really know Taehyung? He doesn’t know Eyrie Taehyung, doesn’t know Jin’s brother Taehyung, doesn’t know college sweetheart Taehyung. How many more versions of him exists that Yoongi doesn’t know? The Ghost, the murderer, the possible architect of this entire case—Yoongi doesn’t know any of those Taehyungs.

He just watches lightning fractal and the earth split. Closes his ears against the noise and confusion, draws his legs closer, stays on the ground out of range of violence.

He thinks he hears voices shouting. Thinks he sees someone neatly break the spikes tearing up the floor, blunting them on command.

People.
There are so many other people.

Someone grabs his arms and pulls him up. “Come on, hyung.”

It’s that boy. Jimin’s boy—the Seagull. His face is familiar, somehow, and Yoongi’s instantly able to place him. That should be strange, but what does strange even mean anymore?

“Tae,” Yoongi starts, half in shock. “W-where’s—”

“We’ve got him,” Jungkook says. “He’ll be okay. We’ve got him.”

Yoongi cranes his neck to try and figure out what’s happening, but then Seokjin’s at his side, blocking his view.

“You okay?”

“I’m fine.”

Seokjin blinks at Jungkook. “I know you.”

“Yeah,” Jungkook says, wearily. “You sure do.”

Yoongi pushes past him. Behind them, the warehouse’s walls are bowing down dangerously, only being held up by an Extraordinary forcing it up telekinetically. Remnants of dry static spark like fireflies on the concrete. There are a few other people—Extraordinaries, the lot, Yoongi just knows—but they’re all clustered around ground zero: a circle of unburnt, unsinged, untorn ground.

That’s where Taehyung had been standing.

Yoongi strides forward. Jungkook tries to stop him, but he throws his hand off. Irritatingly, Seokjin grabs his shoulders, too, trying to hold him back.

“Fucking—let me go. I have to go. I need to see—”

“Hyung, just wait—”

Yoongi twists bodily around, surprising both of them into dropping their holds. He shoves Jungkook back when he reaches for him again, swerves forward, and shocks the little crowd of Jungkook’s people to jump back in surprise.

He doesn’t know what he expects to find. Taehyung, a bloody mess again, wheezing and gasping and dying. Taehyung, struggling and feral and contained somehow, tied down to the floor like nothing more than an animal. Every scenario from the plausible set seems more terrible than the last, a fall of cards with no good outcome.

He’s not expecting to find Taehyung calm and quiet, blinking slow and long, nestled in an embrace. His head rolls back on his shoulders and the last of the sparks flicker off his fingertips. The man holding him takes his wrists, and gently—very gently—slips special Extraordinary cuffs on.

“You,” Yoongi says, routed to place, unable to take his eyes off Taehyung.

Namjoon looks up. “Hey, hyung,” he says, one hand curled protectively around Taehyung’s shoulders, the other splayed soft at his back. “It’s going to be okay.”

***
They don’t go back to the city outside the Seam.

They go inward, instead—deeper than Yoongi’s ever been, deeper than Seokjin’s ever been. Yoongi drives his own car and follows Jungkook and Seokjin as they twine deeper and deeper into close alleys and rain-hazed streets. Jungkook called wherever they were heading safe, and Yoongi doesn’t know what that means. Safe for them? Safe from them, now that they had Taehyung with them, calm for now but possibly unpredictable?

He tries not to look around at the backseat ever so often—tries not to peer at Namjoon and the gentle grip he keeps on Taehyung at all times. Tries not to look at the Extraordinary cuffs pinning Taehyung’s wrists down. Taehyung’s eyes wander aimlessly from the window to Yoongi and back again to the window. He looks blank and sleepy, each blink very slow, fingers fiddling softly at the edges of his cuffs like a child not knowing how to sit still.

“You’re the one he calls H, aren’t you?”

Namjoon hesitates, frowning, cheeks hollow as he pouts gently down at Taehyung. “That’s—yeah, that’s one of the things. One of the names.”

“What the fuck is wrong with him?” Yoongi asks, and it comes out mean. Ugly. Yoongi doesn’t care. He makes a turn behind Seokjin’s car, and when he looks back again, Taehyung is dozing fitfully against Namjoon’s shoulder.

Namjoon’s gaze meets Yoongi’s in the mirror. “Taehyung is not exactly all here.”

“What does that mean?”

“Means I’m making him dream. So he doesn’t burn your car down or blast us into smithereens or something like that.”

“Making him dream.”

“It’s something I do,” Namjoon says. “Among other things.”

A cold weight settles in Yoongi’s stomach. “Is everyone I know a fucking Extraordinary now?”

Namjoon sighs and smiles tiredly. “I was afraid you’d react that way.”

“No shit. You lied to me. What the fuck, Namjoon-ah.”


Yoongi doesn’t want to hear his reasons. Doesn’t want to know if he had orders, from some shady intelligence agency. Doesn’t want to consider that maybe he’s Eyrie, just like Taehyung. Yoongi feels awful and petulant, wanting to smash something. Fear still sits in his heart, a crushing fist of weight, and he can’t stop looking at Taehyung. What if he disappears? What if he dissolves, right from the back of this car, nothing at all of him left behind except those cuffs? Yoongi is almost expecting it. Expecting to lose Taehyung again, vapour into ether.

And Jimin. Yoongi’s been trying his phone since he got in this car. Trying and trying with no avail. What’s he supposed to do now, leave Taehyung here and run to Jimin? He should, he thinks. He will. It’s just that he can’t trust anyone, and he needs to know Taehyung is safe, at least until his questions are answered.

“Why did he try to kill us?”
Namjoon heaves a breath. “Same reason Jimin stabbed him.”

“Someone’s in his head,” Yoongi says. “How do we get them out?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“Where’s the fucking bastard?”

“I don’t know that either.”

Yoongi grits his teeth. He thinks he’ll probably blunt them down to nubs with the force of his anger. It’s an effort to keep it under the surface, to sound calm and sane when he says, “Where are we going?”

“Safe house.”

“You have a safe house.”

Namjoon’s face is indecipherable. “It isn’t mine.”

“Whose is it, then?”

Namjoon just shrugs.

Yoongi makes another turn. There’s a park to his left, and a woman sitting on a swing. Her child levitates a few feet above the ground, swinging vertically above a set of monkey bars. The surreal reality of it throws him off for a minute, and then he realizes that he has a big, confounded lump of mystery and a telepathic Extraordinary sitting in his backseat.

“Did he really kill all those people?”

Namjoon sighs. “Does it matter?”

“I don’t know.”

He really doesn’t. The thought of Taehyung crushing bones to powder and turning organs to mush is too hard to stomach. The Ghost is gruesome, terrifying, a nightmare-creature from urban folklore. It keeps eyes as trophies and its violence is excessive. Such a thing shouldn’t have the face of Yoongi’s lost, enigmatic lover. He’s held those hands and kissed that mouth, and he can’t reconcile beautiful Taehyung to that monstrous ideal he’d imagined.

But Namjoon’s question holds: does it matter?

Taehyung could kill him horrifically if Namjoon’s control on him as much as slips a little. Yoongi already knows that.Knows that those cuffs are in place and that Namjoon is holding him that way because Taehyung is out of his mind, running on a program of pure, wanton destruction. His gaze doesn’t track and his head lolls on his neck and he’s barely a shadow of who he used to be.

Yoongi should be repulsed or afraid or spiteful.

All he is is relieved.

Taehyung is here, warm and alive and close enough to touch.

This is all Yoongi wants. This is all Yoongi has wanted, for years.
“Joon-ah,” he says, his throat thick. “Did you know he was alive?”

Yoongi can sense the force with which Namjoon shakes his head back there. “Not until—not until recently, hyung. And then I thought he might be exactly like this, and I didn’t know what to do with that information,” he says. “I would never have let you believe he was dead for two years if I’d known. That’s not me. You know that, don’t you?”

Yoongi snorts. “I don’t know anything, apparently. He’s some freak Extraordinary, and you’re his telepathic best-friend. Who’d have known?”

Namjoon makes a face. “I can’t tell you anything. Not until we reach the safe house.”

Of course he can’t. Yoongi sighs. “How did you know to find us?”

Namjoon is quiet for a minute. Yoongi thinks he won’t answer, that this is another one of the things he can’t tell Yoongi. He shakes his head and slows as they pass over a dark bridge, the river shimmering below them, the lights so infrequent and so dim that every house and every tree looks like a shrouded, hulking monster.

But when he looks back, Namjoon is just looking down at Taehyung, a soft expression on his face.

“Because,” he says, so quiet the night almost snatches his words from him, “the Ghost doesn’t work alone, hyung.”

Yoongi is held back from pondering this by Seokjin’s car coming to a stop. They’re outside a building that doesn’t look any different from the others that surround it—blocky, dilapidated, peeling walls and an overgrown front-yard. It doesn’t look like anyone has been here in years. There are bolts on the gates, which Jungkook manages to get open with a minute of fiddling. Yoongi feels antsy again and he goes to help him get the gate open. He sees Seokjin make a beeline for Namjoon and Taehyung, wonders what Namjoon meant by the Ghost doesn’t work alone, and realizes he probably doesn’t want to know.

“Where’s Jimin hyung?” Jungkook asks, between grunts as they shoulder ineffectively at the gates. “I’ll go get him if you tell me where he is.”

“I’ll go myself.”

Jungkook rolls his eyes. “Don’t be stupid. You know he’s my friend.”

“You’re also Extraordinary mafia.”

Jungkook sighs. “It’s probably not safe for you to go out there once you get in here.”

“Why’s that?”

Jungkook steps back from the gate to tap his temple. “Information.”

Yoongi thinks he looks like an asshole. “And you’re safe?”

Jungkook grins. “Like you said, I’m Extraordinary mafia.”

Another car pulls up. Yoongi doesn’t think he has the capacity for shock anymore, but it’s still a start to see Kwon getting out of the car with Hoseok. They’re both carrying weirdly bulky bags. She sees Yoongi and shrugs a little. Hoseok follows her, looking lost.

“Is everyone I’ve ever met here?” Yoongi calls out. “Is my dad going to show up next?”
Namjoon winces from where he’s standing, right outside Yoongi’s car. But of course—it was Namjoon who had referred him to Kwon. Possibly Jimin, too. How deep exactly does his involvement go?

“Hi, Hoseok-ah. Are you here for this circus too?”

Hoseok looks pale and confused. Jungkook snorts next to Yoongi. “Just help me get this gate open, hyung.”

It takes a few more tries before the thing creaks open. The path to the house is overgrown with weeds, and the door creaks dangerously on its hinges when Jungkook opens it with a key. Yoongi doesn’t understand how it’s a safe house. Don’t safe houses have reinforced walls? Panic-room iron everywhere and bulletproof windows? What the hell is this supposed to keep them safe from?

Inside too, the air is stale and some windows are broken. Jungkook coughs against cobwebs and dust. Namjoon’s nose scrunches as he walks in, and Hoseok just stares and blinks. Kwon’s mouth is pursed into a thin line. Seokjin brings up the rear, uncharacteristically grim, one arm around Taehyung’s waist.

Taehyung just seems to go along, wide-eyed and suggestible. Yoongi’s eyes glance off his blank face. It’s too odd seeing him like this. It’s too odd seeing him at all.


The basement is a little better. It’s wide—wider than it should be considering the house—and cleaner. There’s a couch and a bunch of screens and air-conditioning, and lights flicker to life when Jungkook gets to the bottom step.

Yoongi follows in, hesitant.

“The whole house is safe,” Jungkook calls out. “But we best keep the sensitive stuff down here.”

Yoongi scowls. “What sensitive stuff?”

Nobody, it seems, wants to tell him anything. Yoongi tries Jimin’s phone again. There’s a cold stirring of fear in his gut again, now pulling in the direction where he left Jimin, and he feels disoriented. Half of him feels anchored here, to Taehyung, who’s curled up quietly on the couch with his head in Seokjin’s lap. The other half of him wants to rebel and run back out there, to Jimin, and apologize for having taken so long. Is he even okay? Yoongi should have persisted, he should have fought to make Jimin come with him.

Namjoon clears his throat. “Yuri?”

Kwon nods at Namjoon and stands up from where she’s been perched on the edge of the couch, watching Yoongi. “Yoongi-ssi,” she says. “Remember when you told me once that you don’t feel like you can trust your own mind?”

Yoongi does. That had been before Jimin, before the case reopening. When he’d had those dreams of Taehyung—the party dreams. He remembers telling her that he thought he was going mad. That he was delusional, imagining those things in vivid recurring loops that felt more real every night.

“Remember what I told you then?”

“You said I was wise not to.”
Kwon nods. “Do you understand why?”

Yoongi does a slow sleep over the room. Seokjin and Hoseok is as clueless to this as he is—their expressions speak for it. Namjoon looks pained. Jungkook listens attentively, but Yoongi can tell he’s not all clued in, too. Yoongi shivers and raises a hand to point. “He—Taehyung, he fucked with my memories. Didn’t he?”

“Do you know how much you’re missing?”

“Parts of a year. Jimin’s missing a lot more.”

Kwon nods. “Give or take nine months. There are some selective memories ranging back to a year before that which is gone, too. Care to guess what that might be?”

Yoongi hates therapists. “I’m guessing that’s when I met Taehyung,” he says, and Kwon nods.

“What about the firewall? Did you put that in my head?”

Namjoon’s brows knit together. “What firewall?”

Namjoon’s eyes go wide. “He’s—what? He’s trying to break through it?”

Yoongi squirms. “Of course he is. If there’s a fucking virus in your brain that you were aware of, wouldn’t you want to get rid of it?”

“Jungkookie,” Namjoon says, quietly. “Go get him. Basement of the Hippeis. You know where it is?”

Jungkook nods and slinks away. Kwon turns back to Yoongi, her expression the same sterile, calm one that Yoongi is used to. “Namjoon put the panic routine in your head, yes,” Kwon says. “But you agreed to it, Yoongi-ssi.”

Consent, he remembers. How strange that that’s where the line gets drawn in this whole web of mind games.

“Why?”

“Because there’s someone—someone powerful—out to get us,” Namjoon mutters. His gaze slips to Taehyung, still quiet and docile, and then pointedly to Hoseok. “And their weapon is our minds.”

Hoseok takes a stuttering breath. “You mean…like what happened to me.”

“To you, to Tae, to Jungkook…” Namjoon says. He looks towards Yoongi. “And…”

“Me?”
Namjoon nods quickly. “Jimin, too, obviously. But—”

“What?” Yoongi demands. “I don’t remember.”

“Neither did I when it happened, hyung,” Hoseok mumbles. “I just came awake with a steel rod in my hands.”

Yoongi recoils. *When?* He wonders. *When* had something else taken over his mind? He tries to remember, and finds he cannot. There are no unexplained gaps in his memory. There are no inexplicable moments. He hadn’t come to with a bloody steel rod in his hand, or walked all the way to his apartment without realizing it. He had never noticed.

“We’ll catch you up,” Namjoon says. “I know you don’t want to trust any of us right now, but there’s good reason for—for everything. If you could remember, you would know, hyung.”

“I want to remember then.”

Namjoon and Kwon exchange glances. “Yes,” Kwon says. “We just have to take some precautions first.”

“Precautions.”

In answer, Kwon pushes up the bottom of her left pant leg. There are scars there, similar to Taehyung’s, ashen-gray within.

Namjoon’s curl around both his ankles.

“The Seagull’s gang-marker is not a marker,” Namjoon says. “It’s a hiding mechanism. A—a barrier, so to say. Before we say anything, we need to make sure you’re all safe. Jin hyung, Yoongi hyung, Hoseok-ah—you have to get your own. We’re not safe without it.”

“Safe from what?” Seokjin asks. He hasn’t moved from the head of the couch, hasn’t taken his eyes off Taehyung, and Yoongi wonders if he feels the same fears as him. If this feels too surreal to be true.

“The thing that was in your brother’s head,” Namjoon says, grimly. “He calls himself the Scarab.”

“And who the fuck is he?”

“There’s time to ask questions later,” Kwon says, sharply. “Precautions first.”

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They set it up upstairs, Kwon and Hoseok, and Namjoon goes to help. Yoongi is alarmed that he’s moving out of range of Taehyung, but Namjoon just points to the walls. *There are things that limit Extraordinary abilities. He has the cuffs. It should be safe.*

He looks safe. He seems to fall asleep for a few minutes and then start awake, the tiny jerk so quiet that Yoongi barely notices it until Seokjin points it out. He looks tired, dark eyes and sallow cheeks, a paleness to his skin that looks uncharacteristic. Yoongi’s never seen his hair black that he can remember, and never seen it long enough that it nearly brushes the nape of his neck. He looks ill, Yoongi thinks—with the raccoon eyes and how skinny his wrists look.

The scar on his throat is healed over by now, of course, just a pink line against his skin. It’s not ashy anymore, and Yoongi’s not sure what that happens. Had someone re-opened this wound, to remove
what little protection Taehyung had?

Seokjin’s fingers brush lightly at Taehyung’s bangs. “It feels so…weird. Seeing him here.”

Yoongi nods. His mind’s still not come to terms with it. He still doesn’t believe it. Where he kneels, in front of the two of them on the couch, Yoongi reaches out to lightly touch the side of his face. Yoongi’s barely pressed his fingertips to his skin when Taehyung starts awake again.

“Hey,” he says, to wide, panicked eyes. “You’re safe. You’re with us.”

Taehyung scrambling to get up, fear crowding his face. But Seokjin’s above them and thinks to restrain him first, taking both of Taehyung’s flailing hands in his, pinning him down to the couch. Sparks flutter and dwindle uselessly at the tips of Taehyung’s fingers. He shakes like a leaf, face pressed into the upholstery and breath coming in a wheeze. Yoongi and Seokjin exchange tense glances.

“It’s just shock,” Seokjin mutters. “Has to be.”

Yoongi raises a hand hesitantly, and then cards his fingers through Taehyung’s hair. It used to make him feel better—the repetitive motion of it—back when he’d had those bad nights and ended up in the back of Yoongi’s car or his apartment. Thankfully enough, it seems to work now too. He goes boneless and peers at Yoongi through the cage of his arms, tiny shivers still making their way down his spine, confusion etched in his face.

“It’s me and Jin hyung,” Yoongi explains, stuttering a bit. “You—you remember us, don’t you, Taehyung-ah?”

A fraction of silence. Then Taehyung’s brows knit together, and he nods.

Yoongi breathes out in a whoosh. “Okay. Okay, that’s—good, you’re doing good.”

They sit there for a while like that, in silence. Yoongi still can’t wrap his mind around it all, Seokjin doesn’t seem to know what to say, and Taehyung is more or less out of it. It’s not that Yoongi doesn’t have questions. There are a hundred. Why did you wipe our memories, for one. Or, why did you go into the Ace. Or, were you scared. And there’s more, bubbling up in the mire of his mind, more potent every time. Why do you have all these abilities? Did you kill those people? What were you doing in that Institute, in the lab? A day ago, all Yoongi would have wanted was to sit Taehyung down and shake him till he answered everything. Now, faced with Taehyung, nothing leaves his mouth.

“Water,” Taehyung croaks, after about five minutes.

Seokjin looks at Yoongi. “I’ll get it.”

Yoongi stays. When Seokjin’s left, the top door swinging shut at his back, Taehyung makes a small sound in his throat, little words mumbled into the couch that Yoongi doesn’t catch.

“What?” he asks.

Taehyung looks up at him. “H-how, um. How l-long…?”

“Ah. Two years. Almost, ah, three.”

Taehyung lets out a quite little oh. He looks upset again. Sparks curl up and down his wrists like lethal little bracelets. Yoongi holds them anyway. “It’s okay,” he says. “We’ve got you now.”
“Don’t remember.”

“Yeah, I don’t remember some stuff either, Tae.”

At that, Taehyung looks at him with more awareness than he’s showcased so far. Yoongi wonders if he’s going to ask how much he knows. How much he remembers. All this secrecy and walls and the cloak and dagger games feels like it’s been leading up to this. But then, all Taehyung asks is, “J—Jimin?”

It’s enough.

Yoongi hadn’t realized how much it would sear to hear it from Taehyung. The confirmation of lost memories; the vetting of forgotten relationships. His throat clams up. “He’s—Jungkook is getting him.”

Taehyung nods. Then he cries, but it’s not like the time Yoongi met him in the Seam. His eyes just blur up and a few tears slip down his face. He hides his face in the couch again.

Yoongi climbs up next to him. Taehyung doesn’t waste time in shuffling close against him, the way he’s always had. “Sorry,” he mumbles, and Yoongi hates that there is no atom of him that resents this boy, nothing in him that can bring itself to begrudge him—even with so many gaps in the picture. It’s probably stupid. Yoongi’s probably just a dumb, gullible bastard, playing with fire because of a pretty boy who moved people around like chess pieces.

“What are you sorry for?”

Taehyung brings his breath in slow and hitching, the fingers of one hand curling into Yoongi’s shirt. He blinks rapidly. More tears spill out the corners of his eyes.


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Every memory crests and folds and ebbs over Jimin.

It’s hard to explain—how it feels at first—because it’s just like those optical illusions. You see the world one way at first, and then a memory slots in place, and suddenly it’s different. You’re different. But meanwhile, the new memories you made in the absence of the old ones remind you of who you’ve become, and all of a sudden there’s conflict.

The you of before, versus the you of now.

They don’t all hit him at once. He feels like he’s wandering, alone in a giant house with a thousand doors, and behind each one that he opens is a new memory. Or old. Isn’t that odd how lost memories, by definition, cannot be new?

He sees the party first, of course.

Taehyung in the dumb beret. Yoongi grumping along behind him like he can’t believe Taehyung talked him into coming here.

Taehyung saying, “Meet my boyfriend. He’s shy.”

It’s early 2013.

They’re in Asan.
They leave the party behind to talk outside and Taehyung tells Jimin a hundred things at once—that he likes hip-hop, that he doesn’t like alcohol, that he’s been with Yoongi for about six months now. They met through a mutual friend—“Kim Namjoon—he goes here too!”—and share a hometown. Apparently they don’t share much else because Jimin has never seen an unlikelier couple.

It’s cold away from the heated indoors. Jimin shivers in his thick coat. Taehyung, in just jeans and a red sweater, doesn’t look bothered by the cold at all. Yoongi looks miserable, though, shuffled close against Taehyung’s side, a crease of annoyance in his brow as he pointedly ignores Jimin to stare at his phone.

There aren’t very many silences with Taehyung. He speaks comfortably, asking questions Jimin can answer, steering conversation neatly towards things they have mutual interests and opinions in so Jimin doesn’t feel confused. A part of Jimin understands that this is some sort of unwarranted sorcery—he’s always been bookish and therefore cultivated a kind of awkwardness; Taehyung seems to vault right over that awkwardness like the Olympic Conversationalist he is—but a part of Jimin is… intrigued.

Why had Taehyung sought him out?

“How do you know Jungkook?” he asks, when it feels like he might actually split open from holding the question in. Yoongi starts to look up in concern. “Where is he?”

Taehyung just grins. “He’s not far. I can tell you some things, but it’s a two-way street. Would you like to hear a proposition, Jimin-ssi?”

Yoongi makes an irritated sound. “Maybe you should get to know him before you start making business deals with him, Taehyung-ah.”

Taehyung just looks at Jimin, completely unbothered. “We just talked.”

Jimin can tell from Yoongi’s resigned face that this is completely ordinary for them.

Taehyung is warm. He’s gentle, smiles sweet, drags them both—bodily, one hand on Jimin’s elbow and the other on Yoongi’s—to the car to go on a drive around town. It’s what all the kids at university do on the few days they’re allowed to let loose. The cool wind rakes across Jimin’s face, and Taehyung doesn’t stop chattering. Yoongi just holds his tongue and drives. It’s all a bit off-putting to Jimin because Taehyung sought him out. Taehyung is here with a proposition, Taehyung is here for something.

Taehyung is also trying to talk to him about anime.

Jimin watches him carefully and decides that his demeanor doesn’t seem false. He’s just like this. Loud and cheerful and tactile.

Yoongi and Jimin are distrustful of each other—Yoongi keeps trying to pull Taehyung back, tells him they should head, scowls and shakes his head at Taehyung’s insistence that they go for ice-cream. Jimin asks a lot of questions, most of which Taehyung deflects, but Jimin’s quick enough to realize that Taehyung isn’t lying. This weird, talkative boy knows Jungkook. Has seen and talked to him, which makes him the only person Jimin knows in this world to have done so.

It’s what makes Jimin push away his own discomfort, what brings his own drive into play.
“I do want ice-cream,” he crows, and Yoongi throws him a dirty look. Taehyung grins. And when they’re sitting around a frozen table digging uselessly at frozen dessert, Taehyung says, *I’d like to know more about your research, Jimin-ssi.*

Jimin’s research.

(This is where a big chunk sorts into place, because now that Jimin thinks of it, the dance school was just a cover, wasn’t it? A cover for his parents to believe in. If they hated what he was doing, they wouldn’t come looking for him in Seoul. If they didn’t come looking for him in Seoul, then they wouldn’t know what he was actually doing.

Research.

That lie he’d spun had been modified to make *himself* believe it. If Jimin thought of it now, the year he thought he’d spent in dance school would be blurry. The only studio he can remember is a dingy underground one, and…and is that where he met Taemin? *Come by, you can study in my cafe.* And later, when Jimin got into university, *bring your friends—I’ll give you a discount.*

Memories are so fragile. So fallible.

If he asked Taemin now, would he be able to vet this? Would he be able to say *oh, you came to dance at my studio?* Or would he think, after all these years, and find it hard to guess how exactly they’d come across each other?)

“I gave up that research,” Jimin tells Taehyung. “It’s a pretty dark subject, anyway.”

Taehyung cocks his head to the side. “Hm. What got you so into *death,* Jimin-ssi?”

Jungkook. Jungkook and the cat, Jungkook and the butterflies, and then Jungkook himself, disappearing from his life in the blink of an eye. Jimin’s never forgotten that last day in the playground. The look on his little friend’s face. It made him want to know more, of course. About *death.* About the way Jungkook’s ability worked.

“It’s not *death* you’re interested in, though,” Taehyung prompts. He’s very light with his words, very curious, and it throws Jimin off because he’s saying these things he shouldn’t know. He’s saying these secret, secret things, and he’s so *free* about it. Like he can’t bring himself to care at all. Like this doesn’t matter—the secrecy, the taboo, the darkness of it—against whatever his end goal is. “It’s *near death.* You want to understand *near death,* the ultimate barriers to which someone can go before you can bring them back. Right?”

Jimin’s never even *shown* this stuff to anyone. “How do you even know that?”

Taehyung smiles. “I’m resourceful,” he says. “You’re a prodigy. We know people in common circles.”

Taehyung’s proposition involves Jimin taking him through his research in return for information on Jungkook. It seems harmless enough—Jimin can teach him what he knows, and he’ll unravel a mystery that’s been bothering Jimin for a long time—but now that Jimin thinks back on it, he wonders if Taehyung was uncannily good at reading people.

If he’d seen right through Jimin, to the core of his curiosity.

They start with Jimin’s side of the bargain the very next day.
Taehyung meets him in one of the forensics labs. It’s late at night, and Jimin’s never been to this wing. He shudders at the scent of formaldehyde and the ice-cold rooms with its metal counters, but Taehyung looks right at home there, armed with a laptop and a whole bunch of books.

“Your name isn’t on any roster,” Jimin accuses, when he walks in. He’d looked up Kim Taehyung last night, and found nothing. There was a Min Yoongi in the year above him, in the ordinary police program, but Taehyung existed on no official records. “Who are you?”

“Elementary, Watson,” Taehyung says. He’s sitting on the teacher’s high table, thick-framed glasses perched high on his nose, half buried amongst his books. “I live here, so I must go here.”

“Never seen you before on campus,” Jimin says. “You’re not in any of the programs I checked.”

Taehyung winks. “Well. You haven’t been looking hard enough, then.” He rummages in a bag and brings out a little camera. “Do you mind if I record our sessions?”

“Well?”

Taehyung shrugs. “I just like being able to re-look at things. I miss stuff in my notes.”

Jimin understands—from the books and the lab and Taehyung’s general questions—that he’s a bio student. Some sort of bio student. There are things he says— about brain functions and delta waves and sleep spindles—that don’t make any sense to Jimin even after he spent more than a year reading everything he can about death and altered states and deep comas. Taehyung wants to know things—specific things.

Specific, weird, dark things.

How to push people to the edge and bring them back. How to modify brain wave patterns to mimic the surge that occurs right before death. How to reverse the ischemic damage that occurs right after.

“Well, if you reduce body temperature drastically…but this is all hypothetical, of course,” Jimin says, at the end of their first meeting. “Right?”

Taehyung nods. “Of course, Jimin-ssi.”

The next time they meet, Taehyung asks about slow-wave sleep and sensory deprivation. About Talon—which at high dosages, seems to send users to an altered dreaming state some shamans call the deep place. Shamans in the deep place have been known to display great strength, astral projection, incredible mental capabilities.

“—it’s not advised, though.” Jimin says. “The drug…it works one way on Extraordinaries, but it’s lethal in high dosages to normal people. There’s a study I can give you.”

“It can hide Extraordinariness,” Taehyung says. “It can deflect mental attacks. If I were Extraordinary with a mental ability, using it would severely weaken me. Clearly it links Extraordinariness and human biology, and manipulating it could lead to interesting combinations. I want to find out."

Jimin looks at him curiously. Taehyung bends over his notes, writing something down, and his cheeks puff out comically as he thinks. He doesn’t look a whole lot serious at first go, Jimin thinks. Doesn’t look a whole lot smart. But he’s penning down whole biochemical interpretations to Jimin’s warbling about consciousness. He’s making some sort of calculations involving the blood-brain barrier. It’s beyond anything a graduate student should know.
It’s interesting.

Taehyung is an interesting person. An interesting person who isn’t on any roster but easily passes through every door and gate and checks at this university. An interesting person with a fascination for Extraordinariness and biological modification.

“Taehyung-ssi,” Jimin says, midway through their third session. “What exactly are you doing with this information?”

Taehyung smiles widely, all teeth and crescent-eyes. “Just…cheating my way through a paper?”

Jimin snorts. “Please make up a less obvious lie.”

Taehyung puts a hand to his heart, wide-eyed, pretending to be hurt. “Would I ever lie to you, Jimin-ssi?”

He would. He’s a lying liar and that’s fundamental with him, Jimin realizes. Jimin leaves at the end of their third meeting with his brain buzzing full of Taehyung’s questions. He shouldn’t think about them, shouldn’t worry about them, but he can’t stop himself. He’s never been able to stop himself when it comes to things he’s curious about, and Taehyung asks a lot of questions. Taehyung expects things from him—knowledge and certainty and proof to his hypotheses—and Jimin feels like he wants to give it to him. There isn’t much he’s learning here that truly interests him.

That’s how he finds himself staying up all night, despite physical training in the morning, looking up details on everything that had come out of Taehyung’s mouth. Drawing his own conclusions. Writing them down to present to Taehyung the next time they meet.

It’s what Yoongi finds him doing in the library one night. He startles Jimin by walking up and asking, “Why are you helping him?” Jimin drops his pen on the floor. In the split second that he leans to pick it up, Yoongi’s already gotten hold of his notes. “Sodium channel gates. Beta blockers. What the hell is this?”

Jimin rolls his eyes. “Ask your boyfriend.”

“He’s crazy.”

“He’s entertaining.”

“Stop enabling it.”

Jimin smirks. “I hate being bored, Yoongi-ssi.”

Yoongi groans. This late into night, he’s changed out of their uniforms and is in a giant, oversized hoodie, a cap covering his head and hair untidy. “Why are you helping him, Park Jimin?”

Jimin shrugs. “I’m curious. Anyway, he said it’s all hypothetical.”

“How realistic, Yoongi snorts. “Do you know what he wants to know? Why he’s doing this stuff?”

Jimin’s initial impression of Yoongi had been small, somehow—a lithe frame, cute features, gremlin-like air of belligerence. Now, devoid of Taehyung, Yoongi looks weirdly graceful and frightening. Like he’s looking down his nose at Jimin, and doesn’t like what he sees. It makes Jimin want to fluff up his own hair somehow, which is a completely stupid response, but what’s he supposed to do?

Yoongi scowls. “He wants to learn how Extraordinaries are made.”
Jimin raises an eyebrow. “Made? No one’s made Extraordinary. They’re born that way.”

“Taehyung doesn’t think so,” Yoongi says, a hint of bitterness in his tone. “He thinks they can be made. And if they can be made, then they can be unmade.”

Jimin has never heard anyone trying to cure Extraordinariness. Weaponization, suppression, deflection—he knows those are all research fields that shady government agencies employ to control Extraordinary populations. But removing it. Deleting it completely from someone. How is it doable?

“And you don’t want him to pursue this theory.”

Yoongi sighs. “It’s a pipe-dream. The world is built to be unfair. We can’t hope to become equal overnight.”

Jimin bites down on his smile. Of course, Yoongi would be the type to take his boyfriend’s interests in screwing around with Extraordinary biochemistry and apply it to socialism. Yoongi would be the type to immediately think of the social and legal side of the hypothesis. If Extraordinariness could be removed, if it could be eliminated, then society would be more equal in terms of power. Crime could reduce. There wouldn’t be Seam—non-Seam separations in most cities.

“What if I said it’s not a pipe-dream?” Jimin says. “What if it can be done, hypothetically speaking? Would you be willing to experiment?”

Yoongi gapes at him. “What?”

Jimin laughs. “I’m just joking, Yoongi-ssi.”

“You think all of his…I don’t know, death and drug theories are feasible?”

“Weirder experiments have been conducted in the name of science,” Jimin says. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s feasible. He’s smart enough.”

“…And so are you.”

“And so am I,” Jimin mumbles, looking back at his notes. It suddenly makes sense—in a strange way. All of what Taehyung’s been researching. All of what Jimin’s been researching because of him. Beta blockers, voltage gates, electric signals to the brain—this is the death-verge stuff that Jimin’s been learning for a year. Somehow, Taehyung’s connected it to Talon. To the only known biological agent that affects Extraordinariness.

Would Jimin want to cure Extraordinariness? Why not? If it could be taken away, then Jungkook could live with his family. Kids like him wouldn’t get dragged away from school playgrounds for god knows what. Like Yoongi says, crime and power differentials would end. It’s interesting, the puzzle, and Jimin can fool himself that it’s a noble cause. However, Taehyung had said manipulation, which can mean more than just elimination.

It can also mean induction.

Like Yoongi had just said, creating Extraordinaries.

“Maybe he’s onto something,” Jimin says. Yoongi’s still looking at him suspiciously, but now there’s slow curiosity stirring on his face. An undercurrent of interest. “Dunno if it’s serendipity or what, that he knows and wants to employ Talon. But maybe he really has a shot.”

Yoongi nods jerkily. He doesn’t say much more, fiddling with the zipper of his bag before he pulls
his hoodie up and turns to go. But then he pauses at the next table, hunched over in thought. “I would be,” he says, abruptly. “If you think it’s not just a pipe-dream, I would be willing to experiment.”

It’s slightly surprising. Jimin hadn’t expected Yoongi to stop. He’d thought Yoongi would be the sort of lawful good that struck a counter–balance to Taehyung’s chaos, but maybe there’s more to him than that.

Jimin smiles. “Good,” he says. “You want me to help him? Tell me who he is.”

“***

“I’ll work with you if you get him out of there.”

It’s their next session. They’re meeting elsewhere, this time, at the top floor of a disused building. It’s a dusty space, used as storage now, and there’s panes of glass and construction material everywhere. Taehyung’s cleaned out a little space and pulled up a table and a chair, but as usual he sits, legs folded, on top of the table. There’s a white-board behind him full of equations. If Jimin were to take a shot, he’d guess Taehyung is looking into drug-delivery mechanisms.

“Get who out of where?”

“Drop it. I know Yoongi told you he told me.”

Taehyung smiles. “Maybe I told him to tell you.”

He’s a cunning thing—mind sharp and recklessly deviant, smile knowing, hopelessly beautiful. He knows what he’s doing, Jimin thinks. He’s well aware of the reel he’s spooling, sticky-sweet like a Venus flytrap. Jimin considers falling for it, willingly. But where’s the fun in that?

“Yeah, I guessed you might have. Agent.”

“Not an agent yet.”

“Baby agent.” Jimin mutters, dropping into the chair. “Agent-to-be. Whatever you are. Agent of the Eyrie. Is that why you know so much about everything?”

“I don’t know everything,” Taehyung says. “I only know bio. That’s what I like. How much did you find out about the Institute?”

“Oh, not much. Just that it’s very secretive, very hush-hush, and it kidnaps Extraordinary kids,” Jimin’s tone comes out bitter, dark with all the implications he’s thought of. “What do they do to them in there? Keep them imprisoned? Cut them up?”

Taehyung squirms a bit. It’s the first Jimin’s seen him uncomfortable, even in the slightest, and the effect is rattling enough that Jimin knows the Institute is not somewhere Taehyung wants to be. “Yes,” he says, in answer to both questions. “It’s not right, but it’s also not wrong. As long as Extraordinaries exist people are going to be afraid of them and find out ways to control it. As long as they exist there will have to be checks and measures. Larger interests will demand for them to be made weapons. Families…families will get broken up.”

There’s something about the way he says families that makes Jimin wonder if he’s speaking from personal experience. He doesn’t ask. They don’t know each other that well yet, and Jimin’s not going to use his own information as leverage for something so personal.
“Your friend is okay, though,” Taehyung says, faux bright, the smile not quite reaching his eyes. “Jeon Jungkook, the necromancer. He’s very interesting. He taught me this code language.”

“The Cola language?”

“Yeah!” Taehyung grins. “It’s cool. I’m going to use it all the time. It’s so random and arbitrary that it’s going to be impossible to solve for someone who doesn’t know what it is. Imagine if I wrote all my notes in that code.”

Jimin thinks Taehyung is exactly the type of person he’d expect that from. “I’d be the only one who could read it,” he says. “Me and Jungkookie.”

Taehyung winks. “You be my secret-keeper then.”

Jimin looks at him. Taehyung is wearing a denim shirt over dark jeans today, and his lips are cherry-shine glossy. He looks pretty—with his dark hair and big eyes, the laugh-lines his smile carve on his cheeks. Too pretty, to be here to spend a whole evening poring over death and dangerous chemicals. Did he lose someone to Extraordinaries? It would make the most sense. There’s that layer of grit to him, that gentle thrum of determination—Jimin’s sure it comes from someplace sad.

There’s a little scuffling sound from behind them and then Yoongi pokes his head in, eyebrows arched and expression blank. “Am I late?”

“Nope. Jimin and I were just discussing the details of our little arrangement.”

“Does he want to get his friend out of the Institute?”

Taehyung clicks his tongue and shoots Yoongi with finger guns. “Predictable, Jimin-ah,” he says, softly. “But most people are.”

They don’t irritate Jimin—Taehyung and Yoongi and their tricks. It doesn’t rile him up. If anything it’s amusing, flattering that they’ve obviously spent some time poring over how to get Jimin to agree to their little scheme.

Yoongi looks at him. “What d’you say?”

Jimin shrugs. “I’m game for it. As long as you two don’t regret it.”

Taehyung and Yoongi exchange glances. They’re both obviously hiding things, Jimin guesses. Old hurts, fueling new ambition. Jimin’s not that much different.

Taehyung puts out his hand. “It’s a deal, Park Jimin.”

***

Jimin doesn’t understand Yoongi’s part in this game until a few more sessions into their brainstorming. He and Taehyung have been sketching ideas—contained spaces, control switches, playing with death and the biochemistry of that Talon drug that can be modified to push life to the very edge. But they’re both talking human body, biological manipulation; neurotransmitters and adrenaline flux and cell damage. The controls have to be external, have to be built and then managed precisely.

It’s Yoongi who brings in engineering.

“Everyone in my family are mechanics,” he mutters. “I knew the way the insides of engines worked
“Before I knew the alphabet.”

“Hyung’s really good at building things,” Taehyung says, squeezing Yoongi’s shoulder. “We just have to come up with the exact thing we want him to build.”

This takes a while. Jimin and Yoongi still have their normal classes, and Taehyung has to do whatever it is that he does in the Institute. Their meetings run late into the night, and it’s always intense. Jimin feels pushed to the limit already, heavy theory on conductances and actuators buzzing through his mind. Yoongi brings in microchips and diodes, resistances in all shapes and sizes, and the three of them hunker over bread-boards and micro-controllers, trying to simulate the sort of waves and voltages they require in theory.

“You’re talking precision beyond what I can envision,” Yoongi says, one of the days it feels crazy and impossible and the three of them are slumped against the wall after four hours of intense work. “We’ll need more help, Taehyung-ah.”

Taehyung sits up. “Write down your problem,” he says, and passes Yoongi a notebook. “Write it down precisely and I’ll get the help.”

Yoongi looks at him quizzically. “How? You said you weren’t bringing anyone else into this. Remember?”

Jimin remembers. Secrecy is a big part of this game. Yoongi and Taehyung keep stressing it, and Taehyung’s held Jimin’s hand more than once to lean in close and whisper don’t tell anyone. It’s our secret. Don’t tell anyone.

“I’m not bringing anyone else,” Taehyung says. “I’m going to pose a problem to someone. See if they can think of a solution.”

Jimin asks, “Are they a friend?”

“You don’t need to know that,” Taehyung winks. “Leave it to me.”

When he walks away that night, Yoongi and Jimin take the route back to their living quarters slowly. Jimin wants to ask, the question always sitting at the tip of his tongue, but Yoongi and Taehyung are nothing if fiercely loyal. They keep each other’s secrets so close to their hearts, so well, that speaking to one about the other is like talking to a wall.

Surprisingly, Yoongi brings it up first. “He’s this desperate because something happened with his brother.”

Jimin hums. “Did he tell you to tell me this, too?”

Yoongi shakes his head. “Don’t tell him I did. But I feel like this is crazy town we’re in right now, and you deserve to know.”

Jimin nods, crosses his arms, and waits.

“His brother had an accident,” Yoongi says, on the back of a sigh. “As far as I know, it should have killed him. It did kill him. But the hospital revived him, just in time. He woke up Extraordinary.”

“He wasn’t before?”

Yoongi shakes his head. “He was born normal. Post his accident he gained some abilities. Couldn’t
control them. He tried his best, according to Tae. Tried everything. Their parents didn’t want him to be registered, didn’t want the stigma. Apparently, whatever they were doing to help him wasn’t enough. Something happened, something bad, and Tae’s parents…”

*If Extraordinaries exist, Taehyung had said, families will get broken up.*

“Where’s his brother now?”

“I don’t know. Ran away after that, maybe. Taehyung won’t talk about him. But his hyung is a big reason he got into all this. That, and what happened to his family.”

Jimin thinks about that all night that night. The idea that Taehyung is in this not just to change the system but to stir things up so hard that the world itself changes. No more divisions along unequal lines of power, no more lost children, no more dead parents and broken homes. Jimin is in it for a part of all that, too, but his intentions are much less nobler. There is a lot more academic curiosity driving him, and even when he tells himself it’s because of Jungkook, it’s become more than about Jungkook. It’s become about why Jungkook can do what he does and what Jimin can do to emulate it.

Eliminate, induce, multiply—Jimin doesn’t mind what they learn, just that they learn. Any of the three had the power to burn a hole through the world.

They settle into their routine. Jimin and Taehyung trying to perfect a variant of Talon, distilled into a drug, potent enough to send someone to a modified version of the deep place. They theorize that what the shamans call the deep place is just a part of the brain that Extraordinariness accessed for their abilities. Taehyung sneaks in rats from the Institute, and an electrode cap. While they study brain waves, Yoongi works on figuring out a perfect control switch that can stop someone’s heart just long enough, just the right way enough, that the drug gets a momentary time-frame to work the way they want it to. Then the other control switch, the most important one, that will bring someone back—without ischemic damage, and hopefully without abilities.

Yoongi and Jimin don’t hang out together at the university. They keep to their circles, nod at each other in the hallways, and it becomes a sort of hidden game. Jimin’s heart beats a secret rhythm every time he spots Yoongi in uniform or training clothes. Every time Yoongi bumps into him in the cafeteria, he gives Jimin a little hi, a quiet wave, subtle enough that Jimin knows it’s only for his eyes. *We have a secret,* Jimin thinks, and can’t help the delicious little thrill of it.

*We have a secret.*

When night falls they sneak out together, books and laptops and boxes of paraphernalia in hand, walking in the quiet, wet dark until they reach the abandoned building. Taehyung joins them last, most of the time, hurrying from somewhere that smells of chemicals, hair flattened into the shape of a scrub-cap and cheeks pink from washing with disinfectant soap. He always greets Yoongi with a big back hug. It’s always a mystery to Jimin—how he never notices how strung-out and nervous Yoongi is until Taehyung holds him and it melts out of him.

“If we do this,” Taehyung says, one day, after they’ve spent two hours going over and modifying their calculations, “we have to try it on ourselves first.”


“We need to know the switches work. We can’t put that risk on someone else. Besides, we have a secret weapon that ensures our safety.”
“Who?”

“Jungkook. I know the pass-code to his cell. Yoongi hyung knows where the Institute is. If anything happens, you need to break him out and get him to revive me.”

Jimin raises his eyebrows. “Wait up. Why you?”

“It can’t be hyung because he needs to work the switches. It can’t be you because you know the best about the verge and the deep place.”

“Taehyungie,” Yoongi says, his tone clipped and hot, fists clenching. “You’re asking us to kill you.”

Taehyung smiles, dazed and bright, a distracted smile that doesn’t belong on him. “Maybe.”

Yoongi’s lips pull back in a snarl. “And you think I can do that. You think I’ll let you.”

“If this is going to work, at some point we’ll have to kill somebody,” Taehyung says. “I’d rather we start with me than make mistakes with others.”

He sounds reasonable. He’s talking about playing with fire and he sounds like he’s reciting the dining hall menu. It’s not blood-chilling to Jimin as much as it is invigorating, Taehyung’s obvious lack of fetters when it comes to pushing his work to fruition. Would Jimin have held back? If it’s him that has to go on the table and him that Yoongi is pleading with—would he have stormed ahead like Taehyung seems to be doing? He likes to think yes but he’s made of softer stuff. He’s never had to keep as many secrets. He’s never wormed his way into secret government programs and seen his family get torn apart.

Still, Jimin offers, almost like a thought experiment. “You can do the verge stuff. It’s not an absolute that it has to be you. We can try it on me, too.”

Taehyung shakes his head, stubborn. “That’s not true and you know it.”

Yoongi wants to argue to that, Jimin is sure, but they can’t really think of anything. It’s true that Taehyung’s actual involvement in the process ends where he calibrates three to four vials of potent Talon. Post that, the actual experiment, is Jimin and Yoongi’s field.

He thinks Yoongi argues anyway. The two of them do, somewhere away from Jimin, and Yoongi comes back with a stormy expression. Taehyung looks determined but apologetic, and Jimin hopes Yoongi doesn’t ask him to intervene. Jimin’s afraid something might go horribly wrong, of course, but he’s also curious. There’s no reward without risks, and Jimin thinks they’re getting so close to the reward now—so unbelievably close—that the risks pale in comparison.

Their fight doesn’t last long. Jimin dozes off amid notes and test results and wakes up to the two of them curled together in a corner, talking in low voices, Taehyung’s mouth skimming the line of Yoongi’s jaw. Their fingers are latticed, legs tangled so close together that Jimin can barely make out where one of them ends and the other begins. Jimin tries to look away when they kiss, out of consideration of privacy, but the fire of their discussion from earlier is still surging through him. The possibility that he and Yoongi might have to kill Taehyung to test the experiment out. It makes him feel heady, restless, and so he continues to watch them, liquid heat stirring deep in his gut when Taehyung arches his back prettily for Yoongi to mouth at his neck.

It feels twisted, weird, like breaching a boundary. Like something taboo, a sort of perverse delight, and Jimin knows he shouldn’t, shouldn’t, shouldn’t watch. But then Yoongi sees him—Jimin’s sure. Sees him looking and only looks back, his gaze piercing as his hands crawl over Taehyung’s back, bunching up his shirt, dragging him close to bite lightly at his lips.
They’re pushing the boundaries of life and death and the human body. The boundaries between them don’t feel like they should matter enough—if at all.

After that, Yoongi begins to acknowledge Jimin more in the university. The differences are small but meaningful. In the training grounds he sits on the sidelines sometimes, gaze never leaving Jimin. They meet more in the library to work quietly, never speaking much, stealing glances when they think the other isn’t looking.

If before the game was *keeping the secret*, now it becomes more than that—a push and pull of something unspoken. Jimin skins his knee during training, limps into a washroom bloody, and Yoongi follows him in with bandages and antiseptic. It’s all eye-roll, gremlin, expressionless care, but Yoongi’s fingers are warm on the back of Jimin’s knee, his hand pressing down hard when Jimin tries to jerk away from the jet of water Yoongi turns on to wash the wound.

“Stay still.”

They stay for a while after the bandaging is done—Yoongi on his knees on the ground, Jimin sitting on the cap of the commode, not speaking.

Is it panic response? It could be. There they are, the three of them, shoring up rapidly against something weird and big and crazy that might be too much for them to deal with. That might have heavy consequences if it doesn’t go right. It *could* be panic response, how Yoongi’s pulse jumps beneath Jimin’s fingers when he touches his fingertips to his neck, and then hesitantly, his lips. How his eyes go dark, heady with a hard, glittering lust, and he stays still enough for Jimin to slip that hand into his hair. How Taehyung’s gaze lingers too long sometimes, seeking, and his hands busy themselves playing with both their fingers when they’re discussing, idle.

“We think of you,” Taehyung tells him once, impromptu, midway through a set of simulations that has them both scratching their heads. “When we fuck.”

It sounds strange and crude and perverse when he says it that way. Nasty in all the right ways, a coiled buzz of desire springing free somewhere inside Jimin at those words. Then he smiles, oddly bashful, and the contrast is worse, gorgeous, a deadly blade in the hands of a rose.

“Yeah?” Jimin asks, quiet and meant to rile, and gets his reward in the way Taehyung licks his lips, looks away.

But now it’s out there, this dangling thing, and it sits between the three of them like a flicker, a spark, a lightning tree of possibility.

Jimin falls so fast and so hard.

It *could* be panic response—attraction easily explained away as psychological duress—but Jimin’s never felt anything so intensely, his hunger for their mere presences growing bone-deep, every hour they aren’t spending working in that disused room a marrow-cut, hurting fierce.

Nearly two months into their daily night sessions, Taehyung brings back the notebook with Yoongi’s questions on it. There are answers scrawled against each, equations and a table of voltages, electrical signals commingling with biological notations. Yoongi looks at it and nods, and then begins to draw something on the white-board. Jimin and Taehyung wait. They’ve been studying the effect of their Talon mixture on lab rats that Taehyung sources from the Institute. In a hastily constructed cardboard maze, the rats doze, and Taehyung uses electrodes to show Jimin the brain-wave patterns he’s come to associate with the *deep place*. 
“Looks right?”

Jimin nods, able to spot the waves properly now, his own independent studying contributing to the trials. He’d sat through hours upon hours of electroencephalograms before he could gauge a pattern to dreaming in the deep place. It’s going to come in useful when they finally go through with the experiment.

“Looks about right, Tae.”

Taehyung smiles. He comes to stand next to Jimin, the heat of his shoulder bleeding through his thin shirt and against Jimin’s back, hands curving softly around his waist. “Can you feel it?” Taehyung asks, resting his chin on Jimin’s shoulder. “We’re so close.”

Jimin feels exhausted. His mind feels exhausted, and Taehyung is warm and solid against his back, and he’s barely thinking when he tilts his face to graze the top of Taehyung’s head with his lips. “I can feel it.”

Taehyung shivers. “I’m glad we found you,” he says. “Thank you for helping us.”

It’s a damning moment. When Taehyung’s hand finds his, when he holds, when he doesn’t let go. When his mouth comes down, petal-soft, at the point where Jimin’s shoulder meets his neck. Quick, like a dream, just a glimpse of the sweetest thing. There and then gone—but it’s not a dream, is it? Taehyung’s smile says it isn’t.

Jimin squeezes his fingers and holds on.

***

The first time they try, they let Taehyung fade into the deep place only a minute before Yoongi hits the switch. Taehyung splutters back to life, gasping and clawing at the table, disoriented, trying to scramble away from them.

“It’s me,” Yoongi says, trying to grab Taehyung’s flailing arms and failing.

He’s crying—started crying the moment they hit the first switch and Taehyung collapsed like a cut-string puppet—and he’s trying to reach out, to touch him, make sure he’s alive—only Taehyung is panicking. Yoongi stands back and folds his arms and shakes, and it’s Jimin who climbs onto the table and holds Taehyung down, bodily, until he stops fighting.

“Ssshh,” he whispers, and Taehyung shakes under him, stares wide-eyed. Jimin presses his lips to Taehyung’s forehead, tries to calm his own racing heart, feels it like a stab in his chest when Taehyung sobs like a child. “You’re okay. You’re fine, you’re okay, we’ve got you.”

When he’s calm, when he’s rational, Taehyung tells them it isn’t enough.

“Something’s wrong with the time frame,” he says. “I barely felt anything before you brought me back.”

“You barely felt anything because you died,” Yoongi snaps. He hasn’t stopped shaking. “I can’t—we can’t do this again.”

“Hyung,” Taehyung mumbles, curled around Yoongi like an octopus, “We’ve come so far. We just have to try again. There was something—I saw something. After the first switch. It just went by too fast.”
“It’s not worth it.”

“Don’t say that,” Taehyung says, his voice hardening. “Don’t say that, hyung, you know it is. And we know it works now—we know it works—”

“So we try it on someone else,” Yoongi mutters. “I can’t fucking hit that switch again, Taehyungie, I can’t.”

“Jimin will do it,” Taehyung says, quietly. “Won’t you, Jiminie?”

Jimin hates that he would. He hates it—but Taehyung is right. It is worth it. And they do know it works, they know all the controls and settings, they know the drug is following pathways and processes as they imagined it would. It’s just a matter of gritting your teeth and getting through it.

“Fuck you both,” Yoongi growls, when Jimin nods his answer to Taehyung’s question. “Fuck you.”

He walks out, slams the door shut behind him, and Taehyung sighs. He curls up on the lab table, holds both of Jimin’s hands between cupped palms, closes his eyes.

Jimin thinks he looks horribly pale, eyelids bruised, a brittle-soft, fragile beauty to him where it was solid and warm and strong before.

“What now?”

“He’ll be back,” Taehyung says, quietly. “He’ll come back. He’ll never leave us.”

***

Taehyung is right.

It’s a hot, gauzy sort of night, and Jimin can’t sleep. He twists and turns in starched sheets, thinks of earlier—the zing of electricity, the flatline swell of sound from a heart monitor, the dreary alarm he felt watching Yoongi shake and sob. The lack of pulse in Taehyung’s throat when Jimin put his fingers there, waiting, waiting, fear swinging through his head like a wrecking ball in free motion.

He closes his eyes against it all but his mind is buzzing, and after a while he sneaks out, quiet; walks across wet grass to the old building.

It’s strange that he already knows they’re there. Both of them—he knows. He knows what they’re up to. It’s been flitting through Jimin’s mind, soft filth at counterpoint to the darkness of death. It’s that thing; that weird back-brain idea of how lust and death and delirium are all intertwined, and they’ve all been sipping a cocktail laced high on all three. Maybe they know, too, because he’s barely halfway there before his phone lights up with a text from Yoongi.

R u up?

Yes, Jimin replies, the grass of the courtyard tickling through his socks, paused there to think through this for a flickering span of seconds. He’s moving even before his phone lights up again.

Come here, then.

Up in their converted lab, Taehyung’s already a gasping, weakened mess, eyes rolled to the whites and fingers clenched in Yoongi’s hair. He’s beautiful when he’s put together and exquisite when taken apart, and take him apart is what Yoongi does, so gently: one, two, three fingers down to the knuckles. Taehyung whimpers, arches pretty, bucks his hips up asking for more.
Yoongi’s own mouth is kiss-red, pants half undone, teeth prints under his jaw. He turns to look at Jimin, heavy-gazed, all slanted eyes and dark with a flush pinking his cheeks. He rubs a hand down Taehyung’s chest and pushes his legs open wider.

“Jimin’s here,” he whispers, the words somehow lewd in his mouth, and Taehyung snaps to, eyes going large and innocently shocked, gaze searching.

“Is he?” Taehyung asks, a pitchy little whimper, and it’s so strange in the middle of this, so surprising, that Jimin nearly laughs. _Nearly:_ because Taehyung finds him, eyes spearing him like a butterfly in a glass case, frowns and asks with a sideways pout, _why isn’t he kissing me, hyung?_

Jimin feels every bit of the tension from earlier surge up in him, a wall, a drowning wave. It’s an _effort_ to walk the few paces he needs to to get to Taehyung; physical pain not to fall into him—into _them_—and when his lips meet Taehyung’s mouth it’s a crash, an ungentle collision, hard and bruising and heavy with the memory of hurt.

He kisses Yoongi too, kisses him filthy, sucks hard at his neck and rolls skin between his teeth; tastes an apology when Yoongi kisses him back. He pulls back, brushes a finger over Taehyung’s cheekbone, pets his face slow as Yoongi lines up to slide into him, slick and tight, fuck him into a sweet pink mess.

Taehyung gasps, pretty neck straining for kisses, and Jimin gives it to him, lovelorn and catatonic. His hand snakes down Taehyung’s chest, a ripple of desire running a bolt through him at the way his stomach jumps under Jimin’s palm. Taehyung pulls him up, hand gripping his wrist in desperation, makes him change up the kisses, wants it deep and tongued out, wants it harder. His hips unfurl for more, one hand twisting in Yoongi’s hair, and Jimin _loves_ him—he thinks—this madman, their pretty baby, his strange, secretive boy. It’s odd how his face looks so young in this moment, in this specific lick of time where they’re probably more adult than they’ve ever been. Jimin, with his mouth swollen and cock straining his briefs in that cusp-of-orgasm way, thinks it’s perhaps because everyone becomes young and afraid in the face of death.

Everyone becomes young and afraid; but _they_ are going to have to batter against it, rail against drywalls, tear down the limits.

“You’re not allowed to die,” Yoongi whispers, one hand tight on Taehyung’s hip, the other in Jimin’s hair to pull him close, press uncertain little kisses to the corners of his parted lips, lick the edges, slip soft into his mouth before he pulls out again, “Neither of you.”

Jimin nods, and Taehyung moves fitful beneath them, hands in fists, eyes glinting, sparkling and profane and terrifyingly tender when he speaks a whispered _yes._

***

The second time they try it, the time-frame’s not right again. Taehyung frowns, tells them he _just_ felt something, that it wasn’t long enough for the drug to really do its work.

The third time, something goes wrong.

_Not right,_ Jimin mumbles, looking at wave patterns, heart going rabbit-quick, _thump-thump-thump_ in his throat like it’s trying to claw its way out, _Not right, not right, wake him up._

Yoongi’s hands shake and then is steadied with effort. His mouth falls slack. He gasps and flicks the switch and shocks Taehyung back to life, and this time when he wakes up he’s merely confused, blinking slow at the two of them, hands seeking and lost. Jimin waits for his eyes to track, for him to
look at them with some recognition, but it’s a minute and then two, it’s five minutes, and Taehyung’s still lost, still blinking, stuck in some inward maze that doesn’t have space for Jimin and Yoongi.

Jimin feels panic like he’s never felt it before, a rising tide, so heavy and staggering that he folds from it, hands on the table.

“Tell me your name,” Jimin tells Taehyung, and slaps him hard when he doesn’t respond. “Tell me your name, you fucking bastard.”

Taehyung mumbles something incoherent. His head lolls gently on the table, eyes jumping too-quick from surface to surface, like he’s not really present in his body. Yoongi’s arm cinches around Jimin’s waist and he’s asking something, quick and sharp-voiced, but nothing computes.

Nothing makes sense, nothing comes together, and he feels lost too—the room swirling and the light too bright and fear choking his throat—until he hears, quiet and small, “J-Jiminnie?”

Jimin kisses him hard enough to bruise. He crushes Taehyung to him right after, heart still thumping fiercely, shaking despite Taehyung’s soft protestations of I’m fine.

He thinks it’s only now that he understands exactly how Yoongi felt that first time.

They have everything, they know everything—things could still go wrong.

They could still pay a hefty price.

Jimin makes them take a step back after that. “We’re missing something. We can’t give you more time without something external helping us.”

Taehyung, perched on the table as usual, barely looks up from his notes. “Hypothermia,” he says. “You said it the first day we met. Induced hypothermia.”

Jimin feels a chill down his spine. Yoongi rolls his eyes, makes it look indifferent, but Jimin knows him well enough to see through the mask to the conflict beneath. “Does there come a point in time where we think enough is enough, Tae? Or is that as hypothetical and given to experimentation as our current problem?”

“I don’t know,” Taehyung mumbles, clearly missing the emotional cues in the argument. “Where do we get ice?”

“Taehyung,” Jimin says, sharply. “Shut up.”

He looks up at that. At Jimin first, maybe because he’s easier to gauge, and then at Yoongi. He rubs at his eyes and then goes still, small, a hint of upset drawing his lips down.

“Oh,” he says. “Sorry. I’m sorry, I wasn’t—I wasn’t thinking.”

Yoongi snorts. “Yeah, you weren’t. What if you didn’t wake up? What if you woke up and didn’t know us?”

Taehyung’s face falls. “Hyung. You know this is important to me.”

“Maybe there should be other things of import to you, too.”

Yoongi’s voice is thick, snappish. Jimin shudders and turns to the whiteboard. “We just need to think about this,” he says, to diffuse the black energy in the room more than anything. “Hyung’s switches won’t work underwater without frying you. We don’t know how the drug will work at lower body
temperatures.”

Yoongi sighs. “We have a whole bunch of unknowns. It’s not just fucking ice, Tae. You’re the scientist—think of the science.”

Reluctantly, Taehyung agrees. They redraw and remodel and recalibrate. It’s a small feat, getting Taehyung to stop insisting that they kill and freeze him, but he seems somewhat rattled by the fact that Yoongi and Jimin are suddenly, abjectly, on the same page. He walks around them on eggshells for a while, clearly apologetic but terrible at showing it.

It doesn’t last long because they don’t let it last long. It’s easy enough to make Taehyung shed his inhibitions when they’ve got him trembling, breathless between them, all the air snatched up from his chest, gentle and messy and sweet for them in a way he so rarely is outside of intimate spaces.

It makes Jimin feel like they might get through all this in one piece. That they might power it through with sheer will alone.

Because it’s him and Yoongi and Taehyung, and somehow, he feels like they can move mountains.

***

Their university goes on break and Jimin and Yoongi stay behind on campus. Suddenly they have all this time—all these nights that they can spend together, working and sometimes not-working, sneaking Taehyung into the dorms, kissing him silly when he brings up the fucking ice.

Then there’s one afternoon, when Taehyung miraculously has no work at the Institute. They’ve spent the whole morning fucking around like normal college students, taking pictures on Jimin’s Polaroid camera, Taehyung giggling every time he spots his face in one because he’s not supposed to. He’s not supposed to know them, not supposed to be with them, and he’s flouting a million rules by being photographed with them.

“I don’t care,” he sings. Kisses Jimin on the cheek, clicks the camera. “I have someone to cover for me. Anyway it’s not like they own me.”

“It’s a secret government agency,” Jimin says, lifting his head from Taehyung’s shoulder, taking the picture from him. “Pretty sure they do own you.”

Taehyung makes a face. “I’ve only ever been caught sneaking out once,” he says. “But it’s Professor R who caught me then, and that guy has a thing for me.”

Yoongi sits up on his other side, brows furrowing. “Who’s this guy?”

“He’s the one who helped me with your engineering problem.”

“The—what?”

Taehyung shrugs. “I just did him a little favor.”

There’s a little bell of alarm in Jimin’s chest at this. “What sort of favor?” he asks, trying to sit up and accidentally elbowing Taehyung’s tummy. “What does he know? Taehyung, why did you even go to him?”

“I didn’t. He found it in my notebook when I was discussing something else with him, asked me what it was. I said it’s independent research and he offered to help. He’s a bit of a creep, but harmless, really. Just likes pretty boys, the old perv.”
“What the fuck.” Yoongi swats at him. Taehyung just grabs his hand and presses a kiss to the center of his palm.

“What?” he asks. “I know I’m pretty.”

Jimin rolls his eyes. “Why do everyone you talk about from the Institute have weird names like *Professor R*?”

“Code names. I have one, too. Starling,” Taehyung smirks. “It’s an Eyrie thing. Everyone joining in a single year gets a code name basis some criteria. My year is birds. Professor R’s year was *terrible*—it was insects.”

“What is he, then?” Yoongi says, a scowl in his voice. “Roach?”

“I wish,” Taehyung says. “His name is Scarab. Hey, you guys want me to ask him to modify the control switch problem? For lower temperatures? I’ll probably have to wear a skirt or something, but he’d tell me.”

Yoongi frowns. He’s sitting up now, vague unease in the crease of his lips, but he only says: “Oh, shut up. Fuck you.”

“Yeah, hyung,” Taehyung licks his lips, raises himself up and wriggles his hips. “Shut up and fuck me.”

They leave that there, a loose little thread of information that doesn’t connect, but Jimin finds himself thinking of it often. It’s not just because he’s fond of Taehyung—so, so fond—but it sticks wrong with him and his idea of the Institute as a sterile, white, sexless place. That Taehyung might have a problematic overseer, that he laughs it away and plays it up but has clearly learned to use it to his advantage. That Jimin knows Taehyung is a bit of a whip-smart fire-cracker who acts first sometimes and thinks second.

“Taehyungie,” he says once, after the work for the day is done, eyes gone soft and mouth wet, running his hands gentle across the crown of Taehyung’s head, “Do you feel safe? At the Institute, do you feel—”

“Why?”

“Just. You said, that day, that man—”

Taehyung brushes a finger across his mouth, shushes him, scoots up and close and presses his lips to the tip of Jimin’s nose. “I have to go back in an hour,” he whispers, and smiles wicked. “This is not what I want to do in that one hour.”

Jimm gives up. It’s impossible to argue with him, anyway.

***

Eventually, they’re here.

In front of a bathtub full of ice. New control switches in hand, new vial of a clear drug, Jimin and Yoongi wrapped up in layers and Taehyung in thin sleeping clothes. He shivers, keeps looking between them and the ice with wide, liquid eyes. Yoongi holds him for as long as he can, quiet and staring above Taehyung’s shoulder at the ice, one hand on the back of Taehyung’s head and the other wrapped tight around his back.
Jimin makes sure there’s enough heating pads and thermal blankets waiting. Then he goes to kneel next to the tub, asking Taehyung if he’s sure, takes his hands, assures him that they’ll pull him out at the first signs of things not going well.

“Do it,” Taehyung says.

Jimin looks at the syringe in his hands, and then up at Yoongi. Yoongi nods jerkily and looks away. Taehyung barely flinches when Jimin finds their usual site, the jugular vein at his neck. It’s hard to find, but it brings the onset fastest, and they need to act fast if they are to do this.

“It’s time,” Jimin says, and stands up. “Count of three?”

Taehyung nods.

“Remember,” Jimin mutters, suddenly overcome because this is it, this is the pinnacle of everything he’s willing to try. Nothing more than this. Nothing more, ever. “We love you, baby.”

“I know.”

They count to three. They push him down. It’s exactly as awful as Jimin imagined—water everywhere, stinging his skin, Taehyung trying to get away until Yoongi depresses the first control switch.

Then he flops back, lifeless, into that ice-cold water.

Jimin feels his heart clench.

Yoongi looks pale, bloodless, his hand in Jimin’s icy and lax. He asks, into the silence, “What now?”

“Now?” Jimin asks, slow, trying to sound reassuring. “Now we make a choice.”

They have to wait three minutes. Three minutes, and then they’ll pull Taehyung out of the tub and Jimin will look at the readouts. Three minutes, and then they’ll either bring him back, or wait a minute more for the deep place to settle in.

It’s only four minutes total.

The longest four minutes ever.

“Jimin-ah,” Yoongi’s voice is shaky. “Are we doing terrible things?”

They are. They’re playing god, playing with a life. Taehyung doesn’t care, having honed his entire life towards this. Jimin can understand, because he’s always pursued intellect, put his curiosity over any rational thought. Yoongi is their deepest conscience, their voice of reason.

He sounds done.

“No,” Jimin says, in a whisper. “No, this is it. This will work.”

“If it doesn’t?”

“If it doesn’t, then we stop. I promise you, hyung.”

Yoongi nods. The clock counts down. Jimin holds on tight to Yoongi’s hand, both of them unable to look, and then the alarm is blaring and Jimin surges forward.
“Get him out, get him out.”

Taehyung is limp in their arms, heavy, soaked through and frozen to his skin. Ice sticks to his lashes, to his lips, the dips of his collarbones. Yoongi moves quick, gets the heating pads and the blankets, grabs the control switches and paddles. Jimin sets up the electrodes, breathes deep when the first readings come in.

That weird, inexplicable wave pattern they isolated out of all the noise shows clear through in suspended near-death.


They wait. Jimin can’t breathe, can’t do anything except watch the stuttering readings, and he thinks Yoongi isn’t doing too well either, if his utter silence is anything to go by.

Thirty-two seconds.

His hands itch. His heart pounds the rhythm of pure panic. The camera at the corner whirrs, and he wants to smash it suddenly, inexplicably angry at Taehyung’s paranoid insistence that they record everything.

Twenty-one seconds.

Yoongi wheezes, holds Taehyung’s hand in his, mutters a whispered please.

Nine seconds.

Jimin nods, and Yoongi powers up the paddles, turns on the switch, begins to layer the thermal blankets and pads on top of Taehyung’s body.

Two seconds.

Taehyung jerks to life—without stimulation, without the control switch—spluttering ice-water and startling Yoongi.

Jimin shouts and falls back, nearly ends up ass-first in the bath-tub, and catches himself just in time. He drops to the floor, next to Taehyung who’s climbed onto his hands and knees, breathing hard and shivering so violently that his muscles lock up and his teeth chatter.

Yoongi puts a hand on his shoulders and then draws back as if scalded, stares wild at his palm, holds it out to Jimin.

There’s a welt there.

Jimin doesn’t understand. His heart goes galloping, black crawls at his vision, and he doesn’t understand.

“Taehyung,” he says, shakily. “Tae, you have to calm down.”

Taehyung doesn’t seem to hear him. He’s still shivering, but now the ice is evaporating off him. There’s heat spilling from him, heavy and thick, and sweat starts beading uncomfortably at Jimin’s neck. The water spilled around Taehyung’s body begins to boil, vaporizing from his clothes and skin.

Jimin stands up again, and throws his equipment to Yoongi. “Get out,” he says. “We have to get out.”
Yoongi is reluctant, still staring at the welt on his palm. His gaze flickers to Taehyung, and for a moment Jimin is afraid he won’t go, that he’ll stay and try to put Taehyung back together somehow with his bare arms. But then he nods and looks at Jimin once and leaves. Gets out the door, paddles and switch and all. Jimin follows him out.

“Don’t fucking shut the door on him,” Yoongi says, shocky and thin. “Don’t you do that.”

Jimin runs a hand through his hair, feels the chill down to his toes. The desire to break something climbs to a peak. “What the fuck—what happened?”

“I don’t know,” Yoongi says. His shoulders are quaking. He bites his lip hard enough to draw blood, shakes water off his fringe, gasps. “Help him.”

Jimin feels a hysterical laugh bubble up his throat. “I don’t know how.”

Behind them, there’s a sizzle of water, the stench of burning plastic. Jimin purses his lips and shuts the door, pretends he doesn’t hear the reedy whisper of no that comes from Yoongi. He doesn’t turn the lock; can’t bring himself to.

“What do we do?” Yoongi asks. “What the fuck do we do now?”

“I don’t know, hyung.”

In the end they do nothing. They sit at the far corner of the room, close together and unable to talk. Jimin thinks they should talk, they should figure it out, they need to figure it out. It’s just that the words won’t come. His mind keeps trying to skate around everything that just happened, hits a wall when he forces himself to think about it.

What have they done?

Yoongi has his head in his arms and is surely beating himself up. He’s the eldest, he’ll think, he should have stopped them. It’s stupid, Jimin wants to say. They all are in this together. But this is who Yoongi is, hard on the outside and terribly soft on the inside, and Jimin doesn’t know what to do.

He hears cracking. Glass shattering. Hissing and splitting and a crunch like metal bending. It goes on for a while and then it stops, abruptly.

He can’t think. Everything has the consistency of cotton wool and he can’t think.

Eventually, the door to the bathroom opens. It doesn’t slam, it doesn’t rip out of its frame like Jimin has been half expecting. It just falls open, and Taehyung walks through.

Yoongi says, shakily, “Tae?”

It’s a question. It’s a question because they don’t know what to expect, what they’re facing. But Taehyung just stumbles over, hair in his eyes and a quake in his shoulder.

It’s a few moments before he speaks. The two of them remain sitting, gaping up at him, and Taehyung sways slowly on his feet. His hair is curly from the steam, sticking up. His face is flushed, eyes glassy, and there’s an audible click when he swallows.

“Look,” he says, raspy and so, so frightened. Fire flickers at his fingertips. Then it fades, it’s gone, but a snap of his fingers turns it into sparks, and Jimin’s breath catches in his throat. “Look.”
Jimin clenches his fist. “Tae—”

“I can—I can turn it on and off,” Taehyung whispers. A little frightened giggle crumples through him. “Different things. It’s—like there’s this *space* in my head, and I can feel…others…and draw from them. Mimic them.”

“Others.”


Jimin’s mind races. “How?”

“I think—maybe it…it worked. The part of the brain that aids in Extraordinariness is what we triggered to access the deep place. Just like we theorized. Only, we don’t—we don’t ever have to use Talon or freeze people again,” Taehyung’s eyes are wide, face almost horrified. “I can just—I can turn them off. I can disable them. I can take it away.”

A heavy silence falls after this. Jimin wants to say something, has a hundred questions, wants to put away all the questions and just hold Taehyung, but he feels frozen. Frozen, watching the sparks at his fingertips. Frozen, thinking of the meaning of all this.

“Taehyungie,” Yoongi whispers. “You’re saying—you’re saying you’re Extraordinary. We somehow—we *made* you—”

Taehyung’s lip trembles. He looks at Jimin, half-pleading, and then at Yoongi, the friable facade cracking as he does, a repressed half-sob breaking out of him. He fidgets with his fingers, helpless, itching to hold his hands out to them, to ask for comfort, seemingly confused if it’s even allowed anymore.

“Does this—does this change things, hyung?” he asks, his voice horrible. “For…for *us*?”

Of course, Jimin thinks. This is Yoongi. Yoongi who says, as a passing thought, that he hates Extraordinaries. Yoongi who says, at the tail end of every conversation they have on the matter, that he can’t stand the fundamental power inequality.

But Yoongi just surges immediately to pull him down against them, no distance left between, a choked sound spilling out of him as he draws him close.

“It changes nothing,” Yoongi assures, fiercely, while Jimin leans in close to mumble reassurances into Taehyung’s hair. “Nothing’s going to change between us, okay? *Nothing.*”

He sounds like he believes it. Jimin breathes in deep, kisses Taehyung’s hair, and wishes he could believe too.

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PRESENT

It feels like nothing at all has changed, even when everything has. Yoongi holds Taehyung; the world stills. It’s just them, and the part of him that’s worried for Jimin.

“How much do you remember?” Taehyung asks.

“I don’t know,” Yoongi’s mouth feels dry. “Bits and pieces. We—we did something, didn’t we? In
university?”

Taehyung nods. He’s more solemn than Yoongi remembers him being, a studied stillness to his body turning him rigid in Yoongi’s arms.

“We did something,” he says. “We—I messed up. This is the price.”

This. The Ghost, the Ace, the mind-control—this. Yoongi sits up straight. He doesn’t let go of Taehyung. “These things you can do—”

“There’s a place I go to in my head,” Taehyung says. “I can draw on other people’s abilities, mimic them, switch them on and off. Like Jin hyung did, I can cheat an Extraordinary test. That’s why you never knew.”

Yoongi shudders. “And the memory. My memories—and Jimin’s. Did you mess with that?”

Taehyung shakes his head. “We did.”

“What do you mean?”

“You, me and Jimin. We discussed it. We did it together.”

“How? I don’t understand. I don’t understand why I would—why did we do these things? Why did I let you—”

But Taehyung shakes his head. “Not here,” he says, and Yoongi notices his gaze flick to the door of the basement. “Not now.”

“Because of the precautions?”

A momentary silence. “Because—because of the precautions.”

“Can you tell me one thing?” Yoongi asks. Taehyung looks at him, really looks, gaze locking and his grip on Yoongi’s wrist tightening. “Did you kill those people?”

Taehyung’s expression grows pained. But he keeps his eyes on Yoongi, through the tremble in his lower lip, through the hitch in his breath and the panic settling pale across his face.

“…yes,” he whispers, and Yoongi feels a muted stab at that, despite his expectation of this answer. “I had to.”

“Consciously?”

Taehyung hesitates. “Yes.”

“You weren’t controlled into it? Namjoon said you were.”

“Namjoon hyung has it wrong. I was awake for some parts. I wasn’t for others. I didn’t—I didn’t have much time between the two, but The Ghost is all me. Who else would have known to call Jin hyung? Who else knew what his ability was, that I might mimic it?” Taehyung sounds very rational about all this, but the tremor in his spine gives him away. “I made him come. I used his ability to kill them.”

“Why would you do that?” Yoongi asks, and hates that his voice breaks. “You’re not a killer, Tae.”

Taehyung says nothing at all to this, lips pressed tight together and eyes dazed, and so Yoongi
presses, “I don’t remember all of you, but I remember this much. I know you that much. Don’t I?”

Taehyung’s eyes fill up again. He opens his mouth to answer, but then looks distractedly towards the door. “Hyung,” he whispers. “Can you—for just a minute, c-can you just…?”

Yoongi knows what he’s asking for. He’s asked for it before, in his informant days, crawling into Yoongi’s arms, quivering with secrets even then.

Secrets, secrets—it’s all he seems to be made of.

Yet Yoongi doesn’t even think. It comes so naturally—his hands around Taehyung, one palm slipping to just above his pelvic bone, grounding and orienting him. Taehyung breathes rapidly against his shoulder, almost in soft panic, and Yoongi runs a hand up and down the knobbles of his spine, the curve of his lower back, his sides.

“Just keep breathing,” he says—what he’s always said—and Taehyung makes a noise, small and afraid. “We’ll be okay.”

“I’m sorry,” Taehyung mumbles again. “I’m sorry I had to do this.”

“Do what, Tae?”

From up the stairs, there’s a sudden rapping on the door. “Yoongi?” Seokjin calls. “Tae?”

“Door’s open,” Yoongi says. Taehyung slides off his lap, back onto the couch, biting his lip, eyes darting nervously at the door. A twisted, black feeling crawls into Yoongi at that, a faraway fear that settles with disbelief in his gut.

Sure enough, Seokjin tries again, the door rattling in the frame, and his voice is sharper when he calls again.

“Yoongi? Open this door.”

Yoongi starts to get up. “It’s not locked.”

Taehyung pulls him back down, heavily, grip suddenly so tight that Yoongi winces. “Hyung.”

Seokjin rattles the door again. “Taehyung!” he yells this time. “Open this fucking door right now.”


“It’s locked now,” Taehyung says, calmly. “I locked it.”

“Why’s that?” Yoongi asks, a frisson of unease climbing up his spine. “Why did you lock it?”

“I need you to unlock these cuffs. I know you have a key.”

Yoongi feels the suggestion in his voice, but something in him interprets it as an order. It feels like the action comes from very, very far away when he reaches for the key in his boot.

He doesn’t want to, he thinks. He doesn’t want to bring it out, doesn’t want to free Taehyung, but it’s not a choice.

He has to.

There’s power quashing his own will, power like an anvil.
He has to.

Somewhere up there, he hears Seokjin shout. Taehyung looks at him, shoulders hunched and shivering, biting down on his lip to keep his words in.

What words are they? Words of comfort? Yoongi doesn’t need them. He wants answers. He wants to know what the limits of Taehyung’s ability are; how he’s able to access Namjoon’s telepathy from here with the cuffs on. He wants to know how anything like Taehyung could have been taken over by another Extraordinary: it doesn’t make sense if he is like this, able to mimic, able to use any ability as long as it is in some sort of range. He wants to know if anything he knew of Taehyung is real, if the boy he used to love even exists, or if all of it had just been an elaborate game-play towards a greater end that Yoongi can’t yet understand.

He wants to know.

But Taehyung will have him unlock the cuffs instead. Taehyung will have him free him, instead, sparks crackling to life at his palms the moment Yoongi takes the cuffs off. He flexes his fingers, as if he needs them quick and nimble, and Yoongi’s mouth runs dry.

Taehyung will have him come with, he says, we’re going somewhere else, hyung.

“What if I don’t want to go?”

A flicker of a grimace. “That’s not a choice.”

Someone is railing against the door. Yoongi hears voices—Seokjin and Kwon and Hoseok and Namjoon—and wants them to break the door open, to subdue Taehyung again, because Yoongi can’t trust him—not like this.

But the door holds.

The door holds, and there’s a pressure in Yoongi’s head like a fist squeezing tight around his brain. It cinches, the more intense the more he tries to fight it, and he looks around in panic for something—an object, hard enough to fight with, quick enough to locate that Taehyung isn’t likely to catch his intent. There’s the chair, he thinks, and makes his decision in a split second. Taehyung, gaze affixed on the door, possibly holding it against the fists on it with sheer power of mind, doesn’t see him.

Yoongi grabs the chair, raises it, and with the last of the effort he can maintain against a second will bending his mind, tries to bring it down on Taehyung.

Only—of course—it flies out of his arms. Breaks on the far wall.

There’s no anger in Taehyung’s face, no bitterness. He just looks at Yoongi like he’s always looked at him—fond, gentle, sadness just beneath the surface.

“Why are you doing this?” Yoongi mumbles, blinking rapidly against the black crawling into his vision.

He doesn’t get an answer.

“I won’t forgive you for this,” he spits, and that gets a response. Taehyung looks at him, scalded, something aching and awful in his eyes.

“It’ll be better when you wake up,” he says.

It’s almost a plea.
With the unsettled way his gaze travels, up the stairs to the door and then across to Yoongi, he looks strange and fragmented, a puzzle-game creature that's missing a piece. “You’ll see, hyung. It’ll be better.”

And then everything goes away.

Chapter End Notes

ARGH I researched so much for this FML. It's pseudo-science, and I am shit at bio (I could probably have elaborated more on the engineering bit of his but ehhh) so if I did something really, REALLY, ASTOUNDINGLY wrong please come yell at me, k? Most of it should just be taken as nonsense for the sake of fiction, though.

Follow me on twt where I fangirl about my boys and cry about this #murderfic and occasionally post shitty AU threads and ideas. Now you can also yell at me on curiouscat. I am diversifying socially. It is v exciting.

As always here, of course, is the tumblr

Kudos, comments, theories - I love 'em all. <3333
“You’re supposed to be dead,” the man says, eyebrows furrowed. “They said you were dead.”

“I was.” Taehyung picks the safe up, and turns to him with a wink. “Didn’t suit me.”

OOOOKAY. This chapter fought me SO HARD, guys. I am not sure of the format of it, still, and I feel weird cutting out flashbacks midway, but I want to keep the present of the story going WHILE I untangle the past. Pls bear with me.

Now that we’re here, I want to just sort of add a note that Taegimin’s morality here is dubious. If their logic and reasons for doing the sort of shit they’re doing seems dicey and not very noble, that’s because they’re not. They’re ambitious and fucked up and possibly very myopic in their world view, and that’s on purpose.

In these early morning hours, the Seam takes on a strange quality.

There are places here you can go to for anything. Weird services—mind reading, supernatural surveillance, Extraordinary protection. Weird sex and weird drugs and weirder requests. Want an unsavory job done? A man with invisibility could help. Want yourself smuggled abroad? An illusionist could easily get you into a container ship.

Anything you want, no matter how strange, the Seam can provide.

You have to know how to ask, though. The Seam has to be studiously tackled; alley by alley, corner by corner. And when you can tell which nook belongs to Madame Yuri and which to the Clovers; when you can predict which gang will win the favor of corrupt cops to cart drugs across the border; when you can see who is running what con and to what ends from a mile away—then you can play the Seam like a fiddle.

Peddle its secrets. Sell its knowledge.

Things change everyday in this part of the city. Life a constant whirl; unpredictability its baseline rhythm. Look away for even an hour and you lose your edge in the maelstrom.

Taehyung has been gone a long while. More than two years.

Those who know him look at him with surprise. Those who don’t watch with curiosity. He doesn’t stop to talk, doesn’t look to either side. Keeps to the edge of the road and walks straight.
The pawnshop is tucked into a corner. It’s at an odd little junction—in the crooked elbow of a street lined with buildings—and a dingy convenience store sits across from it. A bell rings when Taehyung enters, shrill and sweet. He flinches at the sound. Everything is loud and bright after the long dark.

“Hi!” he calls, brightly. “Is anyone here?”

The man who sticks his head out of a backroom isn’t the man who used to handle this place. That’s not too surprising. Things change at the Seam rather too quick. “Can I help you?”

Taehyung rests his palms on the counter. “I kept an item here for safekeeping. I’d like to take it back. It’s a safe-box at the back, silver, marked number 38.”

The man looks at him curiously. “Starling?” he asks.

Taehyung shrugs and smiles. In the gap period while he waits for the man, Taehyung rubs a finger absently across the ghost of his scar. His Talon is gone—obviously—but the scarring remains. He remembers a ghostly echo of pain from that procedure. Doesn’t matter who did it. A nameless, faceless man—one among many.

“You have the key?”

“I do, thank you.”

He doesn’t. What the man opposite has for an ability, though, is the sort of magnetism that can bend and fold metal. Useful, Taehyung thinks, and convenient. He smiles and pretends to inspect the box while he reaches out, quick, to steal a bit.

Taehyung has never been able to explain it well—the mimicry. He thinks of it like borrowing something, physical and tangible, just that it’s only physical in another world. A different dimension. It’s like he steps from this world—with its sounds and smells and climate and sights—into another one, thin and origami-like, a paper-world where the only things he can touch are abilities, and thoughts, and memory.

The magnetic man’s ability tastes like iron. Feels like soft pumice. He only takes a sliver, just enough to damage the lock, and then makes a show of pulling a useless key from his pocket and twisting the safe open.

Everything in there is as is. Intact. Preserved.

“Thank you,” Taehyung says, sincerely, closing the safe’s door. “That’ll be all.”

“You’re supposed to be dead,” the man says, eyebrows furrowed. “They said you were dead.”

“I was.” Taehyung picks the safe up, and turns to him with a wink. “Didn’t suit me.”

It’s raining again outside. The rain makes him flinch too, sensory input too much, all the world slicked up brighter by the sheen of wetness. It pulls and grates at his nerves, makes the quiet dark of the paper-world seem like a siren call. He struggles to stay upright, to remain latched physically to himself, to not drift in the way he had after Namjoon had found him earlier.

The Liberty Hotel is old and baroque—one of those startlingly western buildings that looks like it belongs in a classically European city. Its exteriors are dramatic—massive columns and balconies with curved balustrades, gilded facade glittering with lampshades, wisteria curling along the sides—and the insides even more so. Lavish paintings and frescoes adorn every surface, and golden light creates chiaroscuro effects on the walls. It’s gaudy, and cheap, and an absolute eyesore: nothing
Taehyung would have stepped foot in if he had choice.

It’s also the only hotel this side of the Seam that has large bathtubs.

When Taehyung enters the presidential suite, safe in hand, he finds Yoongi sitting on the bed. He’s being very still, studying his surroundings, rather like an aggrieved cat. His hair hangs in his eyes, messy and overlong. His legs are folded, the worn-out plainsclothes sweater almost grazing his knees, and he gapes at the mirrored ceiling, the weird velvet couch, the giant pastoral art print hanging behind the bed.

“All the furniture is burgundy,” he observes. “How odd.”

Taehyung looks around. “You’re right. It is weird.”

The television is on, flashing advertisements for fabric softeners and cosmetics. Taehyung places the safe on top of the mini-bar and ignores Yoongi’s pointed glances.

“Where are we?”

“I thought you’d try to leave.”

“Don’t think I could have if I wanted to.”

“The door wasn’t locked.”

“You can keep someone in without a physical lock,” Yoongi says. His tone is flat, icy, none of the personal warmth Taehyung remembers. “And you wouldn’t have brought me all the way here to Burgundy Land to just let me leave. Don’t play dumb now, Tae.”

Taehyung smiles a little. Yoongi’s words are clipped, and his face is nearly splotchy with how angry he is, but at least the verbal tug-of-war feels like familiar territory.

“What’s in the safe?” Yoongi asks.

Taehyung doesn’t respond. The recessed ceiling light is bright. It crawls into his head, a hum, thrums beneath his temples in a headache. He feels sluggish, drops into a chair with a sigh, and pulls his legs to his chest.

Yoongi makes a noise of irritation. “Taehyung. What’s in the fucking safe?”

Taehyung presses the bottom of his chin to his knee, curling his arms around his legs, fetal in the small space the chair offers. “Find out yourself if you want to.”

“Fine.”

Yoongi strides over. Taehyung looks over to the safe for a minute, holds it shut with his mind—just a game, just long enough for Yoongi to throw him a dirty look and commence yanking at the door with all he’s got. Then he lets it go.

The door opens.

“What the hell is this?” Yoongi brings the items out, begins turning them over in his hands. Taehyung watches him, through the pounding in his head, through the dryness in his mouth and the chills crawling up his skin, and thinks he sees a glimmer of confusion pass over Yoongi’s features. “I… I made this, didn’t I?”
“What gives it away?”

“The soldering. The linkages.” Yoongi’s eyes are wide with dawning comprehension. “I made these. What are they? Switches? Controls? What for?”

Yoongi pulls something else out. A pro-grade syringe holder, packed with coolants, with six slots for vials. Four are occupied. The light-green liquid in them sloshes thickly from side to side when Yoongi holds it up. “What are these?” he asks.

He gets the electrode cap out next. Taehyung doesn’t think they’ll need that, not for what he’s planning, but he says nothing, lets Yoongi discover all their old equipment and notes. Doesn’t think he knows what to say. Where does he start?

“This is my writing,” Yoongi says, eyes widening at a graph sheet. “This is—all this is mine. Taehyung. What the hell is this?”

“We started this,” Taehyung says, quietly. “We’ll finish this now, hyung.”

Yoongi’s face grows pale. “Finish what?”

Taehyung takes a deep, shuddering breath. His bones ache. There’s a nightmarish thing living in his head, raking claws across his consciousness, tugging him back into the dark.

It’s a fight to even speak.

“Everything.”

***

He looks sick, Yoongi thinks.

There’s a tremble in his hands, rapidly darkening circles around his eyes. He moves slower than Yoongi remembers, speaks slower too, words slurring at times like he’s exhausted. Yoongi wonders if it’s a side effect of breaking through Namjoon’s hold on his mind, or perhaps blow-back at having used that ability on Yoongi.

He doesn’t think so. This is something more.

“Something’s wrong with you,” Yoongi says, pausing to push all the weird scientific paraphernalia back into the safe. He can deal with that later. Taehyung rubs a hand over his brow. When Yoongi reaches out to touch him, feel his forehead, his skin feels cold, clammy. “You’re sick.”

“Not sick,” Taehyung mutters. “Just in the wrong place.”

“Wrong place,” Yoongi echoes. “Like this hotel?”

Taehyung shakes his head. “Wrong...space.”

It’s nothing Yoongi understands. He’s angry at the cryptic shit, angry at the mind-control, angry at Taehyung for lying and dying and living again. Angry that he doesn’t know if this boy is a murderer, if he killed all those people in such vicious, awful ways. Angry that he’s here, not getting answers in the safe house back there; angry that he doesn’t yet know if Jimin is alright.

He’s livid.

“Do we need precautions in here?”
“No. Not as long as we don’t bring a third person in.”

“Help me remember, then. Break the firewall. I know you can.”

Taehyung flinches. “Hyung, I don’t think we—”

“Clearly, you’ve made enough decisions on my behalf.”

Taehyung worries his lower lip. He has a hand to his chin, his face shuttered of emotion, and Yoongi thinks he might actually do just that: keep things to himself, not say another word to Yoongi. Compel him, via mind-control, to go along with whatever new scheme this is.

But then where does that leave them? Where do they go from here?

“Please,” he says. “Stop doing this, Tae. Stop keeping me in the dark. It hasn’t worked very well for you, has it?”

Taehyung flinches again. “You say that like I wanted to keep secrets from you. Like I wanted to be a stranger, to look at you and have you look back without recognition.”

“And yet you have to control my mind to get what you want.”

“I didn’t want—”

“Did you ask?” Yoongi says. “Did you try asking before you hijacked my fucking thoughts?”

Taehyung winces, clenches his fists, expression scalded.

It’s unkind. Yoongi doesn’t care for kindness. He doesn’t want to believe that Taehyung is, by nature, a bad person. Doesn’t want to believe that he’s done these things he says he’s done out of pure, self-motivated interest. Doesn’t want to think that everything about Taehyung is a lie.

But if he goes by everything Taehyung’s done at a superficial level—the misinformation, the identity games, the murders—he’s not left with many options.

Taehyung’s shoulders slump in gentle defeat. He staggers out of the chair, drunkenly, stumbles towards the bed. “If I do that,” Taehyung mumbles, dropping down over the pillows, “If I do what you want, will you help me?”


“You’ll know,” Taehyung whispers, voice thin and soft, a ghost of its usual self. “Come here.”

Yoongi hesitates. It hurts that his mind actively considers if this is a trick, if this is some new way for Taehyung to exert power over him that he doesn’t want. It hurts because a part of him feels like he’s given so much for this boy. The job that he had, tossed to the wind. His friends. Any chances at normal relationships.

He’s passed everything over, swept everything away, believing in the truth of what his eyes had seen: Taehyung, dying at the Ace.

Taehyung, his informant. Not Taehyung, his boyfriend he didn’t remember. Not Taehyung, a murderer.

Taehyung, bright and brilliant, secretive and strong, stabbed in the heart with a knife. Now he’s not even sure that has any truth.
“Hyung,” Taehyung says, his face crumpling. “Please.”

It’s such a joke that Yoongi still loves him. Down to the marrow; to the softest, most tenderest depths of him.

He loves Taehyung.

It’s the only thing that propels him back to the bed. To lie next to Taehyung, his face only inches away, the warmth of him tangible, real, not just a fever-dream.

“Is my panic routine like a dream?” Yoongi asks. “Like Jimin’s?”

Taehyung shakes his head. “No. Yours is a set of control questions. You answer them right, you unlock the hidden level. Tada,” he nuzzles his face gently into the pillow, mutters, “This is so fucked up. How did we end up here?”

“You tell me.”

Taehyung presses two fingers to Yoongi’s temple. Yoongi brushes the hair from Taehyung’s eyes, fingers hesitant, tells himself that it makes sense to see him while they do this—really see him. Taehyung frowns, licks his lips, shimmies closer hesitantly.

“Now,” Yoongi tells him.

“Are you sure? The routine also acts as protection. Removing it makes you…vulnerable.”

“Vulnerable to what?”

“You heard what Namjoon said. There’s someone powerful out to get us. Their weapon is our minds.”

“I can’t stand my own memories betraying me,” Yoongi says. “I can’t trust anything you say to me anymore without them, Tae.”

It feels ugly and horrid to say it; uglier when Taehyung just sighs, resigned. He smells like rain and the hotel’s citrusy shower-gel, and also something darker, something that reminds Yoongi of the electric-crackle from before. This close, he’s that old, brittle-soft boy Yoongi knew from the Seam. Sharp enough to cut your hands on, warm enough to hold through the night.

(He has to remember, though. Remember the murders. Remember the secrets. He cannot trust.)

“Please, Taehyung-ah. I’ve never been surer of anything in my life.”

Taehyung rests a hand on Yoongi’s wrist. Yoongi lets him, smooths a thumb over his palm, in some phantom pretense of offering comfort. He watches the way Taehyung’s fringe casts long shadows on his cheeks, is briefly terrified by what he might do. Looks away.


Doubt gnaws at Yoongi’s heart. What if his memories come back and everything changes horribly? What if he wakes up and Taehyung’s gone again, disappeared like breath in the wind?

But he has to do this. Can’t let emotions bleed into judgment; can’t back out this far in.

“Ready.”
Taehyung’s mouth twists. He looks sad, Yoongi thinks, wrenched and wrecked and holding all of his pieces in faltering hands. “What,” he whispers, his voice a warm, curling thing tangling tendrils through Yoongi’s thoughts, “is the king of the birds, hyung?”

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2013

There are three rules that they set, early on:

1) Tell no one about the experiment,

2) Record everything,

3) Tell no one about themselves.

The rules are not very hard to follow in theory. Taehyung has always been keen on having physical evidence for everything they do—video or audio or both—and Yoongi is willing to keep both the experiment and their relationship to themselves. After all, they’re not easy things to explain. *I tried drowning my boyfriend in a tub with the help of my other boyfriend so he could gain supernormal powers* is not exactly what he considers a great conversation starter.

The rules are not hard, not exactly, but keeping them in place poses more of a challenge than Yoongi expected.

Firstly, there’s the Institute, and Taehyung’s less than stellar prowess at not picking up random abilities. It’s not uncommon during their sessions for Taehyung to show them something new (*look, guys*, he’d say, and his whole hand would turn invisible, or, his feet would simply float a feet above ground.)

Yoongi tries not to feel uneasy because of these displays, but he can’t help it. He thinks Taehyung knows that, knows that Yoongi thinks he’s a loose cannon, let free into an uncontrolled system of firepower. He won’t bring it up, though, in typical Taehyung fashion. He won’t *ever* bring it up, and Yoongi’s too much of a coward to do it himself, and so here they are, walking around the issue.

Secondly, there’s all the stuff they’re keeping from Jimin.

“We have to tell him,” Yoongi says, one of the days when the two of them are alone. It’s only been a week since the botched experiment but already it feels longer, like a lifetime, and Jimin feels like he’s been here longer too—long enough that Yoongi and Taehyung have actively started to reduce the time just the two of them spend together. But Jimin has class right now, and Yoongi doesn’t, and Taehyung’s found a rare window to escape from the Institute. “I don’t feel right, keeping this from him.”

“We’ll tell him,” Taehyung mutters. “Not now.”

“He’s not going to care.”

Taehyung’s eyebrows knit together. “You don’t know that.”

And he’s right—Yoongi really *doesn’t* know that. He knows the reason behind Jimin’s drive—the lost childhood friend, the sudden cleave in innocence at that tender age, the explorations that led to—but he doesn’t know if there’s *more* to it. There’s more to Yoongi himself than he likes to say. There’s a lot more to Taehyung than he’s ever told anyone, including Yoongi.
“You love him,” Yoongi says, instead. “We don’t keep secrets from the people we love.”

Taehyung smiles. “On the contrary,” he says, “I think we keep the most secrets from the people we love.”

The third challenge for keeping the rules is the one Yoongi didn’t see coming.

The first time it happens, they’re all in the converted lab. Taehyung tugs on the electrode cap and Jimin reads the waves. Jimin’s become good at this, at what they’re calling Verge Science, able to tell from fluctuating patterns just how far, how deep into the deep place Taehyung was dipping into. Yoongi watches the lines spill across the screen, peaking and troughing. Watches Jimin isolate the ones more at the forefront until he lands up on the ones he wants.

“What does it feel like?” he asks, a crease in his brows as he looks at the odd, spiky waveform. It reminds Yoongi of catastrophes, of disasters—earthquakes, radiation speaks, heat waves. “The deep place. What’s it like?”

“Spongy,” Taehyung mumbles. He has his eyes closed, hands clenched tight on his chair like he’s afraid of tilting and falling into some other place, through a little wormhole or something; somewhere he wouldn’t know how to return from. “I—I don’t know. It’s not physical. It’s just a bunch of things. Connections. Memory.”

“Can you reach into my head?”

Taehyung squirms. “Maybe.”

“Tell me something I’ve never told you about me.”

Taehyung clears his throat. “It’s not—I can’t see things. I just know…you’re scared right now, but you’re also excited. You’re scared for me.”

Jimin hisses out a breath. “Okay,” he says, noting something down, eyes on the lines charting across the screen. “Okay. How do you find other Extraordinaries?”

“Stream of current,” Taehyung mumbles. “Purple. Like grid-lines, I can trace it back to them. Mostly crowded at the Institute.”

“Alright. You can mimic abilities from them, we already know that. How much can you do? Can you…turn it off, like you thought?”

Taehyung hesitates. Yoongi wonders what he sees. Is it like the inside of a computer matrix, all grid-lines and wave patterns, pixels cumulating and spectral electric code flashing? Or is it more abstract than that, beyond just his understanding of sight and sound and tactility?

Jimin asks, quietly, “Tae?”

“…Yes. Yes, I can turn it off.”

“How…far can you reach? I’m talking range.”

Yoongi cuts a glance at Jimin, cautioning. Taehyung has his face scrunched up, eyes moving rapidly beneath closed eyelids, mouth tugged down in a frown.

“The—The Seam,” he says. “I can reach the Seam. Maybe beyond. I don’t know.”

That’s surprising. Jimin cocks an eyebrow, makes a note of it, and the two of them hunker over
Yoongi’s laptop trying to calculate radius. It’s a lot. It’s a wide circle, encompassing who knew how many Extraordinaries, and Yoongi feels a slow chill spreading down his spine.

This power. This strange, wild thing they had not meant to make but had; this anomaly they hadn’t accounted for that now lives within Taehyung. Within Taehyung, perhaps the first person Yoongi believed when he said he wanted to stop it, cure it, make sure the system and the power inequality never destroyed another family again. Idealistic Taehyung—who now wielded what was perhaps an ability beyond compare, who now walked transcendent, uncharted verge-spaces with all the effort of walking across the university quad.

Yoongi is inexplicably glad that it isn’t his head Taehyung is rooting through. He can’t tell if he’s scared for or of him anymore.

“That’s a big area,” Jimin says. “We need to test it, though. Test if you can get through and take someone’s ability across the distance.”

Taehyung slowly blinks open one eye. “How do we test?”

Yoongi clears his throat. “Underground radio,” he says. “They have underground radios. The host is Extraordinary. They don’t use stations to broadcast; he hijacks frequencies with his mind. I made something last year that can auto-tune to find it.”

Taehyung nods. Yoongi mutters that he’ll get the modified radio, then tries to pretend it isn’t immense relief he feels walking out of the lab.

He wants them. He loves them. He’s just beginning to have a niggling, dark feeling that this is much more than they can handle.

When he gets back, Jimin and Taehyung are going over the notes, speaking in low voices, heads close and hands touching. Yoongi’s mind revolts at how young they look—still almost children, really, but look at where the world’s brought them.

He walks in and places the radio on the table.

“What we’re doing now,” he says, and they both look rapt at him, “This—is this a point of no return. If we let it all stop here, and we don’t dig deeper into the deep place or Taehyung’s ability, it ends with us. Within us. If we do this—if we test this—then we’re affecting other people. We’re changing the world.”

“Isn’t that what we wanted, hyung?” Taehyung asks, quietly. “Change the world? Make things better?”

Yoongi swallows. “If it works, Taehyung-ah, you take his ability and give it back. We don’t want—we can’t just fuck with lives like that. Are we clear on that?”

“Taking it and giving it back is still on the edge of things,” Jimin says, a bit of a tremble in his voice. “It’s not—not right, but this is for greater good, isn’t it? If we know we’re right, if we know it works, then we can do better. Make everything so much better.”

They exchange glances. Yoongi isn’t sure who is reassuring who here, just that suddenly, morality seems blurred, the borders of what’s allowed in the name of science and what’s not too vague. He fiddles with the radio. In the fractured, pointed silence, his own head feels too heavy.

The station comes on. The host’s voice is crackly, talking about some new political lawmaking that will affect Extraordinaries. Yoongi knows this host and this moving station; he keeps abreast of the
Extraordinary sentiment in the city. He knows this is one of the only channels broadcasting from the Seam. They’ve never been stopped before, their broadcasts never cut. When they hijack the airwaves, they do it with the full intention that they’ll carry on the program to a logical end.

An interruption, then, will be enough proof for what they need.

“Ready?” Jimin asks, and Taehyung nods. He takes a deep breath, and Yoongi finds himself copying him, watching with bated breath as the lines spike on the machine again. They climb up, stagger densely together, rows and rows of sharp teeth all crowded against each other in dizzying closeness.

Jemin places a hand on Taehyung’s shoulder. “Seeing new peaks,” he says. “Do you feel okay?”

Taehyung grits his teeth. “I’m fine.”

Yoongi frowns. The radio continues to warble on. Taehyung’s forehead creases in concentration or pain—it’s hard to tell which.

“Don’t exert,” Yoongi whispers. “It’s okay to take it slow. You don’t have to do this.”

There’s a scritch sound on the radio. Yoongi’s head whips to it. It deepens as they listen, and the host stops talking. The radio goes silent.

Jemin huffs a breath. “Tae—”

Yoongi signals him to wait. The waves on the machine are shooting through the roof. Jemin looks worriedly at it, and then at Taehyung, his throat working convulsively. The radio screams again—an odd squealing, high-pitched. Taehyung makes a small, distressed sound in his throat, and Jimin’s grip on his shoulder tightens.

“What’s happening?”

Yoongi keeps his eyes peeled on the radio. The screeching resolves slowly, gives away to the host speaking again, but they sound panicked. Oh fuck, they’re saying. Fuck, what was that? There’s a bit more of crackling. Then the host is apologizing, saying they have to cut the program short, saying he isn’t feeling well. And then silence.

Jemin looks at the radio like it could attack them, eyes wide, swallowing hard.

Yoongi says, quietly, “It worked.”

They’ve sort of done it, he thinks. What they want—they’ve sort of done it, only at exactly what cost?

Taehyung blinks his eyes open. “Did it—did the test work?”

“Yeah,” Jimin says, shakily. “It worked. How did you—what did it feel like?”

Taehyung frowns. “Nothing at all,” he says. “I just found them, took it and then gave it back. It all feels very simple in the deep place.”

There’s a silence at this. Yoongi realizes belatedly that it doesn’t look good.

Taehyung’s hands make gentle fists. “Is that—is that bad?”

He’s asking it to Yoongi. Yoongi shakes his head, rubs a hand over the top of Taehyung’s head.
“No. Not bad.”

“You don’t—I can feel you, hyung. You don’t seem okay.”

Yoongi inhales deeply. The thought of Taehyung being able to pick up on his emotions makes him nervous. Like a barrier between them he doesn’t want to break. And then he thinks he doesn’t want Taehyung to pick up on the nervousness, doesn’t want him to know, and that makes him even more anxious.

“Just—it’s strange, Taehyungie,” he says, trying to sound quiet, reasonable. “I don’t know what to make of it.”

Taehyung frowns. “But you’re scared.”

“I’m not scared,” Yoongi scoffs, the lie falling easy from his mouth. “A bit rattled, yes, because of how weird this is. How freaky.”

“But I’m not a freak,” Taehyung mumbles, looking right at him. His tone is still flat, a little breathy, but there’s something tumultuous beneath it, something pained.

Yoongi feels his stomach drop. “Of course you’re not, Tae.”

“You’re lying to me. You’re scared, hyung. You’re scared of me. I don’t—what did I do?”

“It’s not you. It’s not. It’s just—”

But Taehyung’s getting up now, out of the chair, his face anguished. Yoongi raises one arm, beckoning, prepared to crush him to his chest and sit with him all night if that’s what it takes to make him understand that none of this is on him. None of this is his fault. They’ve all just shored up against a weird new reality that they don’t know how to deal with. They can be reasonable about this, the three of them. They’re scientists, logicians, rational thinkers. They can get through this without letting it build fissures between them.

And then things go to hell.

Jimin says, “Tae—” and jerks forward, and that’s when Yoongi notices how pale Taehyung’s gone. He sways, blinks a bit, grabs the arm of the chair. In the next moment he crumples, and Jimin’s barely there in time to stop his head from hitting the floor. Yoongi surges forward, the room tilting under his feet, falling to his knees next to them.

“What’s—what’s wrong?”

Jimin’s hands flutter in panic over Taehyung, eyes wide. “I don’t know if he’s breathing.”

Yoongi searches for a pulse, his head gone all vacuumed of clear thought, and realizes he can’t feel a thing. He presses a hand to Taehyung’s chest, so still beneath him, and hears Jimin whimper.

“Wake up,” he says to Tae, and then turns urgently at Yoongi. “Hyung, do something.”

Do what? Yoongi presses his fingers to Taehyung’s throat. Knows his heart isn’t beating. The control switches Yoongi’s made aren’t powered, the defibrillator pads aren’t here. There isn’t much they can do. Yoongi shakes Taehyung by the shoulder, futilely. Thinks wake up.

I can’t do this without you, please wake up.

“Call an ambulance,” Jimin gasps, and reaches for his phone. Yoongi grabs for it before he can,
holding it away from him, one hand still clenched tight on Taehyung’s shoulder. Jimin’s face flickers with brief surprise before he turns stormy, lunging at Yoongi for the phone. “Hyung, what are you doing? Give it back!”

“We can’t,” Yoongi says, slowly. “We can’t call an ambulance.”

Jimin’s face morphs in fury. “No, what the fuck? We can’t just give up, we can’t just—”

“Jiminie. We can’t call an ambulance.”

Something about his tone must register because Jimin draws back, blinks through the panic, asks in a thin voice, “What do you mean?”

“The Institute isn’t supposed to exist. Taehyung isn’t supposed to exist. We can’t call an ambulance—he’ll be in trouble.”

“Worse trouble than dying?”

“You don’t understand,” Yoongi hisses. “The Eyrie—his program—the Extraordinary Containment Service…it isn’t what you think it is.”

Jimin’s face crumples in confusion. He holds Taehyung tighter, fingers pressed hard enough to his side that it’s sure to leave bruises.

“It isn’t a bunch of government agents studying Extraordinaries.”

“Then what is it?”

Yoongi stands up. “I’ll get—I’m going to get him. Your friend. The necromancer.”

He’s barely out of the room when Taehyung coughs, gasps for air, writhing in Jimin’s hold and nearly taking his eye out.

Jimin just holds him, eyes wide and glittering with tears, staring down at him like he doesn’t know what to say.

“W-what,” Taehyung hisses, sitting up, both fists clenching into Jimin’s sweatshirt and eyes wild, “what just—what happened?”

Jimin gives him a dazed, hollow look. “You died,” he says, and the words land cold in the dry air of the lab, ice in Yoongi’s heart. “You fucking died, Tae. Again.”

***

A side effect, Taehyung writes later in his notebook. A side effect of accessing the Deep Place. It’s not death, not really. An inability to stay in this dimension, to stay within this body. I saw and felt the Deep Place, got lost in it for a minute, couldn’t find my way back.

And then, beneath it, more impersonal: The side effect seems equatable to out-of-body experiences in comatose patients, or astral projection as reported among shamans. Effects might be controlled by prescribing hard limits to how far into the Deep Place you allow yourself.

It sounds dry when he writes it that way.

Clinical.
They stop the experiments for a while after that, at Yoongi’s insistence. Taehyung pouts, says he’s okay, says he can bring himself back if he gets lost in there again. He stops when Jimin backs Yoongi up, shuts down the EEGs, and threatens to hide the electrode cap. Yoongi is grateful for this; Taehyung is a stubborn handful sometimes and Jimin seems to naturally know how to handle him, stays adamant in situations where Yoongi might have given in.

But Jimin stays quiet about what Yoongi blurted out. He doesn’t bring it up, even though Yoongi fully expected him to. Yoongi knows Jimin, knows his curiosity, knows his drive. He can’t be quiet because he’s let it go. There’s some other reason why he doesn’t press for information.

And then Yoongi has to go home. Just a week, he tells them. Just because it’s important. Taehyung looks at him weird when he says that—of course he does—but they’ve all reached a sort of strange stalemate where they bicker, and they fuck, and they share space all the time but they don’t really talk. Really talking to each other will mean dissecting the experiment, and the side effect, and the fact that Taehyung’s literally died and resurrected himself in their presence twice.

So Yoongi leaves.

Home, of course, is shit as always. They’ve called him to discuss property division, and he can’t be any less interested if he tried. All that land and buildings are brought from blood money, anyway. Power crackles like a bucking live-wire through the large halls of the cold, impersonal house. Yoongi suffocates, as usual. Suffocates under the disapproving gaze of a father who wields fire like a friend. Suffocates under the indifference of a mother who inflicts pain with a touch. They’re honed and poised and perfect for each other, and so are his siblings.

He’s the only one who’s different. The only one born powerless, weak, unable to whip up storms or read minds or stick his fist through metal like it’s nothing more than butter.

“How’s university?” his mother asks over dinner, and her tone is curious, patronizing, as if he’s some twee, cute creature trying to prove itself in a world of titans. “Do they teach you guns and bows and arrows there?”

She’ll laugh if he answers in the affirmative. Say something like how interesting, the way high society people say to schools of brightly colored koi fish in aquariums. Like he’s a curio, a relic of some alternate world.

Usually it would rile him up. She knows how to get under his skin, operates on a level of narcissism that allows her to stake her own superiority. The house has always felt like a metal garden to him—beautiful, yet with sharp, glinting edges that sliced and lacerated at every turn. There are no defenses possible against it, no way to become immune to it.

Not this time, though. Not this time, not with the knowledge of the experiment thrumming under Yoongi’s skin, not with the knowledge that if he really wanted, if he really asked for it, then he and the boys he loved could bring this house down like dominoes.

That satisfies.

Food has never tasted this good in the house before, and conversation has never been less painful.

“How’s university?” his father asks in a laugh during one of their mindless meetings.

A tinkling laugh. “They won’t get anywhere with that. They’ve been trying for years. Not to mention, Extraordinary gangs put enough money in their pockets. They don’t even really want to try.”

“I don’t know. Maybe they will. They’re pretty determined.”

His father scoffs. “Did you ever really find out what I asked you to find?”


“Co-operation in what?”

Yoongi shrugs. “I don’t know. Weaponization. Experimentation. Behind the scenes intelligence and dirty work.”

“They’re making weapons out of Extraordinary kids? Government weapons?”

“They’re trying,” Yoongi says. “The Extraordinaries agree to it because they’re most often in a bad way when they’re picked up from the streets. They develop a sort of loyalty, you know? Makes them susceptible to brainwash.”

His father hums. “You have proof?”

“I’m a student at that university, not your spy.”

“I’m still paying your tuition.”

“If it’s the Eyrie you want to find out about, maybe you should get one of your Extraordinary children to go undercover there,” Yoongi says. “But I have a roster full of names of two batches. A full roster, not the shit that your information guys found from some musty website. Do what you will with that.”

He’s carrying the drive on him. The drive containing names of all the Eyrie “agents”. Only they aren’t really, and what lurks under the cover of a lucrative young soldier training program is lies. All the kids on that roster are Extraordinaries. All of them work and study and are studied at the Institute.

This is the thing they’ve been keeping from Jimin.

That the Eyrie isn’t a collective of super-smart young intelligence officers. It’s a collective of super-smart Extraordinary intelligence officers.

Yoongi found out about it first from Namjoon, who’d signed up to tutor the Eyrie kids under secrecy. Namjoon had first truly understood the program from Taehyung, one of his charges in the latest Eyrie batch, who he said asked as many incisive questions as he answered.

Non-disclosure clauses mean nothing to him, Namjoon had told Yoongi once. He’s a force of nature. Just wants to know things.

Taehyung was also Yoongi’s best bet at getting any information. Namjoon said he seemed to possess a higher autonomy over the rest of the Eyrie, that he seemed to come and go as he pleased, that it felt like—perhaps—he had negotiated some sort of arrangement with the officials at the Institute to keep a loose rein on him.
What's his ability? Yoongi remembers asking, almost nervously. He didn’t want to get into this, didn’t want to know about hooded agencies and secret experiments, but the threat of his father pulling him out of school remained heavy over him.

Namjoon hadn’t known the answer to that. Outwardly, Taehyung displayed nothing. Yoongi had kept a look out for tells, the first time he’d met Taehyung, after he’d talked Namjoon into getting him a meeting. Growing up surrounded by Extraordinaries, you began to be able to tell the sort of power someone held. It was in glances, in gestures, in body language. Taehyung had none of the tells. He held himself like someone Ordinary, spoke and acted like there was no more strength to him than what his tall, skinny body divulged.

The very first time they met, at the backyard of the Institute, Taehyung told him he knew who Yoongi’s family was.

“I’ve been around the Seam a lot, last couple of years,” he’d said. “I know you.”

“What were you doing in the Seam?”

“Offering…services. In exchange of information,” Taehyung smiled. Standing across the yard from him, dressed in what looked almost like medical scrubs, Taehyung looked too young to be offering services.

Only, of course, the Seam had use for all types of people. Still, Yoongi looked at his sweet face and wide grin and balked a bit.

Taehyung laughed. “Oh, no. Not that sort of services.”

“Then?”

“Your mother works with pain, doesn’t she?” Taehyung asked. “Well, so, if you put me in the same room as her, sometimes I…magnify it. Strengthen it.”

Yoongi frowned. “Make it worse.”

“Or better,” Taehyung shrugged. “If you’re a healer, for instance.”

That explained some things. He’d act Ordinary, of course, because he didn’t have an ability that worked by itself. It was auxiliary, of sorts, required another Extraordinary to become potent. It was an odd sort of ability, nothing Yoongi had ever heard of, one of those rare cases that cropped up every twenty years or so, like space warping or a death-touch.

“I offered to come work with the Institute myself,” Taehyung told him. “Negotiated terms. I want to learn about Extraordinariness. I want their books and their notes. They give me tutors in exchange for blood samples and sitting through tests. It works out.”

A week after that meeting, Yoongi caught Namjoon sneaking books on biology out of their dorms. “For Taehyung?” he called out, and Namjoon stilled, turned halfway, smiled a little.

“Y-yeah,” he muttered.

“Bit advanced, isn’t it, to give to an Eyrie brat? Are you even cleared for this, Namjoon-ah?”

And that’s when Namjoon told him what Taehyung planned to study. He wants to cure Extraordinariness, Namjoon said, eyes lit with that sort of curiosity Yoongi knew could end up hurting him. It sounded ridiculous, when Namjoon said it. Sounded unattainable. But there was
something about Taehyung, a sort of full-hearted commitment in the way he spoke. He was sure Namjoon saw it too. He was sure that was why Namjoon was risking everything, putting heavy literature in the hands of an Eyrie brat.

“Can I come along?” Yoongi had asked.

And now they’re here.

With an almost cure.

At the end of three long, long days, Yoongi says he wants none of the property and goes back to the university. Just leave me be, he says, and his mother smirks, used to his tantrums by now, expecting him to come crawling back as he always did.

But that had been before. That had been when he’d still held value to this family, when he’d still been tied to them with helpless, filial love.

Now his family is elsewhere.

Now he finds them in the lab, late at night, cuddled close in blankets. Now he digs his fingers to bony shoulder-blades, whispers wake up, and is rewarded by two pairs of eyes filling with love and mischief., two sets of hands tugging him down between them.

“We missed you,” Jimin says, leaning in for a kiss. “How was home?”

Yoongi cuts a glance to Taehyung. He shrugs, lazy-eyed, scritches his fingers gently at Yoongi’s hairline. Rolls over to throw his limbs heavily over Yoongi, warm and alive, and how thankful does Yoongi feel, how relieved, having waited the last couple of days for his phone to light up, for Jimin to message him frantically saying Taehyung wouldn’t wake up, wouldn’t breathe.

He reaches out to brush the bangs away from Taehyung’s face, motions quizzically.

Taehyung sulks. “I told Jimin some things.”

“How much?”

Taehyung says nothing, just nuzzles at Yoongi’s neck. “A little much.”

“As much as I could get out of him,” Jimin says, and there’s something in that—something Yoongi’s missed, some conditional he isn’t aware of. He wonders if Jimin threatened him with something, small enough that Taehyung would give up information. without getting pissed and running away. Jimin’s really good at pushing the right buttons. It’s a pretty dangerous skill. “I know about your family.”

Yoongi grunts. “They’re assholes. That’s the only thing you really need to know.”

Jimin yawns. “I know Tae’s both lab-rat and agent, for one. Bit of a shocker, that one.”

“And you’re…okay with it all.”

Jimin shrugs, blinks sleepy eyes. “We’re going to have to do something to get him out of the Institute anyway. He’s not going to be either for too much longer.”

Taehyung shudders, whines something like can we talk about this in the morning, presses cold toes into Yoongi’s thigh.
“No,” Yoongi says. “What do you mean?”

Jimin meets his gaze in the near-dark. “It’s just…This side effect is a little uncontrollable, hyung.”

“What?”

Taehyung sighs, plants a soft kiss on Yoongi’s cheek. “It’s nothing.”

“It’s something,” Jimin says, darkly, nudging Taehyung hard with his elbow. “Tell him, idiot.”

Taehyung sighs, giving up. “I can’t seem to…stay here, hyung.”

“What does that mean?”

Jimin yawns, presses closer. “It means what you think it means, hyung,” he says, and Yoongi can hear the bravado in his voice, feel the tremor. “He keeps dying.”

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There’s no trigger.

No warning, no control mechanism. Taehyung tells Yoongi that it just happens, the Deep Place crawling into his head and snatching him away for awhile until he realizes what’s going on and wakes himself up.

“What if it happens at the Institute?” Jimin asks, and Taehyung has no answer. “We need—I don’t know, maybe we need help.”

“Who do we ask for help?”

“Maybe we just need to run away,” Yoongi says. “Leave this place behind, go somewhere else and figure this out.”

“No,” Taehyung says. “I need Jungkook to bring myself back.”

“So we’ll take him with. Break him out, take him with us.”

“And then what?” Jimin says, shaking his head. “They’ll come hunting for him. For Jungkook and Tae, both. We’ll have to keep running.”

“Then what do we do?”

Jimin says, “I have an idea.”

Taehyung’s already shaking his head. “No,” he says. “Not that. You promised.”

“I promised to not try it if you told me what I wanted,” Jimin says. “I didn’t promise I wouldn’t run it past Yoongi hyung.”

Taehyung snaps his mouth shut, and looks away irritably. Jimin turns to Yoongi. “I understand the verge stuff best. Maybe, if we do the same experiment on me, I can get in his head and cut off the Deep Place.”

“It’s stupid,” Taehyung snaps, immediately. “Isn’t it, hyung? How do you know it’ll work? How do you know you won’t come across the same effect?”
“We didn’t come across it until you reached too far. I won’t do that.”


Jimin cocks his eyebrows. “Like this wasn’t a concern when it was you, Tae?”

“It didn’t matter when it was me,” Taehyung says, clipped and sharp. “It didn’t matter.”

Yoongi feels unease stirring in his gut. “What do you mean?”

Taehyung looks at him, eyes big and dark, turning soft at the fear probably clear on Yoongi’s face. “I just wanted—hyung, I wanted my ability to go away, alright? I didn’t want the magnification, I didn’t want…It didn’t matter what happened because I just wanted to try, most of all, to make it go away.”

“Why?”

“Because it was my fault,” Taehyung mumbles. “It was my fault that my parents died. We were in the accident together, my brother and me. Everyone thought he…he was the only one who became Extraordinary. My ability isn’t clear, you see. It doesn’t work by itself.

“Hyung was doing well before I made everything worse. He wore Talon around the house, even if it hurt him. He got those cuffs even, because he was afraid he couldn’t keep the ability suppressed in sleep. And then it became—too much. Because of me, because we didn’t realize. It became too much and he couldn’t control it and that’s why it’s my fault. He ran away like some criminal and I had to—I wanted to fix it, okay? I wanted to fix him, make it stop hurting, take my own ability away so it doesn’t hurt anyone. That’s why it didn’t matter when it was me because I’d do anything for this. For the cure. But you can’t die, Jimin. Not for me.”

There’s a pause when he’s done talking. Taehyung looks away, shuddering. “So you can’t do it,” he says, on the back of a gulp. “You can’t take the risk.”

Jimin sets his jaw. “Luckily, that’s not purely your decision, Tae.”

And then they’re both looking at Yoongi, expectant. As if he’s the deciding factor. The winning vote.

“Don’t,” Yoongi mutters, aghast. “Please don’t. Don’t ask me to choose.”

“Give me one other feasible plan,” Jimin says, quietly. “Give me one other alternative that might work.”

Yoongi doesn’t have an answer to that.

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“I know what you did,” Namjoon tells Yoongi, a couple of days later. “Taehyung told me.”

Yoongi startles. “He did?”

“He was afraid it would happen in the Institute. It was the smart thing to do. You know you can trust me.”

It isn’t a matter of trust. Yoongi looks into his criminal law textbook, the words swimming in front of his eyes. It’s a matter of safety. He’s always kept his cards close to his chest—a side effect of being from a mob family—and so has Taehyung. Their own relationship had sprouted suddenly and
intensely, a collision of strangely like minds in staggeringly different outward personalities. Then that small, potent circle of the two of them had naturally expanded to make room for Jimin—the stabilizer, the mid-point between them—and Yoongi likes it that way. He likes that this secret only belongs to them.

But Taehyung is right, of course. Right to trust Namjoon.

He’s breaking the rules they’ve set, but he’s right.

“How much did he say?”

“No details,” Namjoon says. “Just that if things happen to him—bad things—to get the necromancer kid close to him. He’s spoken to Jungkook, too, but he hasn’t said anything in detail. Just that he needs him.”

Namjoon pauses for a minute, pretends to look at his notes, but Yoongi can see his eyebrow twitching.

“Hyung,” he says, after a minute of silence. “What the hell did you two get into?”

*You two.* Namjoon doesn’t know about Jimin, then. “It’s complicated.”

“No shit, hyung,” Namjoon says. “I get why he’d want to do it. The Eyrie program is a mess. They’ve got a guy running it who it turns out is Extraordinary. You ever heard of this MKUltra shit?”

“The CIA incident in the United States. Yeah.”

“Mind-control and human experimentation. This guy—the one who’s running it now—that’s what he does. Mind control. Suggestion and thought manipulation. Taehyung’s smart to let me know—at least I can keep an eye on him. You don’t want the Institute after your ass, hyung. It’s a whole lot messier than you can guess.”

Taehyung is quiet when they meet again, peeking glances at Yoongi, trying to gauge from his behavior if Namjoon’s told him yet or not. They’re not doing any verge stuff today, just sitting quietly in the lab playing a game of cards that Jimin brought. Yoongi stays silent, plays his games, makes small talk. He knows Taehyung well enough, knows he can’t keep secrets from them, knows it will all come—

“Did Namjoon tell you?” Taehyung blurts, all frowny-faced. “Hyung?”

“Yeah,” Yoongi says. “Bugged me at first, but now I think it’s a good idea. We can’t be around you always, and Joon likes you a lot.”

“It was Jimin’s idea.”

“I just don’t like you being there by yourself,” Jimin sighs, cupping a palm to Taehyung’s cheek. “And you keep talking about Namjoon hyung. He sounds like a good person.”

“The best person,” Taehyung mumbles. “Right, hyung?”

Yoongi nods. He’s still not sure of how he feels, having the secret go beyond their immediate, intimate circle, but better Namjoon than anyone else. He asks, “This new man handling the Eyrie. The one with mind-control as an ability. Is that the same guy you mentioned before, Tae? The Scarab?”
Taehyung winces. “Yeah.”

“Don’t let that bastard see you die,” Jimin says, darkly.

Taehyung nods gravely for a minute. Then his face splits in his characteristic grin, and he elbows Jimin. “Look at the way you said that, Jimin-ah. Don’t let him see you die. It’s not dying, you ass. Stop calling it that.”

“It’s just a very sudden coma,” Jimin says, elbowing back. “In which you neither breathe, nor your heart beats. It’s like that thing in Romeo and Juliet.”

Taehyung slings a hand over Jimin’s shoulder, pulls him close, presses a kiss to the corner of his eye. He pretends he doesn’t know, does Taehyung, how much all this is affecting them. Pretends it’s fine to just march on ahead, full scientific fervor. And then sometimes he’ll soften, like this, say I know, I know with little gestures, and Yoongi remembers.

Remembers, asking once, what do you think is the best ability, and Taehyung replying making people happy, always, everyone just be happy. Remembers he doesn’t want to be this, doesn’t want the darkness and death and the uncertainty that comes with playing with fire.

“Which one of you is Romeo, then?” he asks now. “If I’m dumb, poisoned Juliet?”

“Neither,” Yoongi says. “We aren’t as stupid as that.”

“You’ll tell us if you have problems, though,” Jimin says, fingers enmeshed in Taehyung’s hand around his shoulder. “If something is wrong at the Institute.”

Taehyung nods. “Fold,” he says, pushing away his cards. “Show me what you have, Jimin-ssi.”

Jimin smiles and shows his cards. It’s all aces.

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PRESENT

Taehyung lets himself go away a bit.

Years’ worth of memory is hard to process, and he thinks Yoongi will sleep for a while more, which gives him enough time to dip into the Deep Place. He’s tried to explain it, over the years, to Jimin and Yoongi and Namjoon. Once—in confidence and with minor details—to Hoseok. He doesn’t think he’s ever really succeeded, knows for a fact that Yoongi still thinks of it like a grid from the Matrix movies, that Jimin still thinks of it like a vast empty void with fluffy lights where people and their abilities presented.

It’s none of these things.

It’s this world, but malleable. The floor warps beneath his feet like sponge. Distances can be pulled and pushed at like sugar taffy. If he wants to get from this hotel room to the one across the window, it’s a simple matter of squeezing that distance into nothing.

It’s not a dimension. It doesn’t exist as some sort of other, planar world, with its own laws and rules and physicalities. It’s not physical at all. It’s just an extension of his mind, a seventh sense perhaps, and it stretches out far and wide, a large net of traffic-less, crowd-less streets for him to explore.

He thinks everyone’s version of it is different. Maybe what he sees as soft and malleable presents
glass-like to someone else. Maybe Jimin would see the Deep Place as weedy and veiny, green everywhere. That’s why it’s pretty impossible to find someone in the Deep Place. Makes it a good hideout, say, for when someone is trying to hijack your mind.

He’s gotten good at navigating it. Gotten very good.

He’s had two years of experience, now, after all.

The world hasn’t changed much. The Seam, he realized earlier, had remained more or less the same. Yoongi, of course, looked sharper, more gaunt. He’d always had a tendency to let the world try to buckle him down, and Taehyung’s disappearance for two years seems to have increased that. It hurt to see that, to know that he was the cause, but maybe he’d understand once he knew.

Maybe they’d both understand once they know.

Taehyung knows exactly where things had begun to go wrong. It isn’t right after the experiment, not even once they discovered the side effect that his ability came with. He’d always known he was being watched, taken care not to be seen with Yoongi or Jimin, always sneaked out of the Institute only in pre-negotiated hours. He’d been careful to skate around the issue of the Scarab even when Namjoon had begun loudly voicing concerns, and the other Eyrie agents he knew began to act strange. And when he realized he had secrets to protect, he’d begun to draw from the man to construct blocks in his mind.

That’s probably where he made the first mistake.

Time doesn’t exist in the Deep Place. Traveling inward through his own mind is easy, especially because he’s been doing it for so long, digging for the root of the trouble, the point where he realized the center couldn’t hold anymore.

That first time he sat across the man, in that white room, staring at a bunch of ink-blots on pristine white paper.

“Why am I doing this?” he’d asked.

“Just a little test,” the professor said, smiling. His gaze felt like a clammy hand on bare skin. “How are your independent studies going?”

Taehyung shrugged. Reinforced the wall in his head. “They’re going well. I’m learning about biochemistry now.”

“Namjoon tells me.”

Taehyung swallowed. Namjoon—he’d have to figure out a way to protect Namjoon, too. He understood enough of the Scarab’s ability from his exploration of it that he knew it was unlikely the man would look into Namjoon’s head. He isn’t a telepath, so he’d need to know exactly what to suggest to Namjoon for him to be able to get Namjoon to divulge the information. It was still frightening.

“You’ve been stealing rats from the lab.”

“Just experimenting.”

“Are they at the police university lab?”

“Yeah. I can bring them back, if you want.”
“No need. Namjoon tells me you’re smart, you can just show me what you’ve achieved. You know the negotiation is that we intervene very less in your affairs, as long as you keep our secrets and help us research your...ability.”

It ended there, that thread of conversation, but Taehyung was suspicious. He looked at the ink blots and made up nonsense—*this one looks like a bee sitting on a truck*—and wondered if it was a trap. And then he felt it: a tingly sensation in his head, a cold dribble of ice-water. He jerked up, head whipping towards the professor.

The professor’s face remained blank. “What is it?”

“N-nothing.”

He thought, later, lying on his bed, that he had screwed up a little there. He shouldn’t have reacted. Shouldn’t have given any indication that he knew the Scarab was trying to get into his mind, to look around and *suggest* Taehyung tell him exactly what he wanted to know. Shouldn’t have let out that he *knew*, that he had defended himself. Fortresses are oftentimes more obvious than armies.

He’d been naive. He’d been stupid.

The stress of it hung on him, cold and heavy, becoming a physical ache. He twisted and turned, trying to sleep, to ignore the shimmering call of that other place, where time and self and people didn’t exist. Only a pool of thoughts, a world of abstraction. He breathed deep, thought of Yoongi and Jimin, thought of his brother who lived everyday with the fear of being discovered.

When they’d both nearly drowned, Taehyung had had a clear moment of thinking *we’re going to die*. When he’d woken up, hours and hours after Jin and with faces crowding over him, he’d been sure that he was dreaming, stuck in some other plane, a limbo between hell and heaven. Everything was hazy, like he was neither here nor there. His mother’s voice had come from far, far away, legions above water. He thought, perhaps, that this was some sort of dream, a vision, a memory recycled in the throes of suspended animation. And then, slowly, the haze had cleared and he’d realized he was in a hospital.

Point was, there had been *awareness*, both times. Right when the water took him down and when he’d woken up. Continuity to his thoughts, no loss of memory. He remembered drowning, he remembered how it felt, he remembered waking up.

It wasn’t the same with the Deep Place. He didn’t know *when* he fell into it, in the bathtub that first time and then repeatedly in the past few days. Just that he did, and that he didn’t know *what* had happened until minutes after he woke up.

He just...ceased to exist for a while.

That night, Taehyung fell asleep on his bed and woke up on a cold table. He sat up abruptly, felt the world spinning, coughed and gasped as air filled his lungs again.

“Shit!” Namjoon yelped, scrambling back. “Oh my fucking god, Tae, you scared the crap out of me.”

He was with what looked like a medical student, a young man with little lips and a terrified expression. He came close as Taehyung doubled over, still gasping, long fingers fluttering quickly at his throat, hands shivering as he instructed Taehyung on how to breathe.

“You’re okay,” the man soothed. “You’re doing well, Taehyung-ssi. Just keep—keep breathing. Namjoon-ah, what the fuck?”
Namjoon threw the medic a deer-in-the-headlights look. “I told you not to ask too many questions.”

The medic’s mouth turned down-wards in a scowl. “How the hell am I not supposed to ask questions? He was dead. And now he’s not,” Taehyung coughed again, and the man stopped glaring at Namjoon to pat gently at his shoulder. “Do you think you can drink some water?”

While he sipped from a sippy cup of all things, trying to calm his racing heart, he heard them whispering.

“I only brought you here because I trust you, Hoseok-ah. You’re the only one I can trust. Okay?”

“But what—how even—”

“No one can know. You know that, right? You can’t tell anyone.”

“Of course I won’t tell anyone. I don’t know what to tell.”

“Hoseok-ssi,” Taehyung rasped. “If I tell you what you want to know, will you help me control it?”

“Control?” Namjoon asked. “Control, how?”

Medicine. Anti-anxiety, beta-blockers. Maybe stress was the trigger. Maybe if he stayed, doped-up on pills, at least in the Institute...But they’d have to be non-traceable in blood. They’d have to skip detection by the Institute’s common testing devices.

“I know you can get it,” Taehyung said and Hoseok blinked at him violently. “I know you have them in the Extraordinary section of the teaching hospital. You just have to get them for me.”

“Why would—why would I do that?”

Namjoon looked right at him. “You told me once you didn’t feel safe with Extraordinaries. That you wished it were easy to do your time at the Seam hospital without fearing for your life. Taehyung’s trying to make that happen.”

Hoseok’s face dawned with hope. “Cure...Extraordinariness?”

“Yes.”

Taehyung told him a little. About his ability, about the Deep Place—surface details, nothing deep enough that anyone digging into Hoseok’s mind will find it suspicious. He made Hoseok swear to secrecy, and wasn’t sure if he’d keep it or not, but Namjoon seemed to trust him, and Taehyung trusted Namjoon.

For a couple of weeks it worked. The pills, the daily brain-wave readings he and Jimin did, keeping a low-profile.

And then Taehyung made a second mistake.

“You seem dull,” the Scarab remarked, on one of their meetings where Taehyung was staring at ink-blots again. “Anything on your mind?”

Taehyung’s brain felt spongy. He blinked, yawned against his hand, tried not to appear too drowsy. “Just sleepy. Been reading a lot.”

Something knocked at his mind. Taehyung reinforced the wall again. Acted completely innocent about it this time, leaning over to stare at something that looked like a butterfly slung on a meathook.
“Starling,” the professor said. “I can’t seem to access your mind.”

Taehyung jolted a little. “You—what?”

“No need to play games. I know you can feel it when I try to get into your head, and I know you’re actively walling yourself up. Why’s that?”

Taehyung stiffened. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“No? Would you be able to elaborate better if I asked you about that old, disused building you currently seem to be hanging around in?”

Taehyung grits his teeth. “The negotiation was that in my free hours, what I do isn’t the Institute’s business.”

“If you really believed in that, doesn’t that make you really naive?”

That battering at his mind again. Taehyung swallowed, siphoned the professor’s own power to use against him, held that wall against him tight. Everything felt odd and hazy with the pills. He couldn’t keep the wall up at the same intensity any further, and he didn’t know what would happen if he took more from the man in front of him. Would it take away his ability completely? Would it pass over to Taehyung? That would mean side effects he didn’t know about, consequences with no hypothesis.

So he did the one thing that made weird, doped-up sense to him.

He died.

The Deep Place unfurled around him, shadowy and strange, made slower by the effect of the pills. He saw the Scarab in front of him like a glittering, many-faceted beetle, and all the other Extraordinaries in the Institute like shining beacons of light scattered across the flickering geography of the space. He found them, as well, Yoongi and Jimin in their classes, hunched over books and thinking about him. Worrying. Wondering.

Help, he whispered at them. Then he shouted. He yelled, and screamed, and tried to physically get them to notice him, somehow, but they couldn’t. They couldn’t. This dimension didn’t allow that. It didn’t work the way ghosts worked, able to knock down shit or move planchettes around on ouija boards. It wasn’t even a real place.

And he was right here: the Scarab, thinking murky thoughts and working out possibilities, hands on Taehyung’s body and head still trying to worm its way into him.

It felt like violation.

Like non-consented, forced entry to his thoughts, his mind, his privacy.

He was enraged, of course, but what was he going to do?

Or maybe he needed to do nothing. Maybe he needed only to stay here, long enough that the professor became convinced he actually was dead. He’d have to leave the Institute, and that meant leaving access to pills and Jungkook and lab supplies that he could only get here. Still. What was the alternative?

He’d have to hope Namjoon found him. Or Hoseok. Or someone.

Surely, the professor would now have no use for him.
But that was where he’d gone incredibly, awfully wrong.

It’s hard going back to this. Hard going back, at all.

He takes a deep breath and brings himself back, to the present, to Liberty Hotel. He doesn’t need Jungkook for this now—he’s well past all that—but the confusion and disorientation of the moment always hits him hard. He sits up, hacking and coughing, lungs expanding, fists clenching into the dumb burgundy sheets. It takes a while, but eventually he begins to breathe slow. Calm. Falls back into the pillows and keeps his eyes on the ceiling, counts the cracks up there, counts his breaths.

Everything still hurts, but the itch is so much better now. The pull to fall into the Deep Place is less stronger. He can breathe again without breaking into a sweat, but he doesn’t know for how long.

He turns to Yoongi, curled up next to him, asleep. He’s barely moved an inch through all of Taehyung’s coughing and gasping, and Taehyung wonders now. How much of this sleep is the memories resurfacing through him and how much is sheer exhaustion?

Yoongi had always been somewhat unsuited for the police. Too much heart, and too much stoic indifference layered over that heart. Taehyung remembers watching him, in his time as a Seam informant, thinking how if memories made a person, it didn’t really explain Yoongi. Yoongi had been the same to him before and after. A single, shining constant. The same gruff gentleness he’d shown Taehyung when they were together, extended like a warm hand even when he didn’t know Taehyung anymore.

It had been grounding.

Taehyung had known he was fucking up again, letting Yoongi get close to him a second time. He’d known it was going to come back to hit him hard, because it always did. But the alternative was to push him away, turn him into a pure stranger, and Taehyung couldn’t do that. He didn’t have it in him, that drive to do absolutely anything required.

Maybe Namjoon knew that. Maybe that’s why he didn’t intervene, then; didn’t tell Taehyung off for coming so close to fucking up the plan.

“As long as he doesn’t remember,” is the only thing Namjoon ever told him. He’d looked sad, then, his hand on Taehyung’s shoulder heavy. “I know it hurts, but you know you can’t let him remember.”

He’s sorry now. Sorry that he’s let Yoongi remember, sorry that Jimin will remember too. Remembrance makes them vulnerable. Makes them susceptible. Opens gates and locks and checks that they put in place, so carefully, to protect themselves and others.

He rubs the pad of his thumb against Yoongi’s cheekbone, wishes he could wake him up and explain everything until he went hoarse. Wishes he could reach across the city to Jimin, wherever he is, and say sorry. This had all started with him, and it should have ended with him—not with the people he loved ending up battered pawns on a complex chessboard. If Yoongi had said that right, if Jimin was going to remember him, then he wakes up to the memory of the Ace. You have to leave, Taehyung remembers telling him, then. You have to run. Go.

And Jimin, truly awake for the first time in more than a year, still looked at him uncomprehendingly.

(Who are you in his gaze. Horror and apology in his fluttering, panicked hands. Had he said anything back? Taehyung doesn’t remember. The knife had made it hard to think, all the blood rushing in his ears, and he only had the slightest window of time to wipe this memory, too, to make sure Jimin
didn’t live with this, because he doesn’t deserve it. He doesn’t deserve any of this.)

Taehyung wishes he could go find him now. Touch him, tell him that it’s all okay. Taehyung is here, now, older and damaged, but alive. What’s a knife to the heart compared to everything else they’ve done, every boundary they’ve broken together?

But there’s something else he has to do.

He crawls out of bed, sits for a moment on the edge of it trying to quell the dizziness. Footsteps sound outside the door—one man, maybe two; their abilities are muddled, but Taehyung thinks it’s elemental—fire and ice, that sort of thing.

He knows them. Knows their names, knows the numbers they occupy on his list.

For just another minute he waits, sits, looks at Yoongi. There’s that bad taste in his mouth that comes from the idea of murder, and he doesn’t even have Jin around in range to do it without touching these men.

He’ll have to devise something else.

There’s a knocking on the door.

He walks towards the men, casts a net out to the Deep Place and feels for their abilities. Fire, like he suspected, for one. But the other one is a blood-binder.

Interesting.

The knocking comes again, insistent.

Taehyung opens the door, pressing a finger to his lips, shushing them. “It’s rude to knock so loudly,” he says. They just stare at him, identical dumb expressions on their faces, nothing at all in their eyes.

The fire-starter’s fingers begin to smoke. The blood-binder starts forward, and Taehyung feels a pressure in his head, a trickle of a nose-bleed wetting his lip.

He looks up and down the hallway, empty except for a maid wiping down the floor. She’s peering sideways at them—him at the door and the men dark and hulking in front of it—muted horror creasing her face.

“Come in, boys,” Taehyung sighs, and opens the door wide. “Let’s not inconvenience the nice lady.”

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Liberty Hotel, Jimin thinks, the moment he wakes up.

That’s the rendezvous. If he ever remembered, if the memory-block was ever removed, that’s where they’d leave a calling number, an address, a way to find each other.

“I’m okay,” he mumbles, to the hackers who gape worriedly at him. I’m fine, to Jungkook, who it seems had scampered down here thirty minutes ago. “I just need to—to get somewhere.”

“I have to take you to the safe house,” Jungkook says. “It’s important.”

Safe House. Jimin remembers Namjoon telling him that, right before he and Taehyung brought the memory block down on him. We’ll equip a safe-house. Ward it against abilities, especially mind-
control.

“We have to stop somewhere else first.”

“Where?”

Don’t trust anyone. “I’ll tell you in the car. Where’s Yoongi hyung?”

“In the safe house,” Jungkook says. “He’s with—with Taehyung.”

What? Jimin presses his lips together, trying to think this through. Taehyung being alive—that’s not a shocker anymore. His memories fill in enough that he knows it’s possible, knows that death doesn’t even mean anything much for someone so unmoored from the confines of a mortal body. But his memories are also filling in other blanks.

People who can look one way and have something entirely different living within their heads. People who can be programmed to act according to the whims of someone else. People who are nothing more than puppets.

The Taehyung who Jungkook claims is with Yoongi—he could be anyone at all.

“Don’t look so spooked, hyung,” Jungkook says, quietly. “Namjoon hyung has him under control.”

“Under control?”

Jungkook hesitates. “He is—was—the Ghost.”

But of course: that makes sense, too. “He’s in his senses then,” Jimin says, relieved, and hurriedly turns to thank the hackers. “Let’s go.”

Jungkook waits until they’re out of the club to ask, in a hushed voice, “What do you mean, in the right sense?”

“How are you involved in this?” Jimin asks, in counter. “I know Taehyung came to stay with you. I know you tried to resurrect him, and it worked. Did you see him after that?”

“Not until tonight,” Jungkook answers, gesturing to a car. “Not until I got a call from Namjoon hyung, telling me to come to the warehouses. I know him from the Eyrie, you know? He always suspected Taehyungie hyung was alive. We kept contact, because of that. Because we both thought he might be…hiding.”

“And in all that time you didn’t find him,” Jimin says. “Not even a trace of him. How did you find him now?”

“We didn’t. Jin hyung did. But Namjoon hyung has been suspecting for a while that Jin hyung is hiding something. Did you know they’re brothers? He’s Taehyung’s brother.”

Jimin slots this into place. It makes sense with certain things Jin said—avenge, for instance—and certain things he did, like never letting go of Taehyung’s case. He’s the brother with the ability Taehyung had magnified, unknowingly. He’s the one who Taehyung was trying to redeem himself for.

The car starts up. Jimin looks distractedly at his hands, closes his eyes against the barrage of memories. He feels odd. Not fully in this world. As if he might fall askew into some other place if he kept his eyes closed long enough.
Jungkook asks, over the sound of falling rain, “What did you mean when you said Tae hyung is in his right senses?”

It’s hard to explain. Jimin isn’t even sure if he should explain. “Did Namjoon hyung place a panic routine on you?”

Jungkook nods. “He didn’t explain why.”

“It’s because some—some people can get into your head,” Jimin says. “They can take your ability and walk away with it, and that would be okay if they stopped there. But they can do more. They can take you over, make you do things.”

“Like what happened to me. The night after the Ace.”

“There’s more,” says Jimin, grimly. “They can also erase you entirely. Take you over permanently. Your body will live, without a consciousness. Your body will live like a puppet. You become part of an uber consciousness, just one limb among a hundred. Like a voodoo master controlling living, breathing zombie dolls.”

Jungkooks’ breath hitches. “Like mind control.”

“No,” Jimin says. “Not like mind-control. You don’t have a mind anymore for someone to control. You become nothing. Just a shell. But your ability, your physical prowess, your hands and your legs and your fingers—they’re all free for someone else to use.”

“Like a robot.”

“Maybe.”

“Is that who we’re keeping secrets from? How does—how does someone do that?”

“No from here. Not from this world, ruled by five senses. From an alternate space. A deeper place.”

Jungkook takes a deep breath. “Okay,” he says. “Okay, so the enemy could be anyone, is what you’re saying. It could wear any face. Like—like maybe Namjoon hyung’s face. Or, or, my face.”

Jimin shudders. “Precisely.”

“Who the fuck is this guy?”

“Someone very smart,” Jimin says. “You knew him from the Eyrie. One of the senior Extraordinaries posted there.”

Jungkook looks at him sideways. “Some people,” he says. “You said some people, before, not one.”

They’re driving now, the Seam wet and glossy through the film of rain, contrails of light streaking across the windows like bright koi fish.

Jimin runs a hand through his hair, flattening it, stalling as he considers his answer. “Three people, to be exact.”


“Maybe that should wait until we reach the safe house.”

“Okay,” says Jungkook. “But time-wise, most of the agents from Eyrie are dead. Those
Extraordinaries the Ghost’s been killing? Those are Eyrie agents. You know that now, don’t you?”

Jimin looks at him sharply. “Their names weren’t on the roster.”

“The roster only lists the low-risk Extraordinaries. You know now that the Eyrie was full of Extraordinary kids being brainwashed into loyal intelligence officers. Did you see my name in the official roster?” Jungkook shakes his head. “The longer list is where the game is. The Seam knows a different roster. It came through Yoongi hyung, incidentally. He gave it to his father.”

Jimin sits up straighter. A longer roster. More agents. Some of whom the Ghost—Taehyung—has taken down because they’re nothing more than puppets now, hollow bodies following a madman’s instructions.

Things are starting to come together.

Of course higher-ups would try to bury the Ace incident because looking into it too much would compromise the Eyrie. Of course they would get involved now, all hands on deck, to stop the Ghost from taking them out before the media dug too hard and all the secrets came out. Of course Yoongi would have gotten blocked, at way-points in his investigation, because someone else—someone high-up and embarrassed at what had happened at the Institute—would have tried to stop him from ever sniffing out its existence.

That burned down experiment. Those lost agents. Here’s where it’s all led to.

“I’m just saying,” Jungkook adds. “Taking into consideration that most of those agents are dead, and judging by process of elimination, well…I can make guesses about the third person.”

Jimin still doesn’t know what he did in the years that he spent under mind-control. Wonders if the others that came back out of the Seam with him used to be Eyrie agents, too. Had they all been empty, pretending to be real, but only an extension of a single mind? In court, they had all been quiet, mumbling I don’t remember to every question. Not angry, not curious, not hurt the way Jimin had been. Why hadn’t he noticed that? Had Jimin only been saved because of the panic routine?

“Why didn’t you tell me this when I met you earlier?” Jimin asks. “That the victims of the Ghost also connect back to the Eyrie? Why didn’t you say that if you knew?”

A small smile. Jimin feels his heart skip a beat.

“Oh. Because Jungkookie didn’t know.”

The enemy, Jimin thinks, could be anyone. Could wear any face. He twists slowly in his seat until he has only the Seam flashing before his eyes, not the boy in the driver’s seat. His skin goes cold, a horrid haze misting his vision.

“You’re not him,” he says, shakily. “You’re not Jungkook.”

“No.”

The car slows a little. Jimin squirms lightly in his seat, keeps his gaze out the window, doesn’t look at Jungkook. “How long have you…Is he—is he even still there?”

“Oh, yes,” the pretender says. “I have more use of him autonomous. And not long, really. I picked him up from…well, a little distance outside the safe house.”

“But the panic routine—”
“I already found my way to him once. I know how to do it now, without triggering the routine. It’s like walking a well-worn path. You don’t give me enough credit, Jimin-ssi,” the pretender mutters. “You’d think an experienced agent with years of scientific research would know to do things better than an accidental telepath and that complete idiot, Taehyung.”

“The complete idiot who took down half your puppets.”

“I can just make more.”

Jimin fiddles with the car lock. “What do you want from me, then?” he asks. “You had me for years, tried to root through my head for days upon days—what do you want now?”

“The rest of your memories, obviously,” says the Scarab. He doesn’t sound threatening at all, his voice familiar and Jungkook’s own, his tone light. “Now that the routine is gone.”

Jimin knows what he’s looking for. Knows exactly what information he wants. It’s why he does what he does next.

He slams his elbow back, blindly, smashes it into Jungkook’s face. Wincing at the crack it makes, and doesn’t stay to hear the half of the cuss word that spills out of the Scarab’s mouth. He throws open the car door and doesn’t even brace himself, jumps into the cold, wet night and throws a hand over his head the moment his body hits the asphalt. The car veers wildly out of control. The speed and the heat of the road burns through Jimin’s skin, scrapes his side raw. Jars his bones and cracks a rib, sends a glob of blood rushing to his lips. He comes to a stop, gasping and winded, pain like a livewire through his skin and head spinning.

Run, he thinks. Fucking fool, get up and run.

The car revs. Jimin claws at the floor to get to his knees, and staggers upright. Everything is still spinning, solid dark encroaching from all sides, but he puts one steps forward. Then another. Then he’s running, no breath in his chest, gasping and sucking air through his mouth, pain like corkscrews twisting in his lungs.

It’s wet and cold and the rain makes everything harder. Day is just breaking, too, saffron light in the horizon, and the rays send little dervishes through his vision when Jimin stops to stagger against a wall, breathing hard, every inch of his body protesting and the taste of rust in his mouth.

Nobody stops. Nobody stares. This is the Seam, where death and violence is common, where life doesn’t follow the routes that it takes in the rest of the city.

Jimin’s glad for it.

His lungs beg for air. He casts around for the Scarab and finds no one—no car in sight, no lurching puppet zombie staggering in his direction, no Jungkook.

Jungkook.

Jimin grits his teeth. He’ll get to Jungkook, he promises himself—he’ll go back and save him, however he can be saved. Right now, though, he needs to get to Liberty. Wait there until he can get hold of Yoongi, or Namjoon, or—crazy fucking thought, but sure—Taehyung.

Thinking of Taehyung within the context of memory is painful. The memory of the Ace surges above everything else, and Jimin’s fingers tremble with the memory of the knife.

It hadn’t really been him. It hadn’t been Jimin, just like Yoongi had said—just like Jungkook had
been now. It hadn’t been him but how does that help when he can remember the way the knife felt? When he can remember the warmth of blood and the weight of Taehyung’s body falling into his hands?

(It’s okay. Run. Go. I’ll find you again.)

There is no point in thinking about this. No time to waste, feeling sorry for himself, wandering around the Seam bruised and pursued.

Jimin tries to orient himself. Where the fuck is he? He can see the tollbooth from here, so not too far from the entrance of the Seam. The Liberty is maybe a block, maximum two from the entrance.

Not far, then. Jimin can do this.

Unsettlingly, the Seam proves more familiar than he thought. He’s never walked through it, after the years he spent like a marionette, going where the Scarab wanted him to go. He’s always taken a cop car, been with a policeman or a squad. Alone, walking the streets in the dawn and the rain, brings up some sort of muscle memory.

He takes alleys he didn’t know he could take, keeping close to the slick, slimy walls, staggering. There’s a wheeze in his chest that will need a doctor. He hisses every time drops of water hit his skinned palms, his wrists.

But this pain is nothing compared to the idea of enslavement, of losing—again—that one asset of his that he must protect against every break and scratch: his mind.

Jimin’s phone is broken. He has a wallet on him, with some meager cash. He has nothing else. When he stumbles, bleeding and trembling, to the front-facade of the Liberty, these problems present to himself as niggling, biting doubts.

He could try the cop card. That would either work for or against him. He could try—

Something slams into him. Jimin uses whatever mental capacity he has left in catching himself, palms down, from completely eating the pavement. He winces at the scrape of asphalt against broken skin, then screams at the boot that collides against his side.

Definitely a broken rib, somewhere.

Pain claws wild through him, clamming up his skin. He braces for another surge of it, for his attacker to kick him down again like an impudent dog. Looks up and sees the shadowy hulk of the man, no one that he knows, gazing down at him with empty eyes.

Jimin swipes his tongue over his lips, tastes blood. Smiles tense and angry. “The fuck are you waiting for, T-1000?”

But the man isn’t looking at him. He’s looking across the street, at something or someone, a hand twitching towards Jimin but head whipping in the opposite direction.

Jimin stands up on weak knees. Sways on the pavement. Looks through hazy eyes as his attacker crumples, blood pouring freely from his mouth and ears, gushing from his nose, beading at his fingertips.

Blood-bending.

It’s horrifying. The pavement soaks through with it. Jimin’s shoes sag under it. He steps away,
hurriedly, stumbles dizzy, nearly falls again.

Jimin breathes in and a shudder runs up his spine. His chest lights up with pain. He takes a step forward, past the blood and the body, mouth bitten and fists curled.

His blood pounds. Throat closes up. There’s a bunch of memories in him, a tangle, and when they’ve been gone for so long the way they come back isn’t smooth. Jimin wrangles with scraps, disordered vignettes, and thinks of a knife most of all.

A knife, and blood on his hands. The body in his arms familiar and heavy, held to his chest both in love and in murder.

Jimin remembers Taehyung’s hands on his wrists, most of all. Helpless, clenching in pain, head down on Jimin’s shoulder and trembling when he twisted the knife up, cruel, deeper into him.

(Wake up, Taehyung had said, right after that. Wake up. And Jimin had. He’d woken up, with blood on his hands, not knowing who Taehyung was, but able to think for himself for the first time in ages. And Taehyung—Taehyung had smiled, blood in his mouth, relieved.

Hi, hi, hi Jiminie. I found you.)

It’s been years.

Years since the Ace. But with the fresh pang of returning memory and the scent of blood on the street, it’s as if everything is happening now, right in this second, all over again.

(Jimin-ah, run. Go. Go before he finds you again—go.)

He feels like there’s shrapnel dodged in his heart, cutting every time he breathes. Everything seems to happen in snapshots. Jimin starts across the street, and suddenly the cover of hazy dawn lifts, spilling staggering sunrise like an actor’s spotlight across the street. His mind dissolves into memory—the disused lab, the experiments, the hands on his skin, the deaths. The nights spent in a huddle, discussing science, or the stars, or the world their efforts will build.

The losses, the mistakes, the sacrifice.

(You have to forget, Jiminie. I’m sorry, you have to forget.)

Jimin walks, faint-headed, across the street.

Taehyung meets him halfway. He’s messy and bruised and bloody, face sallow, clothes drenched in blood. Just like the very last time Jimin saw him.

“Jiminie,” he says, voice wrenched. In the bright light his eyes are wide, glimmering, streaks of blood drying on his cheek, his chin. He looks insane, unholy, a thing out of a horror movie with his soaked clothes, his bruises, his wild, unruly hair. “You’re hurt.”

Jimin sways. Taehyung, Taehyung, Taehyung, he thinks, a litany, a rush of emotion so strong in his chest that he thinks it will crack the rest of his ribs.

Taehyung catches his wrist, leaves red prints, just like that night. But it’s Jimin who stumbles into him now, and Taehyung who holds him, hands around his waist and mumbling flimsy words of comfort.

He wonders if he’s gone mad.
But no—this is real. The warmth of sunlight on the back of his neck is real, and the pressure of Taehyung’s hands coming up to cup his face is real, and the sob catching in his throat is real.

He heaves, mouths Taehyung’s name, clutches the front of his shirt tight. Gets out a helpless, strangled: “You’re alive.”

Inadequate words, but it’s all Jimin has. Taehyung breathes in, long and drawn-out, a shuddering thing.

“I am,” Taehyung says. “We are.”

He sounds almost surprised, a laugh choked somewhere in his throat, tears spilling down his face. For a minute they just stay, close together, a shaky, salty kiss pressed to hungry mouths.

Then Taehyung’s grip on his wrist gets tighter, his eyes brighter, that stir of old mischief glinting in his gaze.

There’s a slow smile, trembling at the corner of his mouth, and Jimin wonders now: how. How could he have forgotten this? How could it all not have come tumbling back to him the very first time he opened that case-file to a picture of this boy’s face?

Taehyung spins on his heel, keeps one arm tight around Jimin’s waist. Bloody and battered and even so, brighter than the sun.

“Let’s get you upstairs,” he says. “We have some hell to raise.”

Chapter End Notes

OK I'm trying my best to pull things together for the last few chapters, but I'm only human, and my beta is also only human, and we sort of...maybe...feel a bit in the deep here. There are A LOT OF LOOSE ENDS. We managed to capture and contain, between us, at least twenty plot holes in this chapter, but we might have missed some. If we did, and if you find something that makes zero sense - pls drop me a note!

Follow me on [twt](#) where I fangirl about my boys and cry about this #murderfic and occasionally post shitty AU threads and ideas. Now you can also yell at me on [curiouscat](#).

As always here, of course, is the [tumblr](#)

Kudos, comments, theories - I love 'em all. <3333
“Just for the record,” says Taehyung, quietly. “I think this is a terrible idea.”
Yoongi sighs into his hands. “To be fair, almost all our ideas have unequivocally proven themselves to be terrible ideas.”

Chapter Notes

HEEYYYYY OMFG it’s been so long >< Hopefully, the wait has been worth it :(  
Heads up for a few things in this chapter:
1) there are likely to be plot holes that you—smart readers w/your very accurate theories—will proooobably notice. My beta K and I worked really hard to weed out as much as possible, but let’s be real, at this point this thing is uncontainable in one person’s head (aka mine) or even two (aka mine and K’s). Please, PLEASE call it out if you see it, and if it’s big enough I’ll correct it :)
2) I considered a Road So Far for this but I am really sorry, I couldn’t do it. Primarily because I just cannot figure out how to fit all the plot into a synopsis that doesn’t have x, y, z and t axes.
3) BUT. I DID write a shitty summary of the last chapter: HERE
sgsikgjaofjaio if u read my shitty summary pls let me know if u liked it ok i will make one next time
4) PLEASE LOVE THIS CHAPTER I WORKED SO HARD ON IT MY BRAIN HURTS PLS PLS LOVE IT goodbye

See the end of the chapter for more notes

NOW

The water from the shower is hot on Jimin’s skin, fogging up the glass. He flinches when it hits his bruises, the broken skin stinging painfully, more so when he tries to use the hotel’s rough yellow soap on it. At least it’s helping in getting the blood to wash away. It circles the drain, pinkish from dilution, and he watches, half hypnotized.

He doesn’t have all the answers yet. He doesn’t think any one of them does. Taehyung’s still being cagey. Yoongi’s under, and maybe when he wakes up is when things will start making sense. The others—Namjoon and Seokjin, Hoseok and Kwon—are in a safe-house that isn’t safe anymore, but Taehyung says they’ve been warned. Jimin’s not sure how.

He thinks of the evil looking through Jungkook’s eyes, the puppeteer hiding behind the veil of a friend’s face, and wants to punch the wall.

The door to the bathroom opens. Jimin freezes, just for a moment, then says, “Come in.”
When Taehyung climbs into the shower cubicle, it’s with hesitation writ across his features. He’s still bloodied, great chrysanthemums of red blooming on his shirt, and there’s some of it streaked on his face from where he’d bled, probably during the blood-bender’s attack.

“Here, come here,” Jimin says, and takes his hand. “Come here.”

Inside the cubicle, everything feels small. The whole world reduced to just this little square, their bodies awkward in navigating it, having to twine themselves close together to remain standing where the water falls on them both.

“Can I,” Taehyung says, swallowing hard, the fingers entwined in Jimin’s hand squeezing hard, “Can I—can I touch you?”

Jimin sighs. “Yes.”

Taehyung runs a finger along Jimin’s cheek, cups a warm hand to his shoulder. Even under the hot spray he shivers, hands unsure in the way they slip down Jimin’s back, resting against his spine, palms huge and solid and so gently warm. There’s something frightened and desperate in him, some soft quailing thing, and Jimin wants to chase it away so badly.

Wants to just touch him so badly.

So he does.

Jimin’s fingers are slippery, working the buttons of Taehyung’s shirt. It slips off his shoulders and he trembles, eyes closing, his own hands tight at his sides. The warmth of his skin feels familiar under Jimin’s hands, soft and taut with gentle musculature. Taehyung’s hair sticks to his neck with the water, steam turning his skin pink, and when they kiss he shudders, like this is some benevolence too great to be afforded to him. Jimin keeps them so close together they could be one, melded entity. His fingertips graze the thick scar starting at Taehyung’s belly and running to his heart, and then rest there—the pulse, the heady rush of blood (alive and whole and real) thrumming under his skin a strange sort of comfort.

Shivers ripple through Taehyung every time Jimin brushes against that scar. But he touches it not because it’s ugly, not because it’s horrific and frightening and a remnant of a past that almost was, but because of the fact that he’s responsible.

“Not your fault,” Taehyung whispers, reading his mind effortlessly. “If anything, it’s me, it’s my—”

“No,” shushes Jimin. “No. You did everything exactly like we planned.”

“The plan.”

Jimin says, quiet above the rushing water, “You know what we have to do.”

Taehyung bites his lip. “About that,” he says. “There is one problem.”

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2013

Yoongi worries.

When Taehyung doesn’t show up at night, when he doesn’t check in the next day, he worries. He worries, and he makes Jimin worry, and then it’s all just a hushed, awful few hours of pacing until
Jimin suggests they talk to Namjoon.

“Maybe he knows where Tae is?”

Yoongi presses his fists to his eyelids. “I don’t know. The fact that I’m not running into the Institute right now…”

“You don’t have a death wish,” Jimin says, sharply. “That’s Taehyung. We can’t lose our minds right now, hyung, we’re fucked as it is.”

It’s true. Taehyung can’t stop dying, they don’t know what the Deep Place even really is, and Jimin wants the experiment done on him. They don’t know what’s happening at the Institute, Namjoon knows, and Taehyung is AWOL. Yoongi’s family has the list of Eyrie kids, and God knew what they’re going to do with that.

This house of cards is at the most precarious its been.

Yoongi draws a sharp breath. “Namjoon—I’ll call Namjoon.”

But he doesn’t have to. He’s barely dialed the number before there’s a rapping on the lab’s door, loud and insistent. Yoongi and Jimin exchange glances. Then Jimin gets up, slowly, and walks to the door. There’s a wariness in the set of his shoulders that seems like permanent weight, slowing him down. The knocking continues, determined, the door rattling. Yoongi swallows.

“Who’s—who’s there?” Jimin asks.

There’s nothing. Just the knocking, unyielding and desperate. Jimin inhales loud, runs a hand through his hair, squares his shoulders into a defensive position before he turns the knob.

Then he yelps as Taehyung crashes into him, red-eyed and shaking. “W-what,” Jimin starts, mouth opening and closing like a fish, hands automatically pulling Taehyung’s body close, the taller boy’s face nestled into his shoulder. “Tae—what—where’ve you been, we were so worried!”

Taehyung’s breath comes in a wheeze. He’s shivering, gaze wild, and Yoongi knows it’s bad before he even speaks. Knows it’s a sort of bad that there’s no undoing.

“What?” he asks. Hates how his voice sounds—thin and reedy, panic lacing it like venom. “What is it?”

Taehyung meets his gaze. He’s quivering, holding onto Jimin, and for a moment the expression on his face is such helpless fear that Yoongi cowers from it. The Taehyung he’s known is fearless—the sort of reckless that got people killed, the kind of driven that got whole cities gutted in pursuit of his cause. He doesn’t know what to do with this Taehyung.


Something is horribly wrong with Yoongi that he doesn’t understand. He looks from Taehyung’s shuttered face to Jimin’s puzzled one, and thinks, entirely calm, of why this is bad. The Scarab had been a threat, hadn’t he? What is the fear in Taehyung’s face for, then? What is the awful part of this, where is the horror, why is Jimin’s face slowly blanching of all color?

Yoongi thinks, very hard: a man is dead. Finds he doesn’t care. Two minutes ago he’d thought Taehyung was hurt, was lost somewhere, was fucking dead again. Isn’t this a better case scenario? The Eyrie is a horrible program, built on terrible intentions, run by awful men. If even one of them is
gone, didn’t that make things better?

And then he slip-slides into considering the second half of what Taehyung just said—I killed him—and his heart thuds to an abrupt halt. “What does—what do you mean you killed him?”

Taehyung shakes his head, gaze wild, his face pleading. “I didn’t mean to,” he says, and Jimin squeezes his arms around him, face unsettled, “I didn’t mean to—he had me trapped, he was trying—kept trying to get into my head and—and I was hiding in the Deep Place because I didn’t want him to get into my head but that place was driving me mad so I just— I just sort of….pushed him out. Pushed him out and pushed too hard, and—and—”


Yoongi’s mouth goes dry. “He’s…stuck there? He can’t come back?”

“He hasn’t,” Taehyung says. “It’s been hours. I went—I went looking for him, in that place, and I found nothing.”

“But then he can come back if he wants to. Like you did—he can come back. Can’t he?”

“Maybe not,” Jimin says. “Tae’s always worked with other people’s abilities—enhancing them, amplifying them. Maybe mimicking someone else’s ability doesn’t come naturally to him. Maybe the verge will work differently for him. We don’t know. The conditions are entirely different. He didn’t find the Deep Place under Talon and ice and adrenaline. He wasn’t looking for it. You both discovered it under entirely different circumstances.”

Taehyung’s breath came in short stabs, panic written across his features. “I still fucked up. I fucked up so bad, the Eyrie will find out and then—”

“The body,” Jimin whispers. “Where’s the body?”

“With Namjoon hyung and Hoseok hyung. They’re—they’re keeping watch.”

Yoongi swears. That’s one more person more than he wants involved in this. When it’s him and Taehyung and Jimin it’s all contained, they all know the risks, they all have hashed it out among themselves ad nauseam. Namjoon and this Hoseok—they can get hurt. They can take collateral damage from this situation. The three of them will have to control this as quick as possible.

“Take us there,” Yoongi says. “Take us to the Institute, and take us to him.”

Taehyung blanches. He stands very still, for a few moments, swallowing hard and looking very small. Then he nods, pulling himself out of Jimin’s hold to start walking.

Yoongi’s been in the Institute before, but it’s never seemed so sinister to him. Everything is too white, too sterile. He jumps at every little noise, and so do the other two—they hold their breath around every turn of the corridor and every nurse that passes them and their stolen white scrubs without comment. The other Extraordinaries—those with far less freedom in this place than Taehyung—stare at them cannily through the thick glass doors of their sterile little rooms. Jimin shivers and shies from their gazes, eyes darting frantically from one to the next as if he’s memorizing them all. Yoongi wonders if he’s thinking of his little friend.

When they finally get to the labs, Taehyung heads straight to the back. The little room that he walks into can’t be anything but a small morgue: there are drawers built into the wall, big enough for bodies, and Namjoon and the medic who must be Hoseok are sitting in a corner with huge eyes and pale faces.
Taehyung asks, shakily, “Did anyone come by?”

“A nurse,” Hoseok says, hoarse. “I made something up.”

He stands up, slowly, and makes his way over to the second drawer from the bottom. He slides it out, and Yoongi can’t hear the scrape of metal over the white noise in his own head. When Hoseok’s done and the drawer is pulled open as wide as it can go, the five of them are standing around a dead man. Yoongi keeps trying to look at his face, to learn it, and failing. All that matters is that his chest is still, his breath is stalled, he isn’t moving.

This man.

This man Taehyung—for all intents and purposes—accidentally murdered.

Namjoon clears his throat. “I don’t know about you all, but I’m sort of freaking out.”

Taehyung’s fingers inch forward until he’s holding tight to the door of the drawer. He looks horribly pale, eyes glittering and mouth drawn tight, the quake in his body growing more violent by the second. “I didn’t mean to,” he whispers. “I didn’t mean to; he was just—he was going to find everything, and it was so dangerous. I didn’t mean to kill him.”

“You didn’t touch him,” Yoongi says, sharply. “Stop saying that.”

“You know that’s not how it works.”

Namjoon makes a helpless sort of noise. “I’m—he’s dead. He’s fucking dead. I sneaked Jungkook in here, you know, to come and do his thing? He says—and I quote—there’s nothing in there to wake up. What do we do?”

“Get rid of him,” Jimin says, immediately. He’s the only one staring right down at the body, a fierce, all-consuming fright in his gaze. His hands are surprisingly steady. “Get rid of the evidence. The body.”

Namjoon gasps. “Get rid of it where?”

Jimin lists lightly into Taehyung. “I don’t know,” he says, very thin and breezy. “I don’t know! We should get rid of it and then never speak of this again. That’s what—we should do that.”

Hoseok’s mouth curves downward. “But—”

“He was a bad man, wasn’t he?” Jimin asks, turning his gaze intently on Hoseok. “Wasn’t he?”

Hoseok swallows. Yoongi wonders how much he’s seen in the Institute, what secrets he knows. Wonders if they’re big enough and bad enough that he might consider sticking with him and Taehyung and Jimin and Namjoon instead—that he might let this secret die a silent death witnessed only by five.

He hasn’t left yet. Isn’t pointing fingers at Taehyung yet. That must mean something, mustn’t it?

Hoseok’s gaze flicks to Namjoon. “Yes,” he says, finally. “Yes. A very bad man.”

Jimin looks to Yoongi, and asks, quieter this time, seeking assurance: “Wasn’t he?”

There’s a single cursed second in which Yoongi looks at Taehyung, Taehyung looks at Jimin, and then at Yoongi. His face is something else—a wild, unruly light in his eyes, his fists clenched tight into steel. He looks scared, Yoongi thinks, but not of the body in the drawer. Not of the murder itself.
Not of his own ability.

Taehyung looks scared because he’s afraid of consequences. Of losing what he loves.

There isn’t any chance of that, not really, which is why Yoongi says, like a promise: “He was.”

Jimin deflates visibly. “Then we get rid of him. And if people miss him—well. There’s no murder weapon to trace anything back to us. Technically, Tae, you’re the murder weapon. And technically, because of the Institute, you don’t even exist. Nobody knows anything about us, or the experiment, or the Deep Place. We’ll make sure no one similar to the Scarab can get into our heads again. And right now—right the fuck now— we’ll get rid of his body.”

Taehyung gives a jerky little shake of his head. He still looks a bit shocked, but it’s him who moves first when Jimin’s done with his little speech. It’s him who shuts the drawer and turns to them, holding back a shudder, to ask, “Where do we put him?”

Namjoon shivers. “Somewhere he can’t be found. Not by dogs, not by men, not by Extraordinaries.”

“All right.” Jimin nods. “I have an idea.”

***

Yoongi’s been taught that every murder case starts with a body and a detective standing over it—an observer, drinking up the details, looking for the breadcrumbs murderers always leave behind. The dead are extravagant in their storytelling, if you know how to look, and he’s been learning for a while now how to look. How to see, more than what an unpracticed, civilian eye sees. How to attach patterns and codes and know more than any commoner stumbling upon the scene.

In the fading light of this evening, however, standing above the temporary grave for their latest problem, Yoongi finds that this particular dead man tells him nothing.

They’ve all been careful not to leave prints, and the murder weapon itself has never touched the man’s skin. Taehyung dug up this hole without putting a hand to shovel, borrowing power from somebody, so that took care of any chance of their DNA ending up in the temporary grave-site itself.

“There’s no reason for anyone to suspect any of us,” Jimin says, quietly. He’s been doing that thing unconsciously, where he tries to comfort whoever is in his radius with aggressive enthusiasm. Right now it’s Hoseok, who looks like he’s about a single strand of thread away from folding into himself. “Don’t worry, we’ll move him somewhere else quickly enough. Tae, how long until the Institute freaks out about his disappearance?”

“Not long,” Taehyung says, from where he’s standing at the lip of the hole, looking in, a sickly cast to his face. “He goes away for field work at times, so they’ll think it’s that for a while, but not for too long. A day or two, maybe.”

“Okay. We have maybe a day to move him from here, then. Meanwhile, we don’t talk about this. If we have to discuss anything about it at all, use code names like how the Eyrie does.”

“Birds and critters and nests,” Namjoon sighs. “I’m sick of it, but it will make any over-hearers think we’re discussing the Institute.”

“He’s Dodo, then,” Jimin says, casting a derisory look in the direction of the grave. “Dumb, dead, extinct.”

Taehyung steps forward. There’s a crease between his eyebrows as he stares into the grave, a gentle
discomfort twisting his features. He lifts an arm and the dirt rains down upon the body, earth shuffling and packing close until the site of the hole is smooth again. No raised bump even to mark the spot.

For a few minutes they all stand around, not sure what to do. Then Jimin says, with tremendous false cheer, “Well! I don’t know about you all but I’m famished. I’m going to head back, grab some dinner, try to find more out about verge science. So that these kind of accidents don’t happen anymore.”

“I’m going back to the Institute,” Taehyung says. “Lay low a bit.”


This is how the world ends. Not with a bang, but with a hush.

The hush of murder. The hush of secrets.

Back at the academy, they don’t speak. There aren’t words—not yet. Yoongi knows Jimin is poring over verge science, speaking with the greatest experts on studies related to the field, learning everything he can. He can’t do the same. He feels useless, but it’s all he can do to put a step in front of another, reeling as he is from everything that’s happened.

A government official is dead. Taehyung still doesn’t know how to stop randomly wandering into the Deep Place. Namjoon and Hoseok know. They’ve uncovered a potentially terrible thing—something like the Deep Place would be an incredible weapon in his parents’ hands. Speaking of, Yoongi still doesn’t know what their gameplan is.

He feels adrift.

What follows is two days of nothing. Yoongi goes to class as usual, eats in the mess as usual, tries to sleep in his dorm as usual. He never once sees Jimin in all this time. On the second night, when he’s lying there tossing and turning, Taehyung climbs in through his window.

“Hey, hyung,” he whispers, voice soft, and Yoongi feels himself break. Taehyung slots himself quietly into his arms, cold nose pressed into the crook of Yoongi’s neck, and they stay that way, quiet until the break of dawn, half-drunk on kisses watered in salt.

“No blame me?” Taehyung asks, when he has to leave in the morning. “For his death? Do you—do you think I’m bad?”

Yoongi swallows. Close his eyes, and he can recall so easily the sharp glint in Jimin’s eye as he asked, insistent, he was a bad man, wasn’t he? It was truth, clear and simple; the Scarab had been a bad man. A man in pursuit of his goals, ruthlessly ambitious, completely pitiless for anything or anyone standing in his way. The Scarab had broken down minds, planted doubts, twisted thoughts. Objectively, he was awful. A terrible, terrible man.

But then there was murder. Also objectively bad. Also objectively awful. But with clauses—had it been premeditated? Was it committed with intent? Or was it incidental, an unlucky accident, an unforeseen consequence? How exactly did one define murder? And how many definitions were truly sin, contemptible and unforgivable?

“It’s just…I wonder if it’s me,” Taehyung says, sounding worked up at the pause. “If all this trouble follows me, like a shadow. Whatever I do, wherever I go, how much ever good intentions I have. They all turn bad. You don’t have to answer me, if you think I’m bad. You don’t have to answer.”
“You didn’t do it on purpose,” Yoongi says, firmly. He reaches for Taehyung, folds him against his chest, and Taehyung goes, shivering. “It was self-defense. That’s all it was. You were protecting yourself. Instinctually. That doesn’t make you bad, Taehyung-ah.”

“I’m not really sorry,” Taehyung whispers, in a rush of words against Yoongi’s chest. As if he has been holding this inside of him for far, far too long. “I’m not. I’m just…afraid of what this will bring. That’s the only guilt. I just feel off-balance.”

“I know.”

Taehyung nods. He still looks awful, eyes too huge for his face, gaunt and sleep-deprived. “Have you spoken to Jimin?”

“No. Have you?”

“Yeah. He still thinks one of you two should—you know. That we’re safer if two of us can access the Deep Place. Not just me.”

“And what do you think?”

“I think it’s too dangerous,” Taehyung says, and then hesitates. “He, uh. He’s speaking to this woman. She works with verge science and memory, and Extraordinary therapy. A Yuri Kwon. He’s trying to figure out how to gain more control over the output of the experiment. So if we do it again, we do it with an exact idea of what we’ll get from it.”

“How much has he told her?”

“Only just enough.”

Yoongi’s still opposed to the idea of doing the experiment ever again. It’s unstable, uncontrollable, and they don’t know what will happen. But it also offers the thing he never wanted: power. And struggle as Yoongi may to determine the worth of redoing the experiment, he can’t deny that power could get them out of the tangle.

“Hyung,” Taehyung says, burrowing closer. “What are you thinking?”

Power.

It’s a difficult thought. Once it worms into him it settles, a drowning man’s desperate clutch for a straw. His family, the Institute, the government, the Seam: a carousel of dangers, drawing ever closer, the noose drawing tighter around his boys, and Yoongi thinks—knows—that this answer is right.

Power.

“Maybe we should talk to her too,” Yoongi says. “This woman. Kwon Yuri.”

Taehyung sits up. “You think?”

“Maybe Jimin has the right idea.”

“No,” Taehyung says. “No, it’s dangerous, you can’t—”

“You know the brainwashing and mind control that goes on in the Institute. You know it isn’t fair to those kids. How long will you draw on Jungkook’s power to bring you out of the Deep Place? How long will we keep them all there knowing someone worse than the Scarab could come and turn them
into weapons for their own benefit?” Yoongi leaves out the bit about his family, of course he does. “Maybe this is the best course of action. Jimin is smart, he’ll figure this out.”

Taehyung looks scared. In the faded light of dawn, his bangs cast long shadows on his cheeks, and Yoongi brushes lightly at them.

“If we decide to do this, we decide together. No more secrets. Okay?”

It’s hypocritical, but it’s probably what Taehyung wants to hear right now. Affirmation. Trust. Confirmation, that none of them were going anywhere.

“Okay,” he whispers, and Yoongi pulls him closer, presses his lips to the top of his head. “Okay.”

***

They’re planning to move the body later in the night.

Jimin doesn’t say where, just that it’s pretty safe. Yoongi sets his jaw and asks him about Yuri Kwon, and Jimin shows him things—diagrams, equations, a whole lot of stuff Yoongi doesn’t understand. “Near-death is her specialty,” Jimin says. “She’s a federally trained doctor, and this is her Ph.D research. I simply introduced her to the possibility of Talon inducing Extraordinariness. She’s very excited about the idea. Says maybe she can come over, see the equipment.”

“And then?”

“And then she’ll leave,” Jimin says, evenly. “Because she doesn’t know making someone Extraordinary wasn’t our motive. She doesn’t know anything, other than that I have a maybe morbid hobby. It’ll be alright, hyung. Taehyung and his brother aren’t the first people in the world to obtain Extraordinariness after a near-death experience. We’re just the first people stupid enough to use the information for something.”

“And if she has insights? If she figures out a way to control it all, make it work?”

His voice comes out too harsh. Jimin doesn’t flinch. Only squeezes his hand, rubs comforting circles on his palm. Yoongi lets him; knows that this isn’t purposeful distraction, just Jimin seeking comfort and not knowing the right answers.

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get there.”

In the evening, Taehyung comes by with news that there are secret agents in the Institute. “They’re quizzing everyone,” he says. “I think they have a telepath. They’re quizzing everyone on the Scarab’s disappearance.”

“Even you?”

“Of course. But I’m not worried about me. I can shield my mind. I’m worried about Namjoon hyung and Hoseok hyung.”

Shit, Yoongi thinks. Of course. An Extraordinary’s disappearance will be investigated by teams containing other Extraordinaries. It only made sense, judging from the confidential information and projects the Scarab would have been privy to.

“What if you use the Deep Place to scramble the telepath’s power?” Jimin asks. “Don’t take it away. You know how you can amplify abilities? Just flip it. Make it weaker, or confuse him somehow.”
Yoongi shakes his head. “That’s dangerous,” he says. “What if he notices? What if you fall into that place again?”

“I know how to bring myself back,” Taehyung mumbles. “Jimin’s right. That’s probably our only option.”

Yoongi hates it, he thinks. Hates it all so much. All of these people they’re tangled with, now. All of these loose ends. “What if you shield their minds, too?” he suggests. “There’s no need to involve one more person who might suspect something.”

“What do you mean?”

“What if you make Hoseok forget about all of this? There are memory manipulators in the Eyrie. What if you put that wall up in Namjoon’s head?”

Taehyung hesitates. “I can…I can try that, too. But it’s not fair to them, is it? Messing with their memories…”

Jimin shakes his head, contemplatively. “No, hyung is right. We have to minimize cluing anyone in to your existence. If they forget any of this ever happened, that’s all the better.”

“So we tell them?”

“Do you think they’ll let you root through their minds if you tell them?” Yoongi asks. “No. We caused this mess. We have to fix it. Come what may.”

Taehyung shudders at that, a quick tremor he hides by squaring his shoulders, but then pulls himself together and says his goodbyes. Not even an hour has passed before he texts them back: I’ve fixed it.

Jimin sighs, staring blankly at the blackboard full of his neat writing.

“Maybe we should forget too,” Yoongi says, quietly. “I wish we could.”

Jimin stiffens, marginally. “We’ll be okay,” he says, harshly. He doesn’t look at Yoongi. “We have to be.”

Then he stands, opens his notebook, and begins to puzzle out something on the blackboard again.

***

Their first clue that something is wrong comes late that night.

Taehyung is meeting Jimin at the unused area on campus where they’ve buried the body temporarily. Jimin says they need a vehicle to get where they’re going, and Yoongi is in charge of driving. He waits for them at the gate of the university, car idling, wondering how they’re going to cart an actual human body all the way here without anyone seeing. But then again—Taehyung is Extraordinary. He’s the Starling, capable of mimicking powers. How hard can it be to cast a cloak of invisibility, or confuse a watcher’s mind in some way?

Yoongi feels antsy. The more he dwells on it, the more he realizes that the thought of Taehyung’s powers frighten him. He’s good—there is no fiber in Taehyung’s body that will ever work itself to true cruelty—but he’s also human. Humans can be turned into weapons. That’s what the Institute was doing, after all.

When the knock on the window comes, Yoongi’s startled.

Yoongi unlocks the back door. He hears the thump of something being hauled up into the seat, and Taehyung and Jimin breathing hard. The door thuds shut. Then the two of them are climbing into the bench seat up front, next to Yoongi, sweating and panting and brushing the dirt off their hands.

“Go,” Taehyung whispers. “Hyung, go.”

Yoongi doesn’t think he has the mental constitution to look back at the seat. He simply drives. Something is wrong, he knows. Taehyung and Jimin are very quiet, apparently lost in their own heads, hands clenched together. Taehyung’s hair is hanging in his eyes, and he looks completely blank, lost to the world. Yoongi knows it’s not very useful trying to get to him when he’s like that, and turns to Jimin.

“I don’t know where I’m going.”


More than an hour away. “We can’t take him,” Yoongi says, jerking his head towards Taehyung. “What if someone looks for him at the Institute? What if he slips and falls into the Deep Place?”

Jimin chances a look at Taehyung. He’s got his forehead pressed to the window now, eyes closed. He’s breathing quiet now, but shallow.

“He reached all the way to the Seam that time with the broadcasting station. And I don’t think I want him to be at the Institute right now,” Jimin squeezes Taehyung’s hand tighter. “We’re not leaving him.”

It’s risky. Jimin knows it’s risky, but he’s still gambling on it. Yoongi nods, very slowly. Waits for the car to leave the university compound and get onto the roads before he asks, as gently as he can considering he’s beginning to panic a bit, “What happened?”

Taehyung makes a small whimper and curls into Jimin. Jimin says, glancing to the back, “We ran into Hoseok.”

“Where? At the grave?”

“Yep.”

“I thought we wiped him?”

“I did,” Taehyung says, raspily. “I did. But then we saw him—”

“—and he didn’t remember,” Jimin continues. “He didn’t remember anything that happened, but he was just standing there. Digging. He seemed very confused.”

“Confused…” Yoongi mutters. “Confused how?”

“Wouldn’t respond,” Jimin says, in a choked voice. “Kept turning away from us like he was listening to someone else’s instructions. And, uh. Tore up the earth. Extraordinarily.”

“What?”

“Yeah, before you ask, he’s not Extraordinary. He’s not. He just—I don’t know. Came by an ability. Somehow. It doesn’t even make sense.”
Yoongi keeps his gaze on the road. It’s raining a little. Fog curls away from the windshield like scraps of burning newspaper. They fall into a sort of uneasy quiet for a couple of minutes, Yoongi’s head thrumming with a hundred questions (and then what, and how, and are you okay) all competing for attention.

It’s Taehyung who speaks first. “He called me Starling.” His voice sounds choked. “He’s never called me by that name before. That wasn’t him. He sounded like the Scarab.”

“Is that possible?” Yoongi asks. “Mind control from another dimension? Without a body or—technically—a brain, even?”

Jimin shrugs. “There are theories of astral projection where the astral forms—completely separated from the body—have been able to physically influence things.”

“And ghosts,” Taehyung says, with a shudder. “Not that the Scarab is a ghost—but maybe this is what ghosts are. Consciousness trapped in a parallel dimension, reaching out through possessions.”

Yoongi doesn’t want to think of ghosts. He doesn’t want to think of the Scarab at all, or the Deep Place. This should have ended with them getting rid of the body, but of course things aren’t going to be that easy.

Into the growing disquiet, Yoongi asks, “What did you do with Hoseok?”

“Nothing,” Jimin says, jaw clenched. “I shook him for a minute, to see if he’ll snap out of it. He just sort of smiled at me. Then he—ah. Fell asleep.”

“Just like that,” Taehyung says, hollow. “I took him back to the Institute. Left him there. Do you think I fucked up with the memory wipe?”

“I don’t know,” Yoongi mumbles, truthfully. “But even if you did, why would he dig the body up?”

Yoongi was right, he thinks. Everything is getting worse. The more days pass, the worse it’s all becoming. What, he wonders, is the breaking point? How many more surprises are going to come their way? He’s half tempted now, to keep driving forever, never come back. They have a car and he has his boys.

They could run away—far from the university and the Institute and everything else.

Of course, it’s a terrible idea.

Taehyung will be missed, and they’ll be tracked down. Yoongi’s family might not care what he did otherwise, but they’d never let him run off on them with no contact. Jimin has an actual family that makes some difference to him.

“Where are we going?” Yoongi asks, another heavy while of silence later. “In the Seam?”

“Warehouse G,” Jimin says. “That’s where the mafia leave their bodies.”


“It’s discreet. I know a guy. He can pay Bubble Face to take him.”

“You know a guy?”

“Lee Taemin. He runs a cafe near the Seam. Bubble Face is his friend,” Jimin says. “When I used to
study about near-death and Extraordinaries, I spoke to him a lot through Taemin hyung. He’s seen some shit.”

“I know Taemin,” says Taehyung, softly. “From my time at the Seam. He’s the one who told me about you. That’s how we found you.”

A flicker of surprise crosses Jimin’s face. “Small world.”

“And we can trust this Bubble Face guy,” Yoongi frowns. “Despite not knowing his actual name or face or ability?”

“I know it’s a risk. But the police has never recovered a single body moved him. Not even Extraordinaries have found anything—or any way to trap this guy,” Jimin takes a slow, staggering breath. “Look. We didn’t want anyone to get involved other than us. That ship’s sailed. One person is dead. Two don’t remember, but we don’t know how effective that is, or if it has consequences. Taehyung is…unstable with the Deep Place, at best. We have to take risks. We have to gamble, or we’re going to be caught. And then what will happen to us? So really, it’s Bubble Face, unless you have any better ideas.”

Yoongi really doesn’t have any better ideas. What he has is slow, growing, awful terror. He says nothing, simply drives.

The sky is cobbled with stars. Blue shadows of trees rise up all around them, lurking like ghosts. The roads are empty except for long-haul trucks, passing them by with the scent of melting tar, the noise of their wheels a sirloin-sizzle.


What if they find out about the experiment, and whoever finds them takes Taehyung away? What if they’re found and his memories are wiped like they’d done Hoseok’s, so he doesn’t even know what he’s lost? What if they’re found and Taehyung loses control, messes up like he did with the Scarab?

Every single option sounds horrible. Every scenario another one he’ll give a whole limb and a half never to think of ever again.

But then he looks at them—at the fear clear in both their faces now. Realizes how fucked they must feel. He’s not sure how it happens, how his own fear can possibly take a backseat to theirs, but it does. It does because he loves them: loves them for surging ahead, one step at a time, even now. Loves them for not giving up. Loves them for how they assure and reassure, themselves and him, that this will all somehow blow over, and they’ll get through it.

Yoongi had long ago learned to compartmentalize his own feelings. To push anything inconvenient or dangerous to the back of his mind like useless clothes to the back of a closet. But here, now, he knows they need him. Needs what comfort he can offer.

“We’ll be alright,” he says, after some time. It’s very quiet, hardly audible over the lowing of the wind, but he hears Taehyung inhale sharply, feels Jimin’s hand squeezes his thigh. “We’ll get rid of the body, and we’ll figure out what’s wrong with Hoseok, and we’ll fix the Deep Place issue. We’ll be fine. Trust me. Okay?”

It’s almost a prayer.
Taehyung hides his face in Jimin’s shoulder, shaking. Jimin’s gone very still, a glimmer of tears in his eyes like stars.

Yoongi focuses on the beams of the headlamps, twin points of encouragement that at least they’re moving forward.

And he drives.

***

It goes smooth.

They’re there and back before sunrise, the evidence of their guilt taken away, Taehyung back at the Institute, Yoongi and Jimin pretending that classes still matter. Taehyung slept like the dead all the way back, relief apparently slamming into him like a planet now that the body was gone. They drew a blanket over him and let him sleep, slumped against Jimin, while Jimin and Yoongi spoke, low and urgent, of plans and counter-plans.

“Why are we doing this?” Taehyung asks, confused, when he and Yoongi are sneaking into the Institute in the five am light. “This doesn’t make sense.”

“Sssh,” Yoongi says, propelling Tae forward gently with a hand to his back. “I’ll explain later, but we have to do this now.”

Jeon Jungkook is a small, Bambi-eyed kid who stares in wide-mouthed confusion when Yoongi and Taehyung sneak into his cell. “Hi, Kook-ah,” Taehyung says, quietly, keeping the door open. “We’re getting you out of here. Now.”

Yoongi clears his throat. “On some conditions.”

To Jungkook’s credit, he immediately nods and pulls his shoulders together. “Okay,” he says, fixing Yoongi with a steady gaze. “What conditions?”

The conditions Yoongi lays out are simple. If he leaves, he doesn’t go farther than the Seam in Seoul. Yoongi knows someone in the Seam who can hook Jungkook up with a place to stay and a temporary job—but he’s on his own from there on. He doesn’t leave the radius of the circle within which Yoongi and Jimin knows Taehyung can draw power. He stays out of whatever new madness is going on at the Institute.

“Alright,” Jungkook says, when he’s done. He turns to Taehyung. “Why are you doing this?”

“I’ll explain later,” Taehyung says. “You should go now. I’ll get you out through security.”

Jungkook nods. “But you’ll come see me, right?” he says. “Are you in trouble?”

Taehyung hesitates. Yoongi’s already flitting around the room, packing a bag for Jungkook. There isn’t much. Just some shirts and some cash that Yoongi withdrew for him earlier.

“He’ll come see you,” Yoongi says firmly. “Now go. And please, for Taehyung’s sake, don’t leave the Seam.”

“I won’t. I really won’t, you can trust me.”

And then he hugs both of them, and Yoongi doesn’t have it in him right now to hurry him.

He watches Taehyung and Jungkook leave. Watches how the security cameras in the hallways blink
off in Taehyung’s wake. Yoongi goes to find Hoseok. He remembers the medical wing of the Institute from memory, and it’s the first place he thinks of checking. In the darkness, the whole Institute looks like a graveyard of ghosts, every corner shrouded, every edge erased under a fog of cold air. Yoongi shivers, presses his arms closer to his body.

Taehyung will find him, he thinks. He’ll get Jungkook out and then he’ll come find him. He’s not as unsafe as he imagines. Anyway, what’s he afraid of? Hoseok? Yoongi might not look it but he’s sure he’s stronger. He has police training. He can deal with this for long enough, for as long as it takes for Tae to come and find him.

The medical wing is quiet. Yoongi walks past the silent specters of unnamed machines, eyes watering from the scent of the disinfectant. A night nurse is dozing by a counter. He ducks from the field of her vision, creeping instead down a long hallway lined with beds, to where he thinks the resident doctors’ beds might be.

He’s almost at the door when it opens and Hoseok walks out. He looks at Yoongi for a moment, blinking, eyes wide and confused. “Hi,” he says, finally. “Do I…know you?”

Yoongi stays silent. The blood pounds in his head. “Probably not. I’m just a supplier. I was looking for the exit?”

Hoseok keeps staring. “Oh,” he says, finally. “Um. It’s that way. Are you sure we don’t…?”

The question hits him like a punch. He hates this, Yoongi thinks. Hates this evolving maze of lies. But what choice do they have? Yoongi’s already turning around, walking in the other direction. He can feel Hoseok’s puzzlement at his back like a living, trailing thing, casting huge shadows of doubt all across the walls.

It’s going to be a long night.

***

“Just for the record,” says Taehyung, quietly. “I think this is a terrible idea.”

Yoongi sighs into his hands. “To be fair, almost all our ideas have unequivocally proven themselves to be terrible ideas.”

Jimin squares his shoulders. Looks out through the lab’s window. “She’s not going to know the details,” he says, for the fiftieth time. “She’s just going to look at hypothetical science. We’ll be fine. How did your interrogation go?”

“Fine. They don’t have any reason to suspect me.”

“And Jungkook?”

“They don’t know he’s gone,” Taehyung mutters. “I’m creating an illusion of sorts.”

“My guy met him at the Seam. He’s doing okay, all things considered. Did Taemin give you any updates about Bubble Face?” Jimin just shrugs, and Yoongi rubs his temples. “Oh. About your abilities, Tae. Maybe it’s better if you use them sparingly. We’re operating on entirely new territory here. Who knows what will happen if you exert too much?”

Taehyung looks weary. He’s wearing his Institute pajamas, which Yoongi hates, because they’re so
white and hospital-like. It washes him out. Casts him in a sickly glow. When he closes his eyes, Yoongi wants to flinch at the bruised purple of his eyelids, the lack of sleep writ clear across his face like a weighted mask. “I get it, hyung. But also, it feels like every step we take is into a bigger mess.”

Jimin draws a breath. “Okay,” he says, whipping out his notebook. “Okay, so, I was thinking. We need to discuss extraordinary measures.”

Taehyung and Yoongi watch him as he props himself up on the lab’s table.

“Extraordinary measures,” Yoongi echoes. “What do you mean?”

“People getting into our heads. Figuring out our secrets. Telepaths and what not. We need protection.”

Taehyung nods quickly. “No one can know,” he says. “In any scenario. If I’m not with you for whatever reason, if one of us is separated—whatever happens, no one can know.”

“Agreed.” Jimin mutters. “The Deep Place is dangerous. In the hands of anyone who can use it, it’s as good as a weapon.”

“Yes, but we’re not Extraordinary,” says Yoongi, slowly. “If you’re not with us, Tae, then we don’t have a way to protect our minds.”

Jimin hesitates, looks away. He has a plan for this, Yoongi realizes. Of course he does.

“So,” he starts, looking fleetingly from Yoongi to Taehyung and then back at the fascinating wood grain of the table. “This is difficult to discuss but we have to discuss it. If at any point in time, there’s a significant adversary trying to get information on the experiment out of us…Tae, you have to wipe our memories. Make sure they don’t get anything…”

He trails off, peeks up for their response. The first, intuitive reaction in Yoongi is to snap. No, he wants to say. No, anything but that.

Growing up in a family of Extraordinaries had been strange and terrible in many ways. The saving grace for him had always been the privacy of his own mind; the sanctuary offered by his own thoughts that allowed him to think and hope and resist. Hadn’t he gotten through just the last family dinner on nothing but the strength of his thoughts about Jimin and Taehyung? And to let that go, to allow that last fortress of privacy to be willingly violated…No matter who it was, not even Taehyung who perhaps had all of the implicit trust Yoongi could ever manage to scrounge up…

But he looks at Jimin, watching him nervously, and knows also that he’s right. That the nature of this thing they’ve uncovered is bigger than all of them. That the potential for danger is beyond any of their comprehension.

“…and then?” Taehyung asks, when Yoongi says nothing. “And then what do I do? Where do I go?”

“I don’t know,” Jimin’s voice is small. “Far away. Somewhere safe.”

“For how long?”

“However long it takes.”

Taehyung gapes at him. His fists are clenched at his sides, and there’s a quake in his shoulders that Yoongi tries to still with a steadying hand.
“No,” Taehyung says, and his voice sounds horrible. “No. No, I can’t—you can’t leave me alone.”

Jimin slides off the table, gliding over smoothly to grab Taehyung’s hands. “We won’t,” he says, sharply. “Of course we won’t. But you understand, Taehyungie, how dangerous—”

“No.”

Jimin sets his jaw. “It’s an extraordinary measure,” he says, not even flinching at how tight Taehyung is gripping his hand, the back of his knuckles showing white. “It may never come to pass. But if it does, I need you to—”

Taehyung shakes his head vehemently. He’s still shaking, stood between the two of them and so white-faced that Yoongi is starting to freak out a little. “No,” he says again, and his voice breaks. “No, you don’t understand, you two are all I have.”

“We know,” says Yoongi, because he can see the beginning of tears in Jimin’s eyes and knows that he doesn’t trust himself to speak. “We know. But this is for us, Tae. Jimin’s right. If something wants to get information on you and the Deep Place out of us, I’d rather forget all of it for a small while than giving it to them and risking everything.”

Taehyung turns and walks away. He doesn’t go far—just to the corner of the room to curl up quiet, the set of his shoulders narrow and arms around his knees. Jimin makes a little sad noise, moves as if he’s trying to go to Taehyung, and Yoongi stops him with a hand on his elbow.

“Let him be. He’ll come around.”

Jimin frowns, but Yoongi knows Taehyung well enough. He was always going to react badly to anything that’d pull them apart. That’s just him, stubborn to the ends of the earth when it came to people he loved. But Yoongi knows he thinks logically enough to pick his battles right.

So they wait, at an impasse; Jimin worrying and hunched over his notes, Yoongi racking his brain over and over on what could have possibly happened with Hoseok last night. Could it just have been Taehyung’s memory-wipe malfunctioning? Or was it more insidious than that?

In a while Taehyung says, muffled into his hands, “I’m afraid. I don’t want to be forgotten.”

“I know.” Yoongi sighs, leaning next to him, clamping a hand on his shoulder. For a moment Taehyung looks like he might cry, but then he steels his face and looks at his hands instead.

“But I’m more afraid of someone hurting you for information on the Deep Place than I’m afraid of losing you because you won’t remember us.” Taehyung clears his throat, sounds surer when he says: “I think we should put the protective measures in place.”

They stay up late discussing it. Passwords, controls, firewalls. Jimin suggests that they pick a mental-wall they’d never willingly break. Something that clues them in, even subconsciously, to the fact that whatever is beyond it is awful, a no-man’s land of memory that should not be crossed come what may.

“Pick two bad things,” Taehyung says, half-sprawled on Jimin’s lap. “Pick two terrible things, and then make yourself choose between them. I’ve heard about telepaths doing this, to secret agents. It’s called a panic routine. Something to protect their minds from repressed memories. It tricks your mind by putting yourself in a panic situation, where the fear of the unknown is held at bay by weighing it against a fear of the known.”

Yoongi asks, “What are you most afraid of?”
“Right now?” Jimin says. He looks straight down at Taehyung, smooths a finger over the crease in his eyebrow. “Right now—you falling into the Deep Place and not knowing how to get back.”

Taehyung flinches and wets his lips. “That won’t happen.”

“We don’t know that,” Yoongi mutters. “Just don’t do it, Tae. Don’t go rooting around in there. Not unless you absolutely have to.”

In the next few days the investigation gets tighter. Taehyung comes by less and less, lying low at the Institute, diverting any attention from Jungkook’s disappearance and making sure that nothing about the Scarab gets out. Yuri comes by one day, to discuss the experiment and theories about the causatives of Extraordinariness, but Yoongi doesn’t stick around for it. He drives to the Seam instead, to meet with a telepath. To learn how to teach the mind things that it shouldn’t know. Fear of a thing it’s never experienced. Walls it can never get past. He asks question after question, hoping to put his own mind at ease with the idea, and comes out of the meeting more nauseous than ever.

There’s a police officer waiting for him when he walks out.

“Min Yoongi-ssi,” he calls. He’s got a coat pulled tight against his shoulders and his face is pink, and Yoongi sort of recognizes him. A senior, from the university. “Can I have a moment?”

Yoongi draws his arms over his chest—then realizes it probably looks too defensive. He drops them and fists them at his sides instead. “Yeah?”

“Let’s go in somewhere from the cold? I’ll buy a drink,” the officer shivers, his breath a plume of mist. “Do you remember me? I went to your university. My name is Kim Seokjin.”

“Seokjin-ssi. Are you with the Seoul precinct now?”

“Extraordinary crimes,” Seokjin says, with a small, weary smile. “I’m the rookie, though. Much paperwork, much stakeouts, less beauty sleep. Times are hard, Yoongi-ssi. Graduate soon so one of you little ones can come take my place.”

“Little ones,” Yoongi snorts, following as Jin leads him into a dingy little pub. The owner—skin rippling blue and gold—bristles a bit at the sight of Jin’s uniform, and then relaxes. “Come here often?”

“Oh yes. I like the meat here.”

Seokjin is a strange person. Yoongi notices first and foremost how all the Extraordinaries in this bar don’t treat him the way they would a normal Ordinary cop. They come by, make small talk. Seokjin treats him to warm soju and meat skewers, and makes small talk. Yoongi wonders what he really wants. There’s an air about Seokjin that’s infinitely familiar: secretive, closed-off, an unreachable kingdom at all times. Seokjin talks about cases they’re working on, criminals he’s apprehended. He talks about Extraordinary laws and ethics, the slightest hint of bitterness lacing his tone, visible to Yoongi only because he’s been studying Extraordinaries his whole life. He asks Yoongi about the university, about his friends. Yoongi answers, puzzled. He hates small talk, usually, thinks it’s nothing but a chore. Yet there’s something about everything Seokjin says that feels potent—something twisted-up and sleeping in his words, not just empty words meant to fill up space.

“I keep an interest in the Institute,” Seokjin says off-hand, at some point in this long, confusing conversation about nothing in particular. “I mean—all of the higher ups in police know about it, so the latest…disappearance…has been interesting.”

Yoongi looks up. “Disappearance?” he asks, feigning confusion.
Seokjin smiles blandly. “Oh, if you’re unaware of that, it doesn’t matter. What matters, Yoongi-ssi, is something else. See, as a rookie, I do a lot of paperwork,” Seokjin’s face is carefully blank as he sips at his drink. “Your family comes up a lot.”

“Oh,” Yoongi says. “If you want to know about them, I can’t help you. I’m quite estranged.”

“There’s really nothing you could possibly know that could be of help to me,” Seokjin says, waving a dismissive hand. “That’s not what this is about.”

“Then what is this about?”

“I just want you to pass on a message,” Seokjin says. “To someone I know you know. To Kim Taehyung.”

Yoongi feels the surprise register on his face. Seokjin just smiles and refills his glass.

“He knows me,” he continues, “He’ll know what this is about. Here.”

It’s an envelope. Yoongi takes it wordlessly, and slides it into his coat pocket. Seokjin lets out an exaggerated sigh, slumping a little in his seat.

Yoongi wonders if Seokjin knows the suspicions blossoming in his head. He keeps a careful look on Seokjin’s face, trying to gauge for similarities. Yoongi knows Taehyung so well, his face and his body, and now he triangulates. The only commonality he can come up with at present is how beautiful they both are, but that’s courtesy of his own surprise at how certain he feels.

How sure he is.

Taehyung has always been very secretive about his brother. Always been close-lipped about where he is, what exactly he’s been doing. Not very many people know about Taehyung being at the Insitute, do they?

And now here’s Seokjin.

“I wouldn’t mind it if you read it,” Seokjin says, quietly, as he stands. “Do me a favor, Yoongi-ssi.”

Yoongi looks up.

“Take care of him for me, will you?”

Seokjin bows. Yoongi sits stock-still, unsure of what to respond. The envelope feels heavy in his pocket, misshapen. Seokjin’s gaze right before he turns to leave feels heavier.

Yoongi stays a while long, ordering another drink, letting the buzz of alcohol mute his nerves. He hesitates thrice before steeling himself and opening the envelope. In it are a bunch of documents—transcripts, mostly, of phone conversations between informants and the cops. He catches his family name, several times, knows that they’re discussing the Institute.

If we know their names, we know who to sway.

*The Eyrie*, thinks Yoongi. Brainwashing Extraordinaries into loyal servants of the government, building a powerful force of future lawmakers and justice keepers who can work like a well-oiled machine, or a set of puppets. Bad news, most certainly, for his family. But this is why his father had wanted a list of their names.

To sway them to their side. To turn the game on its head. To cross the double-crossers.
Plant our own people, he reads, plant telepaths and mind-workers. Bring them to the side of the Extraordinaries; beat them at their own game.

It’s so simple. It makes so much sense. It would endanger so many people.

This is why they’d worked so hard—him and Taehyung and Jimin. This is why they’d put everything into the experiment, in finding a cure for Extraordinariness. To quell this potential for anarchy, for using people as objects.

It’s raining again when he emerges. There’s a call on his phone from Jimin, a bit of a rambling text from Namjoon that starts: hyung, I feel like I’m forgetting something. Nothing yet from Taehyung.

Take care of him, Seokjin had told him. Yoongi wonders how much he knows. Does he know yet, about Taehyung’s abilities? That if anyone knew, if Yoongi’s family knew, they’d do anything to have him, to keep him? Does he know the danger in it, yet, of how death itself was the smallest consequence of everything their work had unleashed? He couldn’t, Yoongi thinks, or he would never have asked that of Yoongi.

Take care of him.

And this is why Jimin was right. This is why—if there is danger—they had to forget. Because the Scarab was only one. The easiest of adversaries.

All of the Seam, the government—anyone would kill for information on the Deep Place. And if Ordinary Jimin or Yoongi couldn’t help divulging that information, they’d need to take Extraordinary measures to make sure they couldn’t.

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Day 44, Taehyung is saying into a recorder when Yoongi gets back. He’s been doing that count for a while now, starting from when they’d been working on the experiment. Every night he records everything that’s happened in the day, takes videos of equipment or of the three of them, keeps it all with him safe and intact. Yoongi is not certain if this is not some mild paranoia, but he lets Taehyung be. Maybe he doesn’t have reasons, just a need to keep his reality clear in the face of its increasing vagueness.

“I met Seokjin,” he says, and Taehyung’s head snaps up. “He asked to give you this.”

Jimin, tinkering with their electrode cap, misses the meaning in this exchange. “I’m thinking,” he says, not looking up as Yoongi passes Taehyung the letter. “We should stop using real names when we’re discussing things related to the experiment. In case we’re being watched.”

“We’re probably being watched,” Yoongi sighs. “The police is involved in the Scarab situation. So is the mafia. There’s at least a few eyes on the university compound at all times.”

Jimin’s eyebrows furrow. “Ah, hell,” he says. “Even more of a reason, then.”

“Initials?”

“I was thinking we follow what the Institute does,” Jimin says. “And pick a bird. Tae, you’re already the Starling.”

“This feels like some James Bond bullshit,” Yoongi grumbles, flopping down onto his side on the floor. “I don’t want to have a creepy super villain name.”
“It’s your creepy superhero name.”

“Have you ever heard superheroes named after critters? It’s always the villains. Vulture, Beetle, Scorpion, Octopus…”


Yoongi sighs. “Fine, I’m a crow.”

Taehyung smiles a bit, wry. “If we’re going so far as to remove our memories, hyung, a little bit of James Bond bullshit is warranted.”

“Think carefully,” Jimin says. “Do you *really* want your legacy to be tagged under the name *crow*?”

“What are you going to be, then?”

Jimin pushes his hair back and preens. “I’m a wren,” he says. “Tiny and crafty. A friend told me this story, about how the wren became the king of the birds.”

Taehyung cocks his head. “Well, how did it?”

Jimin launches into the story. Yoongi only half-listens, the tension from the Seam earlier leaving him in waves as he lets their bickering voices wash over him. *That’s stupid,* Taehyung is saying, *the eagle could EAT the wren when they get back down.* And Jimin: *well, it didn’t, because it had more honor than you.* Everything the telepath told him is still running through his mind. Memory alteration, mind-blocks, firewalls. They aren’t—*any* of them—out of danger yet. Still: this room feels safe for now, this one night quiet. Meeting Seokjin had rattled Yoongi, but it had done one other important thing: reminded him that maybe they weren’t—all three of them—alone.

“What did your doctor lady say?” he asks Jimin. “She figure anything out?”

“She was intrigued,” Jimin says, “but she didn’t pry, not too much. She says maybe the voltages… she can come check again, perfect it. I said I’ve only been simulating it, and she seemed to buy it. It’s not like she knows about the bathtub.”

Taehyung asks, “And if she perfects it?”

“Ah, let’s not discuss this now,” Jimin yawns. “You’re tired, I’m tired. Look at hyung, he’s practically half-asleep—”

“That’s just him most of the time.”

Yoongi swats half-heartedly in Taehyung’s direction.

“A raven,” Jimin says, suddenly, poking Yoongi’s cheek and making him jump, “A raven is a badass name, and it’s still *sort of* a crow, if you’re so set on it—”

“Oh, Namjoon hyung told me this story about ravens, see, in Norse mythology—”

Yoongi breathes in, breathes out. Tries to hold onto the calm without worrying for the storm.

When Jimin flops heavily on top of him, when Taehyung follows, it feels quiet for once, in his head.

Calm.
Of course, it shatters quick enough.

It’s barely two days after that that Jimin wakes Yoongi up in the night, sneaking into his dorm, pressing a hand over his mouth as he shushes the near-yelp that Yoongi made in panic. He sits up, scrabbling, and Jimin squeezes his shoulder, leans in to say, “Something’s going on at the Institute.”

“W-What?”

They go outside, sneak past the old buildings until they’re at the fence, and Jimin sucks in a harsh breath. The Institute is commonly very inconspicuous from outside. In all this time that Yoongi’s been watching it, and sneaking into it using Taehyung’s blind-spots, he’s barely seen any outright security detail or men with guns. Not tonight, though. Tonight there are people—lots of them, and many with guns. There are bright lights. There are what looks like doctors, wearing quarantine gear.

“Holy shit,” Jimin mumbles. “What the hell—”

Yoongi moves closer to the fence. “Can’t see. There are police vehicles—”

“What do we do?” Jimin asks. “What if it’s about the Scarab, what if it’s about Taehyung, what do we—”

“Hey!” someone yells, and they both cower immediately, dropping to their knees in the grass.

It’s dark enough here that they’re rendered mostly invisible for a minute, and they use that minute to crawl away further into the gloom—just in time that the policeman’s flashlight doesn’t catch either of them.

They stay quiet, for one minute, for two. Yoongi can hear voices now, muted, discussing furiously about something he doesn’t quite get. An attack? A security breach? He holds his breath and Jimin squeezes his shoulder tight enough to bruise but they don’t hear any of the keywords they’re looking for. No Scarab, no Taehyung. Just security, breach, medical intern. Yoongi swallows, hard. They stand up, very quietly, and he says, “Maybe I should sneak in. Check it out, see what’s—”

A flashlight beam lands right on his face. He jerks back, drops down, yanks Jimin with him. “Shit, shit, shit,” Jimin whispers, and looks up. The beam catches his face, illuminates the fear in his eyes clearly. Yoongi squeezes his eyes shut.

“Going in right now is a really terrible idea,” a voice says, after a few seconds. The flashlight cuts out. “This is not about him. Go back for now.”

Jimin gapes, bewildered. It takes Yoongi another moment to place the voice, but then he knows.

“Seokjin-ssi—”

“Go,” Seokjin says, sharp. “You’re goddamn lucky I found you.”

They leave. And then they can’t sleep, because of course not, so they discuss the extraordinary measures, until the morning. Jimin wants to do it as quick as possible, he says.

“I don’t trust that this is not connected to the Scarab,” he whispers, when they’re curled up close and sleepless in the lab. “Everything is connected. There’s something very wrong happening, and it’s been happening at least since the night we disposed of the body. Did Taehyung tell you? He says the Deep Place calls to him, right, but did he tell you he’s been feeling… presences on it?”

“Presences,” Yoongi echoes. “Like ghosts.”
“Like another voice. Another entity. Stuck in that place.”

“Like the Scarab.”

“I thought it might not be real. Told him that maybe it was just his mind, playing tricks on him. Guilt—you know? But I’m not really sure. None of what is happening has any precedent. It’s all brand new territory.”

“If push comes to shove,” Yoongi says, cautiously, “one of us will have to repeat the experiment.”

Jimin props himself up on his elbows, eyes glittering. “You mean it?” he asks. “You’re sure?”

Yoongi pulls his knees to his chest. “I think so,” he says. “I mean. At least at this point it feels like it will do more good than harm.”

“Because you know I want to,” Jimin’s voice is very honest. “Every time he disappears into the Institute I feel powerless, like anything could happen in there and I wouldn’t know or be able to help. Like now. Like right now, I’m freaking out so much, and I know you are, too, and what if he just disappears?”

Yoongi shudders. “We’d never find him,” he says. “It’s the Institute, they’ve got the police and who knows what else on their side.”

Jimin nods. His words come in a furious whisper, spoken between them like a prayer. “Every single door will close, every record will be wiped clean. We’ll never know. I’ve seen it happen to a friend, I can’t see it happen with Tae.”

Yoongi nods. It feels like a pact, now that it’s been spoken into existence. An inevitability. Jimin will figure out the particularities with Kwon, and then one of them will get in that bathtub this time. One of them will become Extraordinary.

“You should do it,” Yoongi says. “You understand the verge science better, you’ll be less prone to creating situations like the Scarab. I don’t think I—I’ve spent my whole life hating Extraordinariness. I don’t think I can.”

Jimin’s fingers cup his jaw, gentle. “Hey,” he says, quietly, “We don’t have to decide anything right now. We can wait for Tae, we can do this tomorrow. We should sleep.”

The light through the window ripples on Jimin’s face. It’s like he’s a little brook, a sliver of solitude to fall into, to fall against. His hands are very gentle, drawing Yoongi in, and it’s the warmth of his skin and the gentle cadence of his breath that finally lulls him to sleep.

In the morning they wake to Taehyung sneaking in, eyes huge and restlessness writ across his face. Yoongi sits up when the window creaks open, immediately alert. Jimin mumbles and rolls over next to him, blearily cracking open one eye.

“’You okay?’ he asks, muffled.

“No,” says Taehyung, softly. “We were right that night, Jimin-ah.”

Jimin struggles to sit up. “Right about what?”

“Hoseok hyung. That wasn’t him. Not really.” Taehyung mumbles, drops down between them on top of the thin blankets. “He tried to break into some secure files yesterday. Files about kids and their
abilities. He got caught quick enough, but not before he got what he wanted.”

“Where is he now?” asks Yoongi, sharply.

“Dunno,” Taehyung’s face is dull. “Out of the Institute, for sure. I heard they thought he was being manipulated. That’s a good thing, isn’t it? That means they’ll let him go?”

Jimin sighs, reaching across the space between them to brush his fingers through Taehyung’s hair. “What did he want?” he asks, very gently. “Do you know?”

Taehyung presses his lips tight together. Says, very quiet: “Me. He got rid of all the files on the Eyrie agents. Except mine.”

Yoongi frowns, confused. “Except—”

“Every file is gone, except mine. You know what that means, right? The police and the Institute—they know something is up. I can’t go back. Not ever again.”

His words are very quiet, but Yoongi thinks they fall with a thunderous power.

This is the thing with moments that define lives. They aren’t always loud, aren’t always obvious. They’re sometimes quiet, like this, a whispered secret between three people on the cold floor of a disused room.

*I can’t go back,* says Taehyung, and both Jimin and Yoongi know.

This is it. Push has come to shove. The thing they’ve been dreading, the change they’ve been waiting for: this is it, now. Whatever flimsy illusion of time they could have had is gone, shattered. Whatever brief, runaway fantasies he had had that they won’t need to run, that all this will resolve itself quietly and they’ll all have time to clean up the mistakes—it’s gone.

“Well,” Jimin says, shakily. “We can’t stay here, either. This is the first place they’ll look.”

Yoongi stands up to pace, agitated. “No, no. We have to move you somewhere else. Somewhere safe. Immediately.”

“The Seam,” Taehyung says. “Maybe I can go to the Seam?”

His fists are clenched into a blanket and he’s not looking at them. Yoongi wonders if he feels guilty, all over again. Guilty for getting Hoseok into trouble and guilty for removing their memories. Guilty for the Scarab. Maybe, even, guilty for the whole experiment in the first place. If he feels it all like a heavy weight slung around his neck, his own metaphorical albatross. It’s not his fault, really, none of it, but the trouble with Taehyung is that he’s so easy to read, and so heart-breaking.

Yoongi says, “Not alone.”

Taehyung shakes his head. “No,” he says, “You can’t come with me. They’ll look for *me,* not for you.”

Jimin says, impatient, “Don’t be stupid. They’ll look for you, that’s why one of us needs to come with. Make sure you’re safe. Make sure no one else learns about the Deep Place. You forget, Taehyung-ah—this is *bigger* than the three of us. It’s going to be so much more worse than the Scarab if what you can do ever gets out. You *know* this.”

Taehyung’s gaze meets Yoongi’s, uncertainly. Yoongi wonders if he’s thinking of the information
that Seokjin gave them, what the mafia is planning to do, with the Eyrie agents. If he’s thinking—like Yoongi had—how much worse it would be if they know about what the three of them have made.

“You two go.” Yoongi says, watching as Taehyung visibly swallows his protest. “I know a place that’s safe. It’s a hotel, it’s under my family’s protection, and I can sneak you in. So you two go.”

“And you?”

“When you disappear,” Yoongi says, nodding towards Taehyung, “and they can’t find you even by combing the Seam so thoroughly, they’re going to suspect the mafia. They’ll poke around, and search the university, and if I’ve disappeared, that’s definitely going to ping their radar. So I’m going to stay. For a while longer. It’s not very many months until my graduation.”

“But then,” Jimin mutters, shushing a Taehyung who looks like he’s going to protest again, “we put in Extraordinary Measures. Anyone tries to break into your mind, pull information, and the walls come down. You forget, and if someone tries to make you remember again, force you to break the walls, then the panic routine sets in. Because wherever we are, Taehyung and I, we need to know that the information about the experiment is secret. That only the right version of you finds us.”

His voice shakes towards the end, the words tumbling out too quick, and Taehyung is shaking his head, looking mutinous, even as Yoongi nods.

“That makes sense to me. It makes sense—I’m sorry, Taehyung-ah, but this is the only way we can be sure. That we keep this—us—safe.”

“And maybe it won’t be necessary,” Jimin says, hopeful. “Maybe nothing will happen, and the walls will never have to come down.”

Yoongi mutters, half-hearted: “This isn’t goodbye. Not really.”

It still feels like it. When Taehyung clings to him, his face wet against the crook of Yoongi’s neck—it feels like goodbye. When Jimin kisses him, very gentle, and tells him shakily that he’ll look after Tae, it feels like goodbye.

When Taehyung asks, “Are you sure?” and proceeds to put up the the panic routine for the extraordinary measures, that’s when it feels most like goodbye.

“And if,” Yoongi says, “if I remember, again, if the wall is lifted—if I can answer all the security questions correctly, or whatever—I’ll know to come to the Liberty. Same for you, Jimin-ah. If ever we forget and remember again, we go to the Liberty, because that’s where you’ll be, won’t you, Tae?”

“I’ll stay put. For as long as I can.”

It doesn’t hurt, in the end, the thing that Taehyung does to both of them. It doesn’t feel like anything at all, just the slightest disturbance, a feather falling into still water. A soft stirring of ripples across Yoongi’s mind.

He tries to hold onto that feeling, to remember it so he knows if anyone is pushing through to his secrets, all his love and knowledge and fear and terrors.

He supposes it doesn’t matter.

The next time he feels it, or something like it, he will forget everything that led up to the moment of
whatever caused it.

The experiment. The Deep Place. The Scarab. His two boys.

It’s sobering, but it’s not as frightening as the thought of them dead. It’s not as awful as that. And that—Yoongi thinks—is the only solace any of them can afford.

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Taehyung continues to make his videos. They keep the channel secure, encrypted, and Yoongi knows how to access it, which is the only reason he even knows they’re doing alright. Yoongi’s always had little patience for Taehyung’s paranoid insistence at all these recordings, but now the habit comforts him. They’re mostly just black screen and audio, probably because Taehyung is afraid that someone else will get to them and figure out where they are, but his voice is deep and low and wonderful, a balm on the wound their absence has brought.

Day 50, Yoongi hears, headphones on in the quiet of his dorm room. We did nothing much today. This single hotel room is boring, I try to keep myself busy with games and the TV, but I don’t know how to sit still. Jimin doesn’t, either. I’m glad he’s here because he keeps running into problems trying to perfect the experiment and that gives us both something to do. I miss Yoongi hyung, I hope he’s okay. It sucks that we can’t talk, and I keep wanting to dip into the other place, the place in my head, to go look for him, but Jimin says it’s dangerous.

“Go, Jimin,” Yoongi mutters, rolling his eyes.

It’s par for his character that Taehyung has cabin fever—Yoongi would have expected nothing less, and the Liberty Hotel isn’t exactly known for its gigantic rooms. What it does is offer some level of protection: it’s where a lot of his family’s dealings take place, and as such, there is a telepathic Extraordinary among the guards who performs a slippery little trick of making the place extremely unremarkable. The police keep forgetting to raid the place. Most of the Seam barely spares a glance toward it. The bar books are always wrong and the tax payments are always dodgy but the Liberty always gets a pass. It’s the most invisibility in the Seam Yoongi can offer.

Day 51, Taehyung drones, and he sounds so bored on the audio that Yoongi can’t help but chuckle. I’m bored. We screwed around because there was nothing else to do, and then we solved some equations, and now I’m going to go bug Jimin to see if he wants to go again. A bit of a rustling, like he’s walking around with the recorder, and then: He’s talking to Kwon. Great. Oh—he says he’s almost where he wants to be with the drug, in terms of accuracy. That’s good, I guess. I wish I knew what was going on outside. Hey, Jimin-ah, say hi for the recorder, I’m chronicling our riveting time in this hotel room—

It’s good, hearing his voice. Yoongi hasn’t heard from the Institute, but he’d met Namjoon and Namjoon had told him—very confused—that Taehyung had disappeared. That everyone was looking for him. Yoongi had had several visitors: one man in his father’s employ who’d wanted to know if Yoongi knew anything about that Institute kid who vanished. An agent from some government agency who said, candidly, that he knew Yoongi’s family was interested in the Eyrie kids and that he could have immunity if he gave them any information on the boy known in the Institute as Starling. Or the man known as Scarab, the agent said. Did you know, he’s vanished without a trace? A top agent. Just gone.

Yoongi hid a shudder. Said only: “Oh. Pity.”

“We’re examining the intern’s memories a bit more carefully,” the agent smirked. “You know. See if something comes up.”
“Good luck with that.”

“Well. Offer’s on the table,” the agent said, his tone syrupy. “You let me know if you want to talk, Yoongi-ssi.”

Anger flares through him, but anger isn’t very useful in this instance so he twists it to politeness instead. “Good to meet you,” he said, boringly calm as he bowed, “but I don’t think there’s anything to talk.”

The last of Yoongi’s visitors was Kim Seokjin, one rainy Sunday. He came to meet him at the university, under pretense of some routine follow-up, refusing to leave until Yoongi assured him, via convoluted messages, that Taehyung was safe.

“I have a question,” Yoongi had said, when Seokjin finally turned around, relieved and shaking, “That medical intern. The one who got into the files. Jung Hoseok.”

“Oh,” Seokjin says, “Cleared by the court. Clear case of mind manipulation by a telepath or some sort. They gave him a place at Seoul National University Hospital. He’s doing okay, if a bit…upset. I’ve been visiting.”

“Yeah? Why’s that?”

“Well,” Seokjin smiles. “Came by a bit of an Extraordinary ability, didn’t he? Nothing much, he can just…lift things. Very heavy, very large things. Like a truck, maybe. Or a crane. He doesn’t want it, doesn’t even want to think about it, so I’ve been…helping. Talon, you know? I mean, you’d know if Tae told you, which I guess he did, because your face just did a thing when I mentioned it? Anyway. Hoseok kept completely mum about the ability, of course, but I can tell. I’ve been hiding mine for so long—now I can tell when someone else is.” Jin pauses and then takes a staggering breath. “Huh. You’re probably the last person I should be discussing all this with, Yoongi-ssi, but for some reason I…maybe it’s just the look in your face every time I mention Taehyung. I’m glad he has you.”

There’s a little ping in Yoongi’s heart at this—at the thought of the panic routine set in place in his mind, ready to deploy the moment his secrets became vulnerable. He just smiles, wooden, and excuses himself.

Later, he wonders what it means that Hoseok came by an Extraordinary ability. Is that a side-effect? Did that happen because of the Deep Place?

Everything feels so precarious. More than ever a house of cards.

*Day 54*, Taehyung says, in two days, quiet into the recorder, *I scratched an itch today. I am sorry I did, because it was reckless, I know, but it was just for a minute. Just a peek. Jimin didn’t even know. It’s so strange how acutely aware I was that even that place isn’t safe. That there is something in there that wants…something. What does he want? Revenge? Well, he’s sort of got it. We’re scared to open the door for food delivery. We spent an hour hiding under the bed today because there was a policeman in the corridor, asking questions. I thought I heard him ask for the Starling. Might have been dreaming—didn’t ask Jiminie. I don’t want to worry him.*

Yoongi presses his forehead to the cold glass of his phone and sighs. They’re going to get antsy in there—of course they are. Taehyung’s already starting to flout the rules a bit, peek into the Deep Place. Jimin is probably obsessing over his project. How long are they going to hold out, anyway? Some people nurse small sparks of light in them, but Taehyung and Jimin have always been firecracker bright. That came with its own dangers. They don’t know how to survive. They’d always try to thrive.
Day 55, Taehyung is subdued this time. Someone knocked. Kept knocking. It didn’t sound right. They didn’t call out, or knock louder, not even after an hour. They just kept knocking. Measured, even. It’s like they’re just standing there, asking are you afraid yet? Are you? It freaked us out. I wanted to try and reach into the Deep Place, see what’s going on, but Jimin wouldn’t let me. He’s afraid that’s what they want. That maybe I won’t come back if I try that. But if all this is the Scarab, if all this is his doing, then he knows. He knows we’re here.

Yoongi clenches his fists. He has to see them. Not just hear Tae’s disembodied voice on the mic: actually see them. Make sure they’re doing okay. Or no—that was dangerous. He couldn’t endanger them that way, not with the agent probably watching him, not with his family’s eyes on him. No. But maybe he could go to the Seam, see what the word on that side of the city was, if they had heard about the ongoing police investigations. He could help them from the outside, be their eyes and ears.

Next Saturday morning, Yoongi’s walking towards the student parking lot when he runs into Namjoon.

“Hi, hyung. Going somewhere?”

Yoongi has a ready-made answer for this. He offers a smile, plasticky. “Just going home. For the weekend. You know?”

“Yeah?” Namjoon’s tone is cheerful. “Mind giving me a lift? I’m trying to get to Seoul, buy some books.”

It’s not anything in particular that doesn’t rest right with Yoongi. It’s the fact that Namjoon has been texting him on and off about how everything about Taehyung’s disappearance and Hoseok’s removal from the Institute feels weird. How he has been worrying, over long messages, that he feels there’s something at the corner of his awareness, something he might have forgotten, how it’s niggling at him so much that he can’t think of anything else. Yoongi, vaguely guilty, has barely responded to these, choosing instead to hope that Namjoon will let it go, at some point, stop worrying at it, stop trying to scratch that itch to know.

And now he wants a lift to Seoul. He’s smiling, sunnily, dimples carving deep runnels into his cheek and a cheery, jaunty disposition in his posture. He’s standing straighter, using his height. He’s not slouching, not over-thinking, not fidgeting awkwardly with his clothes like he does. He’s not making himself smaller. He’s not showing any signs of their complicated, tentative friendship.

Yoongi feels a brief flutter of fear. A heaviness in the pit of his stomach, a coldness on the back of his neck.

This is not Kim Namjoon.

“Wait,” Yoongi says, mouth very dry, because he’s definitely not getting into a car with this Namjoon, whatever he is. “I just realized. I have to submit a report.”

“Do you?” Namjoon’s smile doesn’t change. “But it’s the weekend.”

“It’s important,” Yoongi says, turning away. “Sorry.”

“Yoongi hyung,” Namjoon says, conversationally. “Are you trying to avoid me?”

“No, of course not. Just—remembered something, that’s all.”

Yoongi starts walking away. The faster he gets away, warns Jimin and Taehyung, the better it is. He just has to play dumb, to act like he didn’t suspect a thing, behave like he didn’t even consider it in
the realm of possibility that Namjoon—with his face, and his smile, and his voice—could be anything but Namjoon.

But Namjoon follows him. He’s quiet, for most of the walk, and Yoongi’s terror begins to increase in leaps and bounds. He pretends that he doesn’t know he’s being followed; walks with a measured pace as if he really has somewhere he has to be. They cross the grassy quad, and Yoongi heads towards his dorms. There are still people here, lounging in the grass, walking through the corridors of the academic buildings. Namjoon wouldn’t try anything here, would he?

“Yoongi hyung,” Namjoon calls, when Yoongi’s almost at the entrance to the dorm. “Look at me a second?”

It’s stupid. It’s so stupid, what Yoongi does, but in that split second he rationalizes it as having no choice. If he doesn’t turn, wouldn’t whatever the Namjoon-looking thing was know? Wouldn’t he know that Yoongi is avoiding him on purpose?

So he turns.

He turns, and he looks at Namjoon, and in that moment he feels that soft ripple in his head. Like a feather into water. Like a friend, gently opening a door, smiling as they sneaked in. The quietest, gentlest disturbance, and he’s already unsure what it is, or why he’s so, so incredibly afraid of it.

“Yoongi hyung—” says Namjoon again, but he’s fading. Yoongi blinks, trying hard to remember why he was walking away from Namjoon, what he was walking towards. Where had he thought of going today? Nothing is clear. His brain feels fuzzy, a low headache settling into his temples, and Namjoon is starting to look angry.

That’s so odd, Yoongi thinks. Namjoon never looks angry.

But here he is, taking a step toward Yoongi, a chilling smirk on his face as he asks: what have you done?

Yoongi opens his mouth. Tries to say: I don’t remember, I don’t remember walking here, where was I going Namjoon-ah?

He feels himself sink, straight through his skin and the ground, black creeping into his vision and numbing his tongue.

And then everything goes away.

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“—hyung. Hyung. Holy shit, hyung, please wake up.”

Yoongi blinks himself to awareness. He’s lying on his back, somewhere cool, and Namjoon is leaning over him, wringing his hands. He looks fucking terrible.


Yoongi frowns. What does he—

He gasps, scrambling to sit up, nearly knocking Namjoon’s eye out with his elbow as he does. A barrage of images assail him: Namjoon, the quad, walking away, the ripple of the mind-control settling into his head. Forgetting. Forgetting Jimin and Taehyung, the Deep Place, the Scarab. Forgetting where he was going.
“Fuck,” he whispers. “Fuck, what—”

“I put it back!” Namjoon yells, from where he’s crouching with his face hidden in his sleeve. “That thing in your head, whatever it was, the thing that broke—I put it back.”

Yoongi gapes at him in confusion. “You put it… back?”

Namjoon nods. He’s shaking all over, long body folded half in on itself, and Yoongi half wants to comfort him and half run away and hide. But this Namjoon looks a lot like real Namjoon—he seems terrifyingly upset and confused and pained to even look Yoongi in the eye. A far cry from the plastic, callous Namjoon of earlier.

“I swear I didn’t know what I was doing, I didn’t realize—”

Yoongi gives Namjoon the benefit of the doubt and asks, in a shaky voice, “Namjoon-ah, what happened?”

Namjoon clenches his fists. His whole face is white as chalk, fear writ across his brows and the soft devastation of his mouth. “I don’t know,” he whispers, “I don’t remember anything. Just waking up on the quad, and you were looking at me, and I asked you about Taehyung because you know I’ve been worried about him disappearing and you just went…you just went who’s that? Like you didn’t even know him.”

“Yes,” Yoongi says, impatient. “And?”

“Oh God,” Namjoon mumbles. “Okay, so I freaked out, right? And I asked you what do you mean who’s that, because Tae…and then you still looked confused so I got frustrated and I—I did something, I don’t know, it felt sort of like this punch came out of me, like I was battering at your mind to get you to respond to me properly, and then something—something happened. It’s like you went into a dream. Do you remember?”

Vaguely. Yoongi remembers, vaguely, a dream: rivers of blood in the city and a victorious, celebrating Seam. His family, raising toasts over the corpses of his Ordinary friends—over Namjoon and Jimin and even Taehyung—smiling at him as they say, welcome to the family. The electric sparks flowing from his own fingers, reaping death, uncontrollable and uncontainable, burning everything to the ground even as they laugh.

His own horrid nightmare. One that he still picks over the unknown, the monster at his back, whispering at him to turn, to break through, to see. Because the panic routine has been placed to teach him that the unknown is always worse. No matter what. No matter the worst atrocity his mind can conjure. The memories are still locked behind the worst thing possible.

The unknown.

Namjoon clears his throat. “I didn’t know how to wake you up,” he says. “I didn’t know what to do. So I just…put it back.”

“Put what back?”

“The firewall? The… the thing? I don’t know. Whatever it is. I put it back. Do you—do you remember, know? Do you remember Tae?”

Yoongi asks, quietly, “How did you put it back?”

Namjoon’s face goes white. “I don’t know. I don’t know, I just did. I just—hyung, no, don’t be
“scared of me.”

“Are you reading me telepathically right now, Namjoon-ah?”

“I don’t know! I don’t know what I’m doing! I don’t remember anything from the morning, and now —”

“You weren’t yourself,” Yoongi says, standing up. “And now you might be Extraordinary.”

“Extraord—”

“Give me a bit to puzzle over this,” Yoongi says, already starting to move. “We have to—I have to call them.”

Yoongi tries to make sense of what happened as he walks to the dorms—Namjoon following. Namjoon had been taken over, his mind not his and his body puppet-like. He’d then tried to push through to Yoongi’s mind, using telepathy he never possessed, and then—when the firewall came up—he’d tried to push Yoongi further. And that, of course, called up the panic routine, trapping him in that horrid dream, but rendering him unable to break through to his memories. And then, when whoever was controlling Namjoon had nothing to gain from hanging around, they’d simply left, and Namjoon had…fixed things.

Telepathically.

“Hyung,” says Namjoon, plaintively, “What’s going on, I don’t understand—”

Something very dangerous, Yoongi doesn’t say. Instead, he asks, “Can you put up protection for your own mind? Like, if some Extraordinary were to try and get into your head—can you put up a firewall to push them out?”

Namjoon frowns as he thinks. There’s a bit of horror on his face when he says, tremulously, “…Yes. I don’t know how I know this, but yes. Oh God. Oh my God, what’s happening—”

“You should do that,” Yoongi says, meeting his gaze. “Put up that wall.”

Namjoon is silent for a whole minute. “It’s bad, isn’t it?” he asks, finally. “Whatever is going on? It’s really bad, isn’t it? I remember the murder now. I remember the Scarab. And what happened with Hoseok, that was connected to him, wasn’t it?”

Yoongi opens the door to his room. He’s already dialing the untraceable landline number of Jimin and Taehyung’s hotel room, willing one of them to pick up. He has to tell them, he thinks. He has to tell them how close he’d come to truly forgetting them, he has to tell them about Namjoon, he can’t keep this hidden from them. Namjoon is going to know everything, but perhaps Namjoon’s new-found ability is useful, after all. Perhaps this is a single stroke of luck amid all the other terrible things. Perhaps he can help.

The phone rings and rings. No one picks up.

They couldn’t have gone anywhere, could they?

“I’ll explain everything,” Yoongi says. “I’ll explain it all, but we have to go now. Will you come?”

“Of course. Of course I will, hyung.”

Yoongi bites on his lip, thinking. “Is telepathic shielding a thing?”
“What—you have to spell it out, this is new to me,” Namjoon mutters, pinching the bridge of his nose. “How did I even—”

“I have some theories. I can explain it to you, but you have to let me know if anyone is trying to get into my head again. Is that something you can do?”

“I guess so?” Namjoon mumbles. “Why is it so easy? It’s exactly like having a new limb. I didn’t know it would be so easy.”

Yoongi feels a little cold inside. He tries the phone again, praying for someone to pick up, but it rings and rings itself to silence. It feels heavy—as heavy as the bloodied air in his dream.

“Are you calling him?” Namjoon asks, quietly. “Are you calling Taehyung?”

“Yes.”

Namjoon swallows and nods. He says nothing else. Simply follows Yoongi without question when they go back to the parking lot.

“Are we going to the Seam?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.”

They pull out of the parking lot. Yoongi watches as the university’s gates fade into the distance behind them. Namjoon’s holding his breath in the seat next to him, and Yoongi wonders if he’s thinking the same thing as him.

If he’s thinking that this might be the last time he sees this place at all.

Yoongi doesn’t think either of them will really miss it. A place means nothing without people, and his people aren’t here anymore.

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It’s obvious that something is wrong the moment he gets to the top floor of the Liberty. A smear of blood on the elevator door, drops of it on the marble. There might be more on the carpet but it’s burgundy, and Yoongi can’t tell. He stops himself from running with difficulty, holding Namjoon back with one arm to tell him to be careful.

It’s the longest walk of his life to the room. The door is ajar when he gets to it, thrown open without care. The room is in disarray: a flower vase lying cracked on the ground, clothes strewn everywhere, more blood on the floor.

Namjoon presses a hand to his mouth. Yoongi calls out, hesitant, “Jimin?”

There’s nothing. A water tap drip-drips itself to silence. The chill of the air-conditioning rises the hairs on the back of Yoongi’s neck.

“Taehyung?” he calls, louder. “Jimin?”

A little sob from somewhere. Yoongi pushes past the curtain separating the bedroom from the small sitting area and finds an unknown woman sitting on the floor, weeping. She’s holding a bloody piece of wood that looks like a table leg, and oddly, there’s ice on her ice sleeves.
On second glance, Yoongi thinks, she’s not completely unfamiliar. Through his fright, he recollects her face from Jimin’s computer.

*Yuri Kwon.*

She draws away when she sees them but doesn’t really make a move to run. It’s clear that she’s in shock.

“Where are they?” Yoongi snaps, and she only cries harder.

“Wait,” Namjoon says, quietly, going to lean by her. “Ma’am. Are you alright?”

Yoongi leaves him to it, casting his glance about the mess in the room. There are other bodies in here, too.

*Bodies*—multiple.

He doesn’t recognize them, but he thinks one might be a guard at the hotel from the uniform he wears. Yoongi swallows hard as he looks down at his sprawled body. The man is very clearly dead—the telltale signs of burns from electrocution all over his body, skin peeling back from bone. The other man is unfamiliar, a tagged Extraordinary with an ankle bracelet, but his afflictions are dissimilar. Where the guard had burns, this man’s face is purple, as if something had crushed his throat, preventing him from breathing. His chest looks caved inward, lungs crushed, bones broken. Both of the men also have ice running up their hands, a lightning-tree of frost piercing their veins.

The dead are profligate in their storytelling.

Yoongi looks and looks, cold inside to his bones. He picks and picks the scene apart with a trained eye, and feels…conflicted. There is not a single answer in this scenario that doesn’t lead to the same conclusion.

He only knows one thing—one person—who can do this. Kill using multiple abilities.

Yoongi doesn’t want to believe it. Doesn’t want to *consider* it, but what choice does he have?

He closes his eyes a minute, trying to understand, but nothing here makes sense. Who are the men? Why are they dead? And if they’d been killed the way Yoongi thought they had, by the person he thought they had…

“Taehyung?”

The crying woman next to Namjoon stutters something. *Bathroom,* Yoongi thinks he hears her say.

He moves through the bedroom as if through water, stepping over the dead men. The handle under his fingers is ice-cold, ice spilling through the keyhole and the sides, jamming the door shut. He puts his shoulder to the door and tries to jar it open, but it stays shut. He tries again, gritting his teeth against the force with which he slams his shoulder into wood. Pain rattles through his bones. Slow despair curls through his body. He can hear the splintering of ice, see some of it fall from the gap of the door, but the door remains firmly locked.

Yoongi reels back and tries again.

“Let me help,” Namjoon says, eyes wide and horrified. He tries very hard not to look at the bodies as he moves to stand next to Yoongi. His hands are shaking. Back at the foot of the bed, the unknown woman is still sobbing, mumbling words that make no sense.
“Three, two, one,” Namjoon counts, and they both slam into the door again. This time, it breaks with a hiss of cracking ice and the snap of tearing wood. They fall in, and it’s cold. It’s so cold, the air’s turned to mist.

He sees Taehyung first, sleeves bloody, collapsed on the floor. The floor around him is patched with blood, actual pools of it, and through the ice settling on his face, Yoongi can see broken skin and heavy bruising around the side of his skull. Like maybe he’d been hit with something hard. Strands of his hair stick wetly to the blood, black with frost. Oh, he thinks, frozen. It’s like everything in him stops. Everything in him goes from escape velocity to nothing, zero, a null numbness that feels so awful it chokes up his throat.

Namjoon pushes past Yoongi to drops next to Taehyung. His fingers are shaky as they press to the pulse at his throat.

“He’s breathing,” he says, the relief in his voice palpable. “He’s just bleeding. Like. A lot. Doesn’t look bad, hyung, just surface wounds—”

Taehyung moans softly, stirring in Namjoon’s hands. His lashes flutter, quick as hummingbird wings. A tear rolls down his cheek. Then another. Then he manages to get his eyes open, flinching against the light, harsh breaths loud in the claustrophobic space.

“J-Jimin?” he whispers, one hand rising to curl into the collar of Namjoon’s jacket. He leaves smears of blood behind, like he has cuts on his palms. “Jimin—where—Jimin.”

The tap keeps dripping, staccato. Rhythmless. Yoongi takes a step away from Taehyung, looking around with mindless stupidity for Jimin, and his ankle catches the icy lip of the hotel’s bathtub. He jerks away, scalded. Sees the look that Taehyung, sitting up now, casts him and it.

The water crackles. Hisses, and pours over the side of the tub, boiling. Yoongi steps away.

He knows what this is.

Knows what has happened.

His heart is in his throat, hummingbird-quick. There’s another wave of ice, now, spreading up the walls, climbing over the edge of the tub, like a living thing. Yoongi steps away from it, his feet on the icy floor skidding and unsure, breathing in the unsteady rhythm of horror.

Taehyung’s eyes widen, brows knitting in pain. “Get him out,” he pleads, his voice a shout in the eerie, hissing quiet. “Hyung, please. Get him out of there.”

So Yoongi does. Sticks his hands in the freezing water and yanks Jimin out, bodily. His brain feels stuck in déjà vu, from the time when he and Jimin had done this to Taehyung. But unlike Taehyung, Jimin’s not completely awake. The water freezes and boils, as if he’s controlling it, but he flops bonelessly in Yoongi’s arms. Taehyung crawls over, confused, muttering wake up wake up in a litany, his palms leaving smears of bright blood against the ice. He does something and Jimin coughs, once, dribbles out all the water he’s swallowed, but doesn’t wake up. Yoongi squeezes his fingers into Jimin’s shoulders and shakes.

“What’s wrong with him?” Taehyung asks, sounding terrified. “What’s wrong with him, why isn’t he—”

“Taehyung-ah,” Yoongi says, trying to keep his voice level, “you’re not doing this with the water, are you?”
Taehyung shakes his head, slowly. He’s panicking, Yoongi can tell, breathing hard, hands fluttering over Jimin’s body like he doesn’t know how to make anything better. “It’s not me. It’s him.”

Namjoon asks, from the corner, “What happened?”

Taehyung shuts his eyes tight— against pain or misery Yoongi is unable to tell. “S-she—she wasn’t herself,” Taehyung grits out. “Kwon. Knocked me out, and t-then—”

Yoongi flinches.

The bathtub. The experiment. Of course, Kwon knew bits and pieces. No details, probably, but enough working knowledge that maybe she could persuade Jimin—under some sort of duress—to help her complete it. Maybe, with everything else the Scarab had gleaned from everyone else’s minds, it had been enough.

Enough for—for this.

“Woke up and there were those—those people—holding him down,” Taehyung’s breath hitches, “and the ice, and I didn’t know what to do so I—I just got rid of them, I was scared, I didn’t—”

“Ssshh, it’s okay. It’s okay—Namjoon-ah, help—”

Between the two of them they pull Jimin out of there, the ice still clinging to his skin, his body shivering in Yoongi’s grasp.

“That’s good,” Namjoon babbles in terror, “that’s good, he’s breathing, he’s not hypothermic yet—”

“Why won’t he wake up?”

Yoongi breathes in. Closes his eyes. “Maybe,” he says, “he needs a bit of time. You did, after the experiment we did on you.”

Taehyung frowns. “Not this long.”


Taehyung wavers for a minute but then stands up, nods, and stumbles out. He’s waiting for them when the two of them finally manage to carry Jimin out of the freezing bathroom. Kwon is still in the room, crying. Taehyung casts a suspicious glance in her direction but doesn’t engage. He looks to the sitting area and Yoongi hears the door slam shut, a bolt sliding into place.

For the next ten minutes, they work in silence. Yoongi helps both Jimin and Taehyung out of their wet, freezing clothes and into warmer things. Taehyung heats up the blankets with his hands. This latter bit is not overly helpful, because—

“Your hands are bleeding,” Yoongi says, trying to remain calm. “Do you have bandages?”

Taehyung looks at his palms, surprised. They’re gashes, deep and long, bisecting the width of his palm sideways. He staggers over to the cupboard, drunkenly, presumably for the first-aid kit, but Kwon beats him to it.

“I’ll do it,” she whispers. “Please.”

There’s a momentary pause, but then Taehyung lets go of the dubious, suspicious way he was staring at her, and puts his hands out.
Namjoon asks, gently, “Did you hurt yourself?”

“No, I— Not really. Once I—once I got rid of the men, I went to get Jimin out of there. Something—something happened. I think he was panicking, or—or I don’t know—he didn’t remember me,” Taehyung gulps and looks to Yoongi. “Maybe…maybe they tried to get in his head, I don’t know, but he got startled by me. I think. I reached for him and these just—appeared. Like he was lashing out because he was scared. Like he wanted to hurt me. And then I got thrown to the other side.”

“You think he doesn’t remember you?”

Taehyung shrugs. Yoongi feels cold, looking at him, thinking how close Taehyung had come today to probably losing both of them. Namjoon exchanges a glance with Yoongi, probably contemplating the same thing, but Yoongi doesn’t have the heart to tell Taehyung yet. Kwon, still bandaging Tae’s hands, doesn’t say a word. Her small frame is still shaking, but her face is determined, set on discovering answers to why she’d found herself in this odd situation. Yoongi wonders if she remembers what she did. If she knows what it feels like now, being controlled. If she’s come by an Extraordinary ability, the way Namjoon had, the way Hoseok had.

Was everyone in the room now an Extraordinary except for Yoongi?

He keeps a close watch on Jimin as Namjoon paces the room. Taehyung sits in a corner of the room, bandaged hands folded in front of him, something terrible on his face. He’s holding a pack of ice against his head, where he’d been hit. From where he’s sitting, Yoongi’s sure he can see the corpses, and he’s sure that Taehyung is looking right at them. His face is bloodless, shuttered; Yoongi can’t reach him now, not if he tried.

*Please wake up,* he thinks at Jimin, keeping a close watch on his face to account for any changes. Nothing happens. Jimin stays limp and asleep, even when his color returns to normal, even when his skin is warm and his heart beating steadily under the probe of Yoongi’s fingers.

“Why did they do it?” Taehyung asks, after a while. “What can they—he—gain from having him be Extraordinary?”

“Power? A way to use Extraordinary abilities the way you do?”

Taehyung closes his eyes, as if he can block everything out. His mouth curls in a pained smirk. “He can be in multiple people’s heads at once.”

“Yes,” Yoongi says, looking at Namjoon. “At multiple places. You were being attacked here while I was at the university. And he leaves behind a bit of him, like a scar from an injury, or antibodies from an infection.”

“An ability?” Namjoon asks, sipping from a bottle of water. “But how? How is he able to do that?”

“My guess is that because he has no body, he can’t anchor them to himself the way Taehyung can when he pulls on them from the Deep Place. So he ends up…it’s imparting them. To his hosts.”

“He’s a memetic virus,” Taehyung says, his voice low and dangerous. “Infecting, duplicating, multiplying. Changing the host body before he leaves it. Bodiless and unkillable.”

Kwon’s face leaches off color. “Unkillable,” she whispers. “The thing that was in my head—it’s unkillable?”

No one has an answer for that. Taehyung gets out of his chair and walks over to the corpses, clenching his fists. “Should I try to bring them back?”
“Can you?” Yoongi asks. “With the level of injuries they sustained?”

Taehyung’s face crumples. “This is all—all of it—because of me. I want to fix it.” He turns to Kwon. “I’ll find a way. To stop him. To kill him. I’m going to find a way.”

On the bed, Jimin coughs and turns over. Yoongi, startled, nearly falls off the edge of the bed, and then jumps to his feet. Jimin takes in a gasping, staggering breath, whole body shaking as he coughs and chokes, and Yoongi hesitates, unsure of going to him because does Jimin even know him? Has the routine triggered? He doesn’t want to startle, doesn’t—in fact—want to validate whether Jimin knows him or not, but Taehyung doesn’t wait. He kneels on the bed, right next to Jimin, rubbing his back and shuddering, tears falling freely down his face.

“Are you okay,” he says, “Are you okay, do you feel—”

Jemin clears his throat. He breathes in and out, harshly, gaze focusing on Taehyung. Taehyung’s still babbling, comfort and assurances, but Yoongi can see the fear in his eyes, the scalding pain that comes with being unremembered.

But then Jimin grabs his hand, unflinching at how Taehyung winces. Holds it by the wrist, his own shoulders shaking, and says: “I had a dream that you fell into that place and wouldn’t wake up. I kept trying—I tried everything. You wouldn’t—you were just gone.” His voice is full of tears. Then he looks, surprised, from Taehyung’s face to his hands, trembling when he asks, “Taehyung-ah, did I hurt you?”

***

NOW

They get rid of the bodies.

A blood-bender and a fire-starter: two Scarab puppets that Taehyung had felled, just hours before.

It feels like deja vu to Jimin, in an odd way, because his memories of that night they were attacked here are so vague. He remembers seeing Taehyung cry. Remembers his bandaged-up hands and the confusion on Yoongi’s face. Remembers being surprised to see Kwon and Namjoon there.

In his memories it feels very far away, as if he was watching through film, as if the memory didn’t belong to him at all.

He remembers Yoongi and Taehyung explaining to the other two what they were up against, what the stakes were.

They were quick to promise help. They’ve delivered, Jimin thinks, because now they’re waiting in a safe-house somewhere. To help them hide. To keep them safe.

But Taehyung has had enough of hiding, and the three of them are here instead.

“Why did you come here?” he asks now, as he helps Taehyung heft the fire-starter’s body into the empty room next door. “Why not stay with the others in the safe house, do what we have to from there? Is it because—?”

Jemin looks back towards their room, and Taehyung understands. “Partly. But mostly because the Liberty has more exits. Also, I hoped you’d come here. That you’d remember this was the meeting place.”
“I didn’t expect that the meeting would happen so many years later,” Jimin says, softly. “What do you think he’s going to do now? The Scarab, I mean.”

“Come at us hard. You know what he wants. He tried it with you, with me. It didn’t work then, so now he’s going to try and force us into it. We need bait.”

“And you think Yoongi hyung will agree to be it.”

Taehyung wipes the back of his arm on his brow, breathing hard as he shuts the door on the bodies. “Not like we have a choice,” he says. “How many more people will die because of this? It has to stop.”

Back in their room, the bed is empty. Taehyung stops at the entrance to the bedroom, wide-eyed, his hand in Jimin’s squeezing hard. Jimin moves forward, pulls Taehyung along, until they’re standing in the dimly lit center of the room. Yoongi stands at the window, looking out, completely silent.

“…hyung?”

“You have a lot of explanation to do,” Yoongi says, without turning. “But first, come and look at this.”

There’s something in his tone that makes time stop. The two of them walk forward to join him, holding their breaths, staring out at the street below them.

“Looks like the cavalry found us,” Yoongi whispers. “Looks like the whole Seam’s here to smoke us out.”

“Great,” Taehyung says, eyes scanning the crowd of people down below. There’s barely any panic in his voice; just a soft sort of resignation. “We’re literally fighting an epidemic.”

Jimin presses his hand to the glass. He’s seen this before—a mass of people being controlled, being used for the Scarab’s own gains. He’s seen it before, and he’s been in that crowd before, and it turns his stomach. It fucks him up. Because, really, there’s no way to save them that they can devise.

There are Ordinaries and Extraordinaries in that group of people waiting for instructions. He sees policemen and citizens. There are—probably—people they know, people the Scarab is going to dangle in front of them like nothing more than sacks of meat. People who never stood a chance against this plague, this virus inhabiting them.

There’s no way to help them. The only thing they can do is fight them.

Fight and win and keep winning until they lose or they die.

“What do we do?” Yoongi asks. “All these fucking people—what do we do?”

Taehyung swallows, his expression conflicted. Then he pulls away from the glass, twisting to go get his safety box and the syringes from the table. “Turn on the tap,” he says to Jimin, voice hard. “We don’t have much time.”
Y'all. This thing is so long now. We have crossed 100k. We might cross 150 before this is over.

I love all of you for being so encouraging with this fic. It's really the hardest thing I've ever written, and it's been an endeavor. You have made it so fun with all the theories and the bird tweets and the encouragement. THANK YOU. Sincerely. I've become so much of a better writer because of the support.

There might be TWO more chapters instead of one, and one of those will fill in everything that happens from this point in the past to the events at the Ace (remember the Ace? remember this started from an informant's death? yeah, all that.) It's partly written, and all in Tae POV. So. Sorry for extending this - yet again. BUT. The Tae POV chapter is going to be more of a mini-interlude than an actual, honest chapter, so...

Give me - for what might be the very last time - theories! Because we're almost at the end of this journey.

Follow me on twt for updates and new fic. If you have thoughts about this or anything else you can hit me up on curiouscat as well.

<333
Shrike

Chapter Summary

This game has no end. Just many beginnings.

Chapter Notes

CONTENT WARNINGS BELOW, PLEASE PAY HEED!

- there is a scene at the beginning of the chapter involving torture (self-inflicted, of sorts), and multiple instances thereafter
- heavy violence, on-page character deaths (not OT7), mentions of blood, loss of autonomy
- (very quietly) ok so a corpse is desecrated for ~scientific~ reasons but it is really un-graphic so uh (shuffling sounds)
- wtf are these notes
- it’s very hurty pls don’t kill me
- shitty summary for the last chapter can be found HERE! https://pastebin.com/Kuc4iHVb
- please leave thoughts, I struggled. a lot. a LOT.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

NOW


That’s what they’ve shored up against.

The Liberty will burn, soon. There are Extraordinaries outside; cops can’t be far behind. They can fight back—they’re enough, the three of them, to hold the crowd back. But for how long? And how will it end?

Taehyung would like the death to stop. It didn’t begin with the Scarab—no. It began from the ice, long ago. In the ice: cold, cold, cold rushing into his lungs, freezing his blood, stopping his heart.

When he died for the very first time.

Everything fluttering outward from that point is a butterfly effect. A fist of permutations, with a filter set to pull from it the most improbable; the farthest possible; the boundary-breaking, world-changing showstoppers.

He’s thinking about it now.

Now, at the very end of things, at the narrowest of corners to be backed into.
He’s making a map of it, in his head. A lightning-struck path of choices made, diversions taken, people met.

The choices that have brought him—*them*—here.

“What now?” asks Jimin. They’re in the bathroom of the hotel, watching the bathtub fill. Taehyung is sitting on the lip again, like he did all those years back, at a smaller, less gaudy bathroom in a university building. There is no ice this time, but that’s alright. Elemental Extraordinaries are a dime a dozen. He can turn this water frozen or boiling in milliseconds. “Tae, you can’t space out. You’re the only one here with a plan. What now?”

Right—the plan.

“The plan,” Taehyung says, on the back of a swallow, “is to get into the Deep Place, and drag the Scarab out. Stick his consciousness in an actual body. Make him human again.”

Jimin inhales, sharp. “And then?”

“And then we kill him.”

He says it dispassionately. Doesn’t look at either Yoongi or Jimin when he speaks. He can feel their eyes on him. Hear their thoughts, almost, wondering if the years have wrought changes so heavy and so staggering that there is no going back. He smiles, stares at his own lap.

Yoongi asks, clipped, “And how will we do that? Drag him out, stick his consciousness elsewhere?”

“Not you,” Taehyung says, shakily. “Me. I’ve been rooting around in the Deep Place the longest. I’m the one that dragged him out of his body in the first place. I’ll be able to get to him fastest,” Taehyung says, picking up a syringe. “This will help me go deeper.”

“Why do you need that?” Yoongi presses, scrutiny sharp. “You’ve been regularly dipping in and out. You told me you’re finding it hard to stay here.”

Taehyung turns his smile towards him. “Hyung,” he says, “You don’t trust me to tell you the truth?”

Yoongi’s eyes are aflame. He swallows, rapidly, trying to formulate a response that Taehyung doesn’t care for. No—that’s not even *bitterness*; he *really* doesn’t care for the truth in Yoongi’s answer right now. Taehyung knows he hasn’t given them any reason to trust him. He hasn’t given them anything *except* pain and terror and confusion, walking paths so convoluted and then asking them to follow him blind. He’s the Starling, the Ghost, the watcher in the shadows. Far cry from the boy they used to know.

He tells himself he has reasons. Reasons, weighed against emotion. So many fucking *reasons*.

He hopes they’ll be enough, someday.

If the day ever comes.

“Jimin.”

Jimin’s eyebrows pull together. But he reaches out a hand anyway, takes the syringe from Taehyung, watches the liquid in it like it holds truths untold. In a way it does.

“How long?”

“Five minutes,” says Taehyung. “And then you wake me up. Trust you don’t need the paddles, not
Electricity crackles at the tips of Jimin’s fingers. “No.”

“Good. Go.”

There are less reassurances this time. Less of anything, really, because there’s no time, and Taehyung can feel the thrum of footsteps on the stairs of the Liberty already. Jimin can feel it too—he hesitates, now, worry writing lines into his face, fingers shaky on the syringe.

“Do it now,” Taehyung says, quietly, “so you can hold the door for as long as possible. Hyung can watch over me for the five minutes we need.”

“You’re…you’re sure? This will work?”

Taehyung squeezes Jimin’s hand. “I’ve had a while to think this through. Didn’t I?”

Jimin’s face crumples. A while alone, he’s probably thinking. A while forgotten. Jimin’s quicker to forgive than Yoongi; faster to trust. Maybe because he’s more capable of pulling deceptions. He looks at Taehyung now, gaze soft, and Taehyung wonders if he feels guilty for these intervening years. It’s Jimin—he probably does.

“I don’t like this,” Yoongi mutters. “I don’t like you doing this. This isn’t like the last time, we haven’t discussed this, we haven’t—”

“There’s no time,” Taehyung interrupts. “The Scarab didn’t discuss it when he did the same thing to Jimin. Did he?”

Jimin blanches. Yoongi’s mouth pulls in a frown but he says nothing. Just keeps watching Taehyung, the same way he’s been watching him since they were reunited—a heavy dose of distrust, with a side of betrayal. It’s hard to look at him when he’s like that; makes something small and childish inside of Taehyung want to curl up and beg for his forgiveness.

Still, when Jimin empties the syringe into his veins, Yoongi steps closer. He squints, like he’s trying to see through the veneer of expressionlessness on Taehyung’s face, go deeper. Reaches out, like maybe he’s thinking of squeezing Taehyung’s shoulder, or curling his hand to the nape of Taehyung’s neck like he used to do.

For comfort’s sake.

But this is not a time for comfort.

The liquid sings in Taehyung’s veins—a lick of fire like flaming gasoline. The minute the syringe is gone he feels it: coursing through him like liquid flame, locking his muscles and twisting his spine. He gasps, feels his lungs seize, staggers back and almost falls into the ice. And then he does fall in, the ice like a thousand knives to his skin, and Jimin jerks forward exactly the way he’d done back then, back when—they’d both held him down trashing under the water for the first of many deaths.

Jimin reaches out, hesitant, like he knows this time is different.

Like he’s beginning to have doubts.

Yoongi says, above the clinking of the icy, slushy water and the blaring of his own blood in Taehyung’s ears: “This isn’t right.”
Yeah, thinks Taehyung, through rapidly descending fog. Yeah, it isn’t.

Yoongi’s voice is high, taut with worry. His hands reach—not to drown, but to pull Taehyung out, to shake the poison out of his system, to demand answers. Taehyung curls his fingers against his chest, the drug blazing through him, ice rising above and around him. He chokes. When he stops choking, he screams. The drug is agony, bone-melting; dimly he wonders if all the victims of the Ghost’s power had felt this: this horrific, marrow-deep pain.

If so, maybe, even for a moment, he deserves this.

The Deep Place opens up in his mind, a dark blooming flower. He can slip in, easily enough, just like Yoongi had guessed he can. It’s easy after all these years to do exactly that.

But just now, when Taehyung told them he needed help to get deep enough, when he laid out a plausible-sounding plan that their panicking minds could believe—he’d lied.

He had lied, and Yoongi almost saw through him, but now it’s too late.

Now it’s too late, and the drug in his veins is like acid, burning through him. Extraordinary power sizzles through his skin, sparking and skimming and dying. Jimin shouts something and drags Yoongi away: protecting him, probably, from the crackling water, from the cracks that splinter the tub, from the vines of inky dark that go crawling up the walls.

Everything is pain.

Everything is noise.

Jimin’s hands scrabble uselessly at Taehyung’s wrists, yanking him out of the water only for his own hands to sear, dark welts forming where they meet Taehyung’s skin until he’s forced to let go. What have you done, he yells, his voice a high keen, muted through the blood pounding in Taehyung’s head. What have you done?

Frost spreads over the bathroom’s walls. Taehyung’s head bobs under the water for a minute and it rushes into him, mouth and nose, and distantly—dimly—he registers that he can’t breathe. Yoongi’s paused at the edge of the tub, frozen. His eyes are wide, bruised circles.

He probably knows now, Taehyung thinks. This drug was meant to do nothing but kill.

There are fists at the door. Jimin whirls, whips around, and the floor of the bathroom near to the door rises up. Concrete and rebar pushes through the tile to block the door from opening. Something like a telepathic pulse rings outward from him, like the blowback from a bow stretched to its maximum, and even through the fog clouding his mind, Taehyung hears the thump of bodies dropping on the other side of the room.

The sparks in the water die. He gasps, fingers clawing at his throat. Jimin screams in pure frustration and pulls him out, skin burning black where his palms touch Taehyung.

What is this, he shouts. What are you doing? If you just wanted to die—

The back of Taehyung’s skull thunks against the bathroom tile. All of Jimin’s words are losing meaning, elongating into nothing more than disparate sounds, floating away from Taehyung like balloon strings he can’t grasp. His head lolls and he spots Yoongi’s shoes, blood-flecked still from the warehouse. God—was that only hours ago?

The world hiccups. Everything warps violet, legs of electricity surging through the water. It’s the last
of the Extaordinariness—the last of his energy—pulsing out of Taehyung.

Time stutters. He breathes in, can’t breathe out. With the last of his consciousness he—
—He hopes.

For a miracle.

For a seam in space, a spill of possibilities like stuffing out of a torn sofa. For a hand to reach out and rearrange reality, to fold the world into its preferred shape like origami.

He’s so tired. His heart roars with the last sparks of a wildfire. Jimin’s tears fall against his skin, sizzling and evaporating on contact.

“I can’t fix it,” he hears Jimin say, and wants to tell him that this was never his to fix. “Taehyung, what have you done?”

Fix it, Taehyung thinks, and meets Yoongi’s gaze one last time.

And then the dark crashes over him.

One.

The void rages, fires itself up, tosses him back out.

Taehyung jolts awake on the floor of the bathroom, the door blocked not with stone and re-bar, but with fire.

“…we can’t kill him, anyway,” says Jimin. He’s sitting on the edge of the bathtub, this time, a defeated expression on his face. “We’re not getting out of here, not with all these Extraordinaries. Might as well save them the time…”

Fire on the walls, on the water, licking bright along the edge of Jimin’s shirt.

No.

Two.

The Liberty shakes. Jimin drags Taehyung bodily out of the bathtub, slaps at his cheek.

What have you done, he asks. What have you—

The ceiling caves. There’s a moment where Taehyung is lucid enough to look up, and he sees it crack right through the center, sees concrete and brick and cement come raining toward them, feels the weight of Jimin’s body as he’s pinned against him—

No.

Three.

A pounding of fists on the door.

Jimin whirls, trying to keep the aggressors out, but he’s too late. The door bursts open, and first in is a man with a mean smile and glass growing from his skin. A split second; Taehyung gasping for breath, trying to see—Jimin blocking his view—
And then Jimin’s falling backward, shards of glass in his chest, blood in an arc across the tiles—

No.

Four.

The world warps. Jimin again, hands cold against Taehyung’s burning skin, face anguished. Sirens warbling outside. A shuddering sob, a kiss to his forehead, Jimin’s voice: Taehyung why, why.

Fists at the door, and this time Jimin doesn’t even turn. In this reality he gives in, gives up, hangs his head and lets the door swing open and—

“Yoongi!” Seokjin’s voice rings out. “J-Jimin—oh, thank god—”

Taehyung’s heart beats slow, each second molasses-thick. He sees Kwon bark something at Hoseok and Hoseok nodding, and then his face filling his vision as he brings out another syringe. His hands shake as he tries to find a vein.

“Some night we’re having, huh,” he whispers, cool hand smoothing Taehyung’s hair back from his forehead. “You’ll feel better in a minute, okay?”

Jemin is frowning in the periphery, rubbing his eyes like he’s in a dream. Taehyung turns his head sluggishly towards Yoongi, to where he’s standing with his hands braced against the wall and his chest heaving, pupils so blown that they’re barely visible.

Namjoon slides into his vision when Hoseok leaves. His gaze is questioning, darting between Taehyung and Yoongi.

It takes effort, but Taehyung nods. He’s safe, he thinks, and Namjoon jerks his head once in acknowledgment.

He’s safe. He’s him. It worked.

Yoongi turns to them, still breathing hard, shoulders shaking as he looks from Namjoon to Taehyung and back. “What,” he asks, “What the fuck did I just do?”

Taehyung takes a deep breath. His body protests; shuddering and alternately too hot and freezing cold. He opens his mouth, trying to shape the words to answer, but Namjoon beats him to it.

“For the answer to that,” he says, grunting as he and Seokjin both take one of Taehyung’s arms each to pull him off the floor, “we gotta go a whole way back. We don’t have time. For now let’s get you somewhere else. Someplace safer.”

Yoongi glares. Taehyung remembers, with a sudden pang, a conversation from long ago. From just a few days after they’d first met. How Yoongi had hated Extraordinariness so much, equating it to poison, a snarl in his voice and a haunting in his eyes when he spoke about it.

His heart clenches in sympathy.

Seokjin sighs, steadying Taehyung with one hand while he squeezes Yoongi’s shoulder with the other. “Just trust us, Yoongi-ah,” he says. “At least for a little while.”

Yoongi says nothing. But he watches Taehyung, a strand of concern looped through with that same hurt betrayal from before.

Taehyung doesn’t have it in him to speak yet. Doesn’t think he can find any words even if he could.
Jimin leans shakily against Hoseok. “Safe place,” he whispers. “Jungkook was trying to take me there. Before. Where—do you know where he is?”

“He’s right there. Waiting for us.”

Jimin frowns. “But—”

Namjoon winks. “It’s safe,” he says, one arm curling tight around Taehyung’s waist to hold him up. “You’ll see.”

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The sun is up by the time they arrive at the safe house, Taehyung blinking away the last of the drug’s effects on him. He’s okay, he tells Jimin, who seems about as confused as Yoongi is. Everything is running in warp-speed in his mind, facts and memory and fortunes tripping all over each other. There’s a headache nestled in the center of his head, a continual, thrumming pain, and he can’t think beyond a few loops of tangled betrayal.

Did you plan this, Yoongi wants to ask, but the words don’t come. What else have you planned? How much of everything that happened is an intricately planned choreography? Who knows the steps?

It’s definitely not him. He places his hand on his knee and watches how the light from outside shifts on his skin. Blink, spotted sunlight. Blink, bars of dark. Between each moment and the next a myriad possibilities of what comes now, what comes after.

Do you understand now, he hears in his head, and it takes him a moment to realize that it’s not his own voice. Namjoon looks at him, eyes wide, expression complicated. Yoongi quirks an eyebrow. Understand what? Understand that every action births an endless, infinite number of future timelines branching out from it? Understand that he sees them all, like a rapid array of TV channels in his head, the many flickering futures that may come to be?

It’s not as tormenting as one would imagine. He knows how to block it—which is in itself surprising. He knows how he came by this power, as well: the memory firewalls are no more and he remembers like yesterday.

It still doesn’t help. His stomach is unsettled. He wants to jump out of this car and run—run from it all, from the Extraordinariness coursing through his blood and the teetering piles of lies and secrets these people have been withholding from him.

He can’t even look at Taehyung. This is stupid, of course, because Yoongi wants to ask. How many more games are they going to play? How much more secrets are there? And Jimin: he’d always been more than he seemed, but Yoongi hadn’t realized how much more, and of course, there’s a flurry of questions multiplying in his mind at that…

Buttery yellow light turns the moss growing on the safe house’s walls a dazzling green. Jimin’s out of the car before anyone, striding up to the house’s porch and pulling a flabbergasted Jungkook into a crushing hug. Yoongi thinks Jimin’s still not sure what happened, not exactly. He’s bitten his questions down and only asked for the minimum, and Yoongi hadn’t had the energy to really explain beyond Namjoon’s bare-bones parallel realities spiel.

Here’s what happened, he’d wanted to say. I panicked, my Extraordinary ability came out of me like a punch, we manifested a different time-line.

In the new time-line, the Seam doesn’t show up to the Liberty before Namjoon and the others do. In
the new time-line, Taehyung survives whatever poison he gave himself to break Yoongi’s ability out. In the new time-line, apparently, Jungkook is somehow, miraculously, safe from the Scarab.

Yoongi’s head spins.

It’s not necessarily a better one: Yoongi knows the Liberty is still going to burn because of them. The mass of controlled Seam Extraordinaries are still going to die, empty puppets that they have become due to the Scarab’s influence. Confused and staggering from that catastrophe, most of the Seam is going to destroy itself with panicked riots in a matter of hours. The police radio in Namjoon’s car had spat out escalating messages throughout their drive here, and Yoongi had clenched his fists to his side, knowing it was because of him.

Because he had picked a different path where he and Jimin and Taehyung got to live, to leave the Liberty.

The Seam was going to pay its price.

“Not true,” Namjoon says to him now. “That’s not true. The Seam would have rioted tonight anyway. The Scarab took too many people to get at you.”

“Are you reading my thoughts?”

“Ah, hyung. Sorry. I can’t really help it.”

Yoongi scuffs his feet against the ground, leveling his stare at Namjoon. “Did you do this?” he asks. “All the time we were in the station together, and I was clueless about all of this—did you keep reading my mind?”

“I had to protect you,” Namjoon says, uncomfortably. “Hyung, it was a necessary evil. I didn’t want to do it. But there was—”

“A plan.” Yoongi grits his teeth. “I know.”

Namjoon sighs. “Can we get inside? So maybe we can get everyone here on the same page?”

Yoongi’s gaze flicks to Taehyung. He’s got mannequin control over his face, Taehyung has, and it’s sometimes hard to read him when he’s quiet. But he’s been watching. Yoongi knows him. Knows he’s always watching and listening. Keeping his own secrets close to his chest. Still easy to read, because at the end of the day, it’s not malice that drives him.

Never that.

Namjoon says, quietly, “Hyung?”

“Yes,” Yoongi says to him, even though he keeps his gaze firmly on Taehyung. “We are all in this together, aren’t we?”

Inside, Seokjin and Taehyung disappear into a barely functioning kitchen with vague promises of making tea. They let them go. Yoongi isn’t certain how much of the purported plan Seokjin is aware of, but it cannot be much. He doesn’t want to know how the two of them are going to untangle this
The rest of them move to the basement. Yoongi’s stomach turns when he thinks of how, just a few hours ago, he and Taehyung had both been down here. How Taehyung had taken over his mind, got him to follow him to the Liberty. *Necessary evil*, he keeps hearing in Namjoon’s voice, but doesn’t know how to move on from all of it. Maybe they’re all trying to save each other—but at what cost?

Jimin sits down next to him. He looks shaky, not really meeting Yoongi’s eye. He asks, “How did you do that?”


“Just an—” Jimin laughs. “That’s not *just* an ability. That’s not everyday. How much can you see into the future when you skip around in parallel timelines like that?”

“Nothing very clear. Just flickers. Faint big picture impressions.”

“But how long?” Jimin presses, his gaze searching. “Until a particular time-line breaks?”

Yoongi says nothing. Jimin hisses, his fists clenching.

“Shit,” he says. “I thought so. Shit. So if that’s true, and you’ve seen multiple versions of the future, and you still don’t know where we’re going—”

“If I’m guessing right about where you’re going with that train of thought, I’ll save you some time,” Yoongi interrupts. “The Scarab is unkillable. In *any* future.”

Jimin presses his hands to his eyelids, rubs in an aggravated motion. “Since when do you even have an ability? How did I not know about this?” he asks. Then his face falls. “Oh. I wasn’t me.”

Yoongi shrugs again. He’s starting to think that no one really knows the whole truth. Bits and scraps, everywhere. Dead-ends and broken memories. Maybe Taehyung knows, and maybe Namjoon. When the enemy could crawl its way into your mind, where do you keep your secrets?

Seokjin’s white-faced when he comes back. Namjoon’s police radio keeps spitting out staticky updates. *Violent riot*, it buzzes. *Heavy firing and Extraordinary assault*. In his mind’s eye, Yoongi can see it: the many dead in front of the Liberty, the Scarab still at large, the Seam reeling. He wonders if—in this time-line—the violence will spill over into the Ordinary part of the city.

If this morning will draw more helpless blood than he can imagine.

Distracted by the radio, he doesn’t even notice Taehyung entering the room until he clears his throat. “Okay,” he says, and tries a washed-out, watery smile. “Now that we have everyone alive and in one room…”

“Explain,” Yoongi says, something fire-cold and bruising tangled up in his chest. “*Everything*. No more secrets. No more half-information. Explain.”

Taehyung looks at him like he doesn’t know where to start. He wrings his hands, once. Looks very small, ensconced in his hoodie. And then his gaze flicks to Jimin.

“Why don’t you start?” he asks, in a near-whisper. “From before. Before—before me and Yoongi hyung, before the experiment and the Institute, before everything.”

Jimin stiffens. His ankle curls around the leg of the metal chair he’s sitting on. His breath sticks in his
chest in a staggering whistle.

“Okay,” he says, and looks once at Taehyung, askance. Like he’s not sure if he wants to say something terrible or tender.

Then he drinks in a drowning man’s breath and begins.

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2012

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_The Seam is no place for a kid._

They tell Jimin this ad nauseum. Everyone at the shelter, everyone on the streets, everyone he meets in his quest for answers.

_Go home_, they tell him, or, _go to school._

But school’s over—finally, _finally_ over—and Jimin is free to live his life the way he wants.

Of course—his parents are unhappy. The disappointment pinches their mouths narrow, crackles over the phone in the low tones of their voices like a sheer cover of permafrost over their relationship. _You could have done anything_, they said. _You could have done anything with your grades, with your intelligence. And this is what you’ve chosen._

Jimin tells them that he loves dance. He tells them that nothing makes him feel as alive as when his feet glide over the floor of a non-existent studio to the beat of a non-existent rhythm. It’s just one among a million lies he’s cooked up for them to believe, in the hopes that their hatred for dance will distance them less from him.

Their hatred for his _other_ hobby is way stronger.

The Seam sprawls. When Jimin first walked through it, fresh off a train from Busan, he hadn’t expected Extraordinariness at every corner. In Busan the Extraordinaries kept quieter, not displaying their abilities outwardly even in their sequestered sections. In the Seam there were both anklet-wearing, law-abiding Extraordinaries _and_ the ones that just didn’t give a fuck. He ran into men that could levitate and women who manipulated time. He stumbled into a man who warped metal as if it was clay. He ran into people who bent water and air and earth to their will, and sometimes stranger things—blood, glass, cells.

None of them knew, or had heard of, a Jeon Jungkook.

Jimin’s obsession with knowing what had happened to Jungkook was rooted skin deep.

His parents made him go to doctors, to boring old men with clipboards who tried to tell him he had to let _go_, that fixating on something so liminal from his childhood was bad for his overall development. It didn’t matter. Here was a mystery—involving a boy who brought dead things to life, a mysterious agency that had taken him away, and the way Jimin’s school and every adult in his life had just accepted it without question.

Jungkook was Extraordinary, but he had also been just a little boy. Where could he have gone?
Jimin researched fervently on shadowy government agencies and disappearing Extraordinaries. He read conspiracy blogs on centers for human experimentation and theoretical studies of those with abilities. He found forums of parents lamenting the disappearance of missing Extraordinary children the police wouldn’t investigate. Jungkook’s name began to be tagged in his mind with the names of other lost children. He wrote about it all in notebooks, using their special old code.

And when school was done and he still had no answers, he’d decided to come here.

To the Seam.

All he has are dead ends and a bunch of names. The Seam is hard to navigate and its denizens harder to speak to. As an Ordinary, Jimin is no one here—just a face in a crowd not worth a second look.

Go home, kid, they say. Go back to where you come from. And once: don’t ask questions you don’t want answers for.

What do you mean, Jimin had persisted once. What do you know?

The Extraordinary hesitated. He was an older man, in his forties, reported to be a criminal informant. You have a computer? He asked. Jimin said he did.

The link the man gave him lands on pages of encrypted information and archived forum conversations. Jimin can make nothing out of it, nothing at all. He wastes time for a while with this cooling lead, trying to decode it. Finds a single string of numbers that could be a phone number, and dials it. It rings and rings and no one picks up.

A police inspector has already spotted him, brandishing around an old photo of Jungkook’s. Jimin had bailed before the inspector could come talk to him, but increasingly, the message is becoming clearer: he’s not supposed to be here.

If by the end of this month there’s nothing, he tells himself, every night.

At the end of the month there’s still nothing. Jimin’s temporary lease on a crumbling old apartment is running out. He packs his bags, furious at himself that all this led to nothing. At the bottom of the stairwell, minutes from hailing a cab out of the Seam, he tries that phone number again.

It rings and rings. No one picks up.

Frustrated, Jimin steps off the curb, hand held out.

And then someone slams into him.

He’s winded, for a minute, staggering back and falling on his ass, the breath rushing out of him and his ears ringing. His stomach hurts where a skinny elbow had nudged hard into his side, and his palms pulse with scrapes from the gravel. But—stuck to his shirt with a gummy post-it—is a little pink note.

An address.

He looks around, but whoever it was had bumped into him, they aren’t around anymore. His phone says the address belongs to a cafe.

Jimin staggers to his feet. Hefts his bag on his shoulder and checks his surroundings again. He can’t find cameras or eyes watching him, but of course—this is the Seam. People here need neither, if they had the right ability on their side.
Jimin types the cafe’s address into his phone, and begins to walk.

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He’s not sure how to approach Taemin in the beginning, except to sit around and stare at him furtively while he types uselessly on his computer. He keeps the post-it in plain sight, for the staff or whichever visitors to see if they were looking to engage with him, but on the first day no one does. On the second day, there’s a question mark in Taemin’s face as he brings Jimin his coffee in the morning, but he asks nothing. On the third day, he stops by Jimin’s booth, half a smile on his face, and asks: “What are you trying to know?”

So Jimin tells him—about Jungkook and the other missing kids, about dead ends and conspiracies, about the encrypted site that the Extraordinary had given him. It’s probably not safe—in retrospect he thinks he was probably stupid to open his mouth at all—but there’s something about the detached interest in Taemin’s face that tells Jimin he’s non-partisan.

“Oh okay,” Taemin says when he’s done. “I can’t do much, but I can tell you how to look for information. So you know that when you’re working with the great world wide web, nothing is truly a dead end.”

It isn’t even much. Taemin just points him to websites and forums that tell Jimin how to look for things. How to dig deeper than others, how to follow web-trails that disappear behind masked IPs and proxies. He finds cipher keys and code-breaking programs, and works furiously on deciphering the coded website. It turns out to be about a program, government-funded, reportedly operating somewhere close to the police university.

It’s only known as the Institute.

Jimin follows a link to a forum that’s now defunct, necro-posting disabled, that seems to be nothing but an archived dump of letters passed between doctors and investigators from the NPA.

They all speak about something called the Verge.

From what Jimin can understand, the Verge is the space between life and death. First described in broken fragments of records obtained from internment camps in the Second World War, but with ties to mythologies of multiple different faiths. Reachable through psycho-actives, near-death trauma, or potent combinations of the two. From what Jimin can follow, the Verge is purportedly where Extraordinaries draw power from. Any Extraordinary not born that way—acquiring power later in their life—does so after a near-death experience.

Does so after experiencing the Verge.

And in the Institute, where they’re reportedly holding young Extraordinaries to train them into perfect powerful weapons of the State, they’re also trying to create more.

More Extraordinaries. More people who can draw from the Verge. More power, in the hands of a few, who can be trained and brainwashed and weaponized to serve.

It’s…interesting. He wonders if Jungkook is there, at the Institute, among these people who discuss tests and experiments on Extraordinaries like they’re discussing lab rats. He wonders who will help, if he wanted to bring this to light: he’s just a kid, and this has police and government written all over it. It’s not like he knows anyone he can trust enough to inform.

And so Jimin learns.
In the next couple of weeks, sitting in Taemin’s cafe every day, he pours his energy into research. He finds that there are more records from the past than he thought. Some of it is in foreign languages, but somehow, through some strange luck, he always finds lucky translations.

It takes Jimin until the end of the month to realize that a lot of people come to the cafe for information.

“It’s your ability, isn’t it?” he asks Taemin, and gets a half-smile in return. “Information. Something to do with the Internet?”

“Simpler than that,” says Taemin. “I just find lost things. Lost data, lost people, lost records—it’s why I have this place. A way-house between two worlds.”

Jimin is not blind to the people that come here. There are policemen, only vaguely undercover, who sniff around for clues about Extraordinary criminals. There are Extraordinary gang-lords, wandering through in search of information on their rivals. There are…others…with far more interesting motivations. Criminal informants waltz in, sometimes as young as thirteen, spying on conversations over half a sandwich and packaged juice. Some of them look at Jimin with interest, wondering why an Ordinary is so at home in this place that straddles worlds.

Then, one day, a young man slides into the booth across from him. He’s wearing a police university uniform, which is interesting, because Jimin has been looking so much into the Institute. His smile is a strange, knowing thing, and his voice is surprisingly sweet.

He says, very soft, “You’ve been looking into some interesting places, Jimin-ssi.”

Jimin doesn’t bolt. He wants to—he’s suddenly very aware of the scrape of knives on plates, of the patrons of the cafe lost in their laptops or their books or their thoughts, of the raw power some of them hold that doesn’t run through his own veins. The young man opposite him does not look older than twenty-one. His face is effortlessly handsome, made more so by some old pain haunting the lines of it.

“I can’t give you my name,” he says. “We do sometimes pick code-names, and mine is Hawk.”

We, Jimin notes, but says nothing. He tries to look for signs that the man is Extraordinary. Sometimes it’s obvious—a flicker of electricity for those that worked with energy fields, a hint of smoke for the ones with fire, a nervous jumpiness to telepaths.

He can’t find anything like that on the Hawk.

“Stupid name if you ask me,” the man continues, “but there’s danger in using our real names, of course. Why are you so interested in the Institute, Jimin-ssi?”

Jimin gulps. “Are you—are you from there?”

Hawk laughs. “Oh no, far from it. I just share your interest. Riddle me this. What’s an Ordinary boy from Busan got to do with Extraordinary experimentation and Verge science?” Jimin stays silent, staring intently at the faux wood grains on his table, and Hawk drops his voice to a whisper. “I’m on your side. You’re looking to get someone out of there? So am I. But I want more than that. I want to bring that whole place down. You can tell me why you’re looking into the Institute without fear. Or, if you don’t trust me—which you’d be stupid to, considering how little I’ve told you—you can maybe come to meet some of us. We go by the Flock.”

Jimin stares at him dubiously. “The Flock.”
“Stupid, right? I thought so. *Birds,*” says the Hawk, with a smile and a shake of his head. “It’s this whole theme. Ironic.”

**NOW**

“It was you,” Jimin says now, to Seokjin. “I know that now. You’re the Flock.”

Yoongi’s eyes narrow. “What is the Flock?”

Seokjin gives him a sideways look. “It’s just some people who know about the Institute,” he says. “People aware of the government’s involvement, and the police’s knowledge. People within both those organizations who are not pleased with the way things were, with the way the Extraordinaries were used. Sympathetic people.”

Yoongi’s throat feels tight. “How did you get into all that?”

“When Taehyung volunteered for the Institute, some of them found me. It’s how I had information to pass to him about what the mafia was planning. It’s how I even knew *where* he was.”

Of course. With his memories back, this fills in some blanks. How Seokjin was able to keep an eye out for Taehyung, how he’d tried to help…

“It’s why you went straight to Extraordinary Crimes when you graduated,” Yoongi says, fingers steepled as he thinks. “Because someone in the system knew your ability already, and protected you. Made you privy to information about the Institute. Is it the same people that doctored Jimin’s documents to let him into the force?”

Seokjin nods. “He was safer in the police force than outside of it. We didn’t know what information he had, hidden beneath that memory wall.”

“And the Flock had no intentions other than bringing down the Institute?”

“Information like the Verge or what you call the Deep Place is too dangerous to let out,” Namjoon says. “The Flock tries to keep it from the hands of the people that can misuse it. Like your family, Yoongi. Or— of course— the Scarab.”

Yoongi’s stomach churns. His head is still splitting—from lack of sleep or the effects of this night’s events, he’s unsure. Reality blurs and fragments if he thinks too ahead, towards the future. He’s still finding it hard to look at either Jimin or Taehyung even though he feels them—like always, caught in their orbit in an unstable three-body path.

He says, scoffing, “Like—like what, a superhero guild? A league of literal Extraordinaries wanting to do good?. That sounds like it works *just* great.”

“What about for one, wouldn’t you think?” Namjoon’s smile is small. “Someone has to work for the greater good.”

*Greater good.* He used to believe in that, once. Believed that that was what they had been doing, forever ago in that University, where all this first started. But if there was an age and maturity attached to the knowledge of the Verge and all the wonders it could bring, then Yoongi was the naivest among the three of them. Jimin had pushed and pushed at walls until they broke down to give
him answers to his obsessions. Taehyung had known because the Verge had opened itself to him when he and his brother first fell through ice and nearly died.

Yoongi, though.

“Did you know about the Flock?” he asks, jerking his head at Taehyung.

“Seokjin hyung only knew about it after I volunteered for the Institute,” Taehyung says, quickly. He seems strangely determined to acquiesce to Yoongi as much as possible. “But he told me there were people in the government, in the police. Good people willing to help.”

“That’s why you stayed on,” Yoongi murmurs. Everything makes sense now, in strange ways. “You had that list of names, from the Ace, which you needed to investigate. But you also had people who could pass on information. People who doctored your files.”

Seokjin gives him a baleful look. “You know. They helped you, too.”

“How?” Yoongi asks. “Keeping me away from Extraordinary Crimes? Demoting me?”

“You were too much in the thick of things.” Namjoon says. “It wasn’t the right time.”

“Wait—you,” Yoongi’s focus narrows on Namjoon. “You came with me. Was it to keep an eye on me? Make sure I don’t—don’t find anything of importance in the Starling case?”

“Nothing until it was time,” Namjoon mumbles, meekly. “In time, you were probably supposed to take this path. You were always going to find each other again. It just had to be…”

The right time. Yoongi winces.

“You have to remember, hyung,” says Taehyung, in a small voice, “We’re fighting something unkillable. We have to take any advantage and moment of surprise we get.”

Seokjin sighs. “That means playing a long game.”

A game of secrets.

Yoongi turns his attention to Jimin. “And you? Did you ever go to that Flock meeting?”

“No,” Seokjin says, with a small smile. “He was too suspicious. He never showed. Just disappeared from the Seam the next day, with his information. Applied to the police university a little after. I told Taehyung to go find him. To be friends. To learn more about this elusive knowledge that only the two of them could put together, because of how one of them was an insider at the Institute, and the other had spent an age learning about the Verge. But by then more people were in the equation. Taehyung had met Namjoon, and they had discussed the hypothesis for a cure for Extraordinariness, something he’d always hoped for. And then he met you, and you wanted a world without divisions, which aligned so neatly with him—”

“—I didn’t want to just peddle information anymore,” Taehyung speaks up. His face crumpled, just for a moment—a flash of emotion and then nothing, like a ray of light through the gloom of an indifferent sky. “I wanted—wanted what we wanted. Always. What we wanted, hyung.”

A cure for Extraordinariness. A world without divisions.

Look where it’s gotten them.

“Things got complex after that,” Seokjin says, sneaking a glance at Taehyung. “I didn’t—didn’t
know. He kept his secrets just like he told you he would. Kept you secret. Kept your experiments secret. We monitored you separately, of course, because of your family, which is the only reason I knew you were involved with my brother. But that didn’t matter. I didn’t care about much except bringing the Eyrie down. That was my job—not squeezing Tae for details on his personal life.”

“And then the Scarab happened,” Taehyung says. Then he sits up, hastily adding on, “Before you ask, I didn’t tell Jin hyung anything about that. But the Scarab quickly made it clear that I was involved, somehow. Made it clear that I had to run from the Institute. Hyung just wanted to give me leverage.”


“That comes later,” says Taehyung, sighing. “But first, you need to know what really happened at the Liberty.”

*2014*

“Taehyung-ah, did I hurt you?”

It’s stuck in a loop in Taehyung’s head. He goes over that again and again, worrying his lip as he paces, holding his hands close to his chest so he doesn’t cause them to bleed further. Namjoon is sprawled over the dirty old sofa, eyes closed and fingers massaging his temples: Taehyung wonders how he’s doing with that newly acquired telepathy. Yoongi sits collapsed into a chair legs up and eyes fixed somewhere far away. Kwon is in the bathroom, cleaning up. Jimin sleeps.

Taehyung can’t help the suspicion rearing in him. He doesn’t want to speak it, doesn’t want it to drive more wedges between them, but he thinks of what Jimin said—I dreamed of you being lost in the Deep Place; you wouldn’t wake up anymore—and he thinks of how Jimin hadn’t remembered him when he tried to help in the bathtub, and he suspects. Everything feels like a conspiracy. Yoongi, who’d only just told him about how his own memories had been temporarily wiped—even he feels unreal, like something too flimsy to hold onto or depend, like he could be taken away any moment.

And he can, Taehyung thinks fiercely, glancing from Jimin’s curled up form to Yoongi’s far-away gaze. They both can.

As long as the enemy played with their minds, none of them were going to be safe.

“We need to get rid of these bodies,” Namjoon speaks up. He shudders. “I can’t believe I’m getting rid of b-bodies a second time.”

Taehyung nods. “We’ll do it,” he says, meeting Namjoon’s gaze. “You and I. We’re the only ones the Scarab can’t reach in our heads.”

“Same way as before?” Yoongi asks.

Taehyung hums. Same way as before. That warehouse. The promise of empty-eyed Bubble Face coming to take them away, discreetly, forever.

Carting the bodies there doesn’t prove to be as much of a logistical nightmare as Taehyung thought it would. The Liberty is empty, its corridors and reception devoid of people. Whoever is in charge of the front desk must be catching some shut-eye somewhere. They manage it in three trips—he and Namjoon and Yoongi—while Kwon keeps fearful watch of Jimin.
“What do I do if he wakes up and starts boiling the place down again?” Yoongi asks, when they’ve finally got the bodies in the car, and Taehyung slips into the driver’s seat.

“Knock him out,” Taehyung suggests, snappish. Namjoon yelps. “Sorry. I’m sorry—I don’t know. Maybe he won’t wake up just yet. He seemed tired. We’ll be back, soon, anyway.”

Yoongi’s gaze softens as he looks at Taehyung. “Yeah. Be careful.”

The night is warm. Namjoon sits with his body tense, flinching ever so often. Probably still trying to get the dials in his head to tune to the right frequency, then. Taehyung waits until they’re on the streets of the Seam to speak.

“Hyung,” he says. “I need a favor.”

“I figured,” Namjoon mumbles. “Figured that’s why you were insisting I come along, and not Yoongi. I’m not much for upper body strength, you know.”

Taehyung manages a small smile. He keeps his eyes on the road, careful.

“What does he want?” Namjoon asks, fidgeting with the hem of his shirt, restless. “Exactly what is the Scarab hoping to gain here?”

“Something permanent to latch on to. A body that helps him mine the Deep Place. I think.”

“So…you?”

Taehyung shrugs. “Would be poetic justice. I was the one who made him, after all. He tried to go for Yoongi hyung, gave up at the firewall. Then he tried to get to Jimin…but he didn’t stick to either of them. I think. He flitted right out after trying to attack them. He could come back, but neither of them are his ultimate goal. So if he’s still coming at us, it has to be me he’s after, right?”

“Or maybe not because of a vendetta,” Namjoon’s voice is thoughtful. “Maybe there’s something fundamental about you that he wants. Something about the way you use the Deep Place.”

“Jimin can take abilities and give them, just like me. That’s what happened a little while ago, when he was—when he was in that bathtub,” Taehyung shakes his head. “I think it’s personal. Payback, for what I did. He was not a good man.”

Namjoon shudders. “That’s true enough.”

If Taehyung casts his mind out, just a little, he can probably grasp at helpful abilities. Strength would help, he thinks, just about now. Strength and healing. His hands on the steering wheel still hurt, the wounds spotting red through the bandages. But he’s afraid now of diving into the Deep Place. He’s afraid that the Scarab can track him that way, that maybe—maybe the reason why he and Jimin were found at the Liberty was because Taehyung broke the rules out of curiosity to dip in once.

And now Jimin is…weird. Extraordinary, the same way Taehyung is. And Taehyung is—once again—a killer.

He wonders how Namjoon can stand to look at him.

“He rasps, after a while. “I need you to tell me which of them is acting under orders from the Scarab. If it’s Jimin, or Yoongi hyung.”

In the periphery, he sees Namjoon’s head whip toward him. “You…what?”
“It’s been a few hours,” Taehyung shrugs. “If the Scarab didn’t have an eye on us, through one of us, then he’d have come at us again by now. Both their firewalls were affected. That means both of them were at risk, vulnerable to mind control at least once today. So were you—but you have an ability that helps keep him out. Even if I were to accept the explanations—that you replaced the firewall I placed on Yoongi hyung, and that Jimin’s now Extraordinary enough to rebuild his on his own…well. You’re smart, hyung. You know there can be loopholes. You know that anyone can lie.”

Namjoon swallows. “I don’t know how to look for him,” he says. “If there are two consciousnesses in one body—I don’t know how to parse them differently.”

“I can help you with that,” Taehyung says. “But when we get back, you have to give me a signal. Something to let me know. Where the—the problem is.”

“And then?”

Taehyung bites his lip. “And then,” he says, as they pull up to the warehouse. “And then we fix it.”

***

It’s raining when they get back. Pouring.

Taehyung stands for a while out in it, marveling. It’s been a while since he’s just stood, he thinks, rooted to a spot and letting himself be soaked through. It’s been a while since he’s stopped at all—the past few months a sequence of dominoes falling, one and then another and then another. They’ve been scrambling, the three of them; mistakes upon mistakes covering up things they’ve done. He doesn’t want to drag anyone else into it, never has—except that that ball is out of their court too. Namjoon’s involved now—an accomplice to murder. Seokjin’s not aware of the big picture and how it all connects, but he’s with the police, so he’s involved too. Hoseok’s out there somewhere, grappling with an Extraordinary ability he probably doesn’t even remember how he gained. Taehyung hopes Jin is helping him, like he’d said he would, but help doesn’t cut it.

He created this monster.

He’s going to stop it.

It’s been a while, he thinks, while the rain pounds the pavement around him, since he just stood, and thought, and planned.

Namjoon had asked him, on the way back from the warehouse, if he had a plan. Taehyung had shaken his head. Just an inkling, he said, an idea. But I need your brain, hyung, and I need your help.

Namjoon had pursed his lips. Of course, he’d said. Anything.

So now he’s renting a room in the Liberty. The premise is simple enough: they all can’t stay in that single room. The true purpose is somewhat different.

They might have an advantage. If he and Namjoon play their cards right. If they don’t drop this ball.

Taehyung steps inside, letting the water drops evaporate from his skin.

There’s a pay-phone in the hotel’s lobby. Namjoon idles by the reception, nodding quickly at Taehyung when he enters and capturing the reception staff’s attention with his queries. There’s not much of a window, Taehyung thinks, before their interest is diverted his way, so he has to make it
quick. The number is well-known to him, much used, often in secret during his Institute days. He lowers his head close to the receiver, keeping an eye out for stray listeners.

Seokjin answers on the second ring. “Taehyung?”

“Hi hyung,” Taehyung says, quickly, “I need you to do us a favor.”


Nothing’s changed when he gets back to the room. Yoongi seems to have convinced Kwon into going home. Taehyung agrees: the more people surrounding the three of them, the greater number of bodies in close proximity that the Scarab can use. Of course, that might be construed as too cold, too calculative, so he tells her that he’ll put a firewall on her. Sits her down and asks her for the thing she fears the most. Creates a monster to fool her mind into thinking that her memories of all this—the Liberty and the four of them and the entire crazy day—are worse than her worst fear. Places it in her mind, to fall down over her memories the moment the Scarab tried to knock at her consciousness again.

“Now you’re safe,” he says, and she smiles. Grateful. “Someone will contact you. Someone I trust. You said you’re federally employed?”

She nods. “Thank you,” she says, bowing. “I’m sorry—I’m sorry I…”

Yoongi sighs, walking over to stand next to Taehyung. “None of it is your fault. Nothing to apologize for. Please, stay safe. Don’t worry about us.”

After she leaves, they fall into an implacable silence. Yoongi paces the length of the room, holding himself carefully, lost in thought. Taehyung sits curled up in a chair, watching Jimin. Everything hinges on a gamble. If Seokjin did what he asked, and if the Seam responded the way he thought it might, and if the Scarab…

“Taehyung-ah,” Yoongi says. “I have to tell you something.”

Taehyung looks up. Yoongi licks his lips, runs a careful hand through his hair, and then moves to sit at the edge of the bed. His fingernails are bleeding where he must have picked at them incessantly, worrying his skin over and over while he waited for them to come back. Something inside Taehyung clenches painfully. “Hyung?”

Yoongi looks at him blankly. “You know how when the Scarab leaves his…ah, his host…he leaves behind an ability?”

Of course. This is a curve-ball Taehyung’s expected. He’d meant to question Yoongi about it with Namjoon in the room, try to gauge if it’s anything that’s also useful the way telepathy is, assured that Yoongi would deny it completely and/or have a massive freak-out about being Extraordinary. He’s never wanted that sort of power. Always loathed it.

Yet—now he’s calm. Now he’s holding himself so calm, hands folded neatly on his lap and eyes trained on somewhere that isn’t Taehyung’s face, movements very small and careful, and this is how Taehyung knows it’s dangerous.

Whatever he has, it’s dangerous.

There’s no other reason for Yoongi to treat his own body like a goddamn nuclear warhead.

“What is it?”
“You told Seokjin hyung to leak information about the Institute to the press,” Yoongi says, very softly. “He’s going to do that now. It’s going to go out, and everyone in the Seam is going to know about the Eyrie. That means the mafia families will get to know that the government is trying to create powerful Extraordinary weapons. You’re guessing that their distrust of each other and the police will result in them trying to destroy the Institute. You’re right. In most variants of the future, the Institute is going to blow up, destroying the whole program. You want to do it yourself, while throwing the suspicion on the mafia. While the people in charge try to suppress the information leak, and gather their wits at the loss of their project, they’ll remove their focus from finding you. That’ll give us a narrow window of escape—out of the Seam, out of Seoul, maybe even out of the country. There are some futures where we almost manage that. But the Scarab has eyes everywhere. We can’t—Taehyung-ah, we can’t win. We can’t win, because he has eyes everywhere. Do you—do you understand what I’m saying?”

Taehyung swallows. “Clairvoyance,” he says, “Do you see the future, hyung, or do you see many different futures?”

“Different ones,” Yoongi says. “Multiple time-lines.”

“Oh.”

Taehyung stares at the window. Yoongi can see a bouquet of futures, but what about presents? Are there presents, he wonders, where they aren’t at the Liberty? Where he hasn’t left the Institute? Better yet, time-lines where they didn’t meet at all? Present-days where they didn’t have to hide? Where no one got hurt?

If only they could pick and choose futures, isolate each thread of time like an individual strand of silk.

Taehyung had known someone like that, once. In the Seam. Known someone who could skip between parallel time-lines. There wasn’t likely to be variants too extraordinarily different, he guessed, if the person still opted to live in this one. Still, he’d count this ability dangerous. Seers weren’t common; they were prized.

“How much do you see, how clearly—”

“Is there any future where we kill the Scarab?”

Both their heads whip toward Jimin. He’s sitting up on the bed now, looking tired but alert, rubbing gently at his eyes. He doesn’t look any different. On instinct, Taehyung climbs onto the bed, scampers over until their shoulders are pressed together. Jimin gives him a slow, faltering smile. His fingers search for Taehyung’s hands, peers at the bandages while Yoongi sits, thumbs pressed to his temples, thinking.

After a minute, Jimin presses, impatient. “Well?”

“It’s not like KBS,” Yoongi rolls his eyes. “It’s not a clear, linear signal. There aren’t that many variants—the more choices you make down a path that ends at a fixed point, the lesser choices there are. There are some events that have clear, direct consequences—like what Taehyung just asked Seokjin to do. There are others that are…complicated.”

“But there’s no non-complex answer,” Jimin mutters. “To killing the Scarab.”

Yoongi’s gaze flicks to Taehyung. “No.”

“You’re lying,” Jimin says, squinting. “Taehyung-ah, don’t you think he’s lying?”
Taehyung’s saved from having to answer this by Namjoon. He walks in and stands in the middle of the room, staring from one of them to the other, throat working in quick swallows. “Guys. So the reception staff? Definitely compromised.”

Yoongi flops into the nearest chair. “Great.”

Taehyung keeps his gaze steady on Namjoon. Jimin asks, “Who are they coming for?”

Yoongi looks towards Taehyung. “You. He wants you. You know that, right?”

“Yeah.”

“He wants you dead,” Yoongi says. “They’ll come right at you, and they’ll try to kill you, because he wants you gone. That’s why he tried to get Jimin, and me. To get to you. Do you know why?”

Taehyung shakes his head. “No,” he mutters. “I thought he wanted me because I can reach the Deep Place. Because I can do things he might find to his advantage. I don’t know why he wants me dead.”

“I can guess,” Jimin says, gravely. “If you’re an unkillable, virulent meme that can replicate yourself across multiple bodies, that’s power. That’s power beyond imagination. And when you have that kind of power at your fingertips, and you’re hell-bent on destroying something, that only means one thing,” Jimin squeezes Taehyung’s arm, gently. “He’s scared of you, Taehyung.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you can stop him. Maybe he thinks only you can stop him.”

“But you can’t,” Yoongi says, staidly. “I can’t see any possibility where that actually happens. He’s always winning.”

“See?” Namjoon queries, blinking at him. “What do you mean, see—”

Jimin’s voice is querulous when he speaks. “But you said yourself that things aren’t clear, hyung,” he tells Yoongi. “You said it yourself. Maybe you can’t see it yet, because we’re too far from it still, but maybe there is a way. I mean, the Scarab for sure thinks there’s a way—”

“There’s no way,” Yoongi says, adamantly. “We run from here, now, let Kim Seokjin and the mafia raze the Institute to the ground, get out of the country—he’ll catch up to us. We stay here, he’ll still catch up to us. He doesn’t have a body, doesn’t hurt, doesn’t die. He has thousands—no, millions—of bodies at his disposal. He’s a fucking parasite. I never wanted an ability, didn’t want to be Extraordinary, but now I have one anyway and it’s telling me, Jimin-ah, there’s no way.”

“So what, we just sit here?” Jimin asks, voice quaking. “We came so far, we did all of this, and now we just sit here?”

“Technically, you can,” Taehyung says, quietly. “If he’s after me, I’ll go.”

“And then what? Get yourself killed?” Yoongi snaps. “No thanks. You stay here.”

“If Jimin’s right and he’s scared of you, and he thinks you can stop him somehow, that means you’re our best chance,” Namjoon says, moving to sit. “That means we have to keep you alive while we figure out what it is that he knows. Remember, this is bigger than us now. Bigger than the Seam.”

“But you said there’s no way,” Taehyung says to Yoongi. “You keep saying there’s no way.”

Now Yoongi he isn’t looking at Taehyung at all. Now he won’t meet his eyes, choosing instead to
stare at the wall, face shuttered, something turbulent and awful held at bay—but only barely.

“There isn’t,” he says, a great shudder rippling through his spine, snatching his voice so that he sounds breathless, terrible when he says, “Because you die, Taehyung-ah. In every possible future. You die.”

Taehyung swallows. He doesn’t understand this gamble of fortunes, doesn’t understand the inter-crossing lines of fate and action and destiny. He doesn’t even really understand who to trust right now. His own mind is his, and Namjoon’s is his own, but he can’t reach past Yoongi’s new firewall or Jimin’s Extraordinarily protected one to reach them. He doesn’t want them to think that he doesn’t fully believe that they are them at the moment; doesn’t want to strew any more mistrust and fear than they already have, but he doesn’t understand what to do. He has no plan. If the gamble with Jin works, then at least he’ll get the Institute off their backs. And then what?

Taehyung doesn’t understand the permutations of the future, but he understands games. He understands deceptions. And if there was no chance of them winning in the clear, discernible futures—well. They’ll just have to play it long and tangled. Offer up so many avenues of possibilities that no clear end-result emerges. Keep playing for as long as they can, as long as possible so they can figure out what it is about Taehyung that frightens the Scarab. And then replicate it—in Jimin, in Yoongi, in one of the others. Make himself dispensable. Keep the fear alive, if not the source of it.

This game has no end. Just many beginnings.

“So,” Jimin says, his hand on Taehyung’s squeezing tighter, as if that’ll keep Taehyung alive on this plane longer. “What do we do?”

Taehyung pulls his breath in, in a sharp inhale. He reaches for the notepad on the bedside table, writes across the top: Future 1. Then he pushes it at Yoongi, watches as he picks it up and his face scrunches in confusion.

“We do what every team of fugitives does when they’re pushed to the corner,” he says. “We get creative.”

***

They leave the Liberty for a safe-house. Yoongi’s family’s, he says, but it’s been abandoned for so long that he doesn’t think anyone even remembers it. It’s a ramshackle old thing, very unassuming, and it’s Jimin who comes up with a way to fortify it.

“Call Kwon,” he says, staring at the walls. “Ask her if she can bring Talon. Namjoon hyung, you’ll have to meet her in the Seam. We don’t want anyone to see this place.”

In the basement, they go over new firewalls. More difficult memory blocks. In their last few hours at the Liberty, Jimin had suggested that perhaps the Scarab would have use for the two of them. They were the ones who knew the parameters of the experiment, after all. Kwon had known the theory and Jimin had helped her perform it on himself, but the Scarab didn’t know about the composition of the Talon solution.

The devil was in the details.

And, surmised Jimin, without the experiment, without other folk who can tap into the Deep Place, the Scarab wasn’t going to find it too easy to get to Taehyung.

“You can just grab their powers,” Jimin had said. “Use them against them.”
“Or he can shoot me. With a gun.”

“You’ll just bring yourself back. He doesn’t want that. He’ll mean to attack you body and mind. He needs us for that.”

Yoongi had corroborated this, of course. So here they are, in this basement, Yoongi sneezing at the mold, trying to fix parameters for new memory blocks.

“The first time was terrifying enough,” Yoongi says. “Now you’re saying it has to be more robust?”

Jimin, lying on the couch with a thin blanket pulled up to his chin, pouts as he thinks. “We only remembered the terror of forgetting because it was undone. That was an oversight. If this happens again, and the block comes down again, then it shouldn’t be undone that easy.”

“So pick a worse scenario,” Taehyung tells him. “Pick something worse than what you picked before.”

“I picked you being lost in the Deep Place last time,” Jimin’s voice is quiet as he peeks at Taehyung. “Now I have a worse fear.”

Taehyung raises an eyebrow. Yoongi sighs and leans his head back against a chair leg. “You fear hurting him.”

“It’s not a baseless fear. I can pop into the Deep Place now. I don’t know how to—how to take or give powers. Not yet, not the way Taehyung does, but I can get in there. And that’s exactly what he wants. Someone like me.”

Yoongi presses his lips together. He says, “I’m not saying it’s a baseless fear.”

Jimin stiffens. He looks again towards Taehyung, something fierce in his gaze, and shakes his head. “I’ll never do it. I won’t do anything bad to you. To either of you. Ever.”

Taehyung tells himself to believe. Tells himself to keep in mind that even if the Scarab can flit in and out of Jimin’s mind, or Yoongi’s, that at this moment, it still is them, talking to him. Worrying about him. He nods his head quickly, looks down at the scribbled notepad in front of him, blinks a couple of times to clear his gaze.


“You weren’t happy about the Extraordinary Measures before,” Yoongi says, his voice quiet. “And there’s a very good chance that we’ll have to use them again.”

Taehyung nods and tries to smile. It comes out flat. “I’d rather you don’t remember than become his pawns.”

“But if we forget, and if at all we then have to find each other later on—however that could be…you know the plan.”

Meet at the Liberty. Leave a reachable number. Know that there’s a good chance that things have only gotten worse.

Jimin makes a choked little noise in his throat, and stares at the water-scoured ceiling. Taehyung goes back to peering at their notes, his thoughts in loops. There had to be a way to trip the Scarab up. If they couldn’t physically get at him, then they would need to get him in the Deep Place. But of course, by now, he’d been flitting out of it more than any of them ever had, which meant that they
had to *deceive* him, somehow. Make him think he has the upper hand. Let him win, and then take the win away.

Taehyung spreads pages of futures on the floor. There had to be a blind-spot, a loophole that Yoongi couldn’t see. A path that wasn’t easily spotted.

“You said we can’t kill him because he has no body,” Jimin muses. “What if we give him one?”

“What, trap him in one?” Yoongi rubs his temples. “I don’t know, my head is so tangled up, nothing is clear. Where would we find a body?”

Taehyung says, in a dismissive mumble, “Same place we get rid of them.”

To his surprise, a wild laugh breaks out of Jimin, short but confusingly full of mirth. Both Taehyung and Yoongi stare at him in astonishment, and Jimin folds into himself, laughing harder. “I’m sorry,” he says, pressing his lips together, rubbing at his face to get the hysterical grin off it. There are tears in the corners of his eyes, tracking down his face when he blinks. “I’m sorry, I don’t find it funny, it’s just that—what the fuck are we doing? Tossing bodies and stealing them back? Writing down half a dozen possible futures so we can work our way around *all* of them? Trying to raze a Government program to the ground while fighting an unkillable virus?”

He breathes in: a long, staggered gasp. The laughter stops, but his tears don’t.

Taehyung wishes he knew what to feel. In the silence that follows, all he has are half-formed ideas and feverish plots, shifting pointless against a tide of futility. “You don’t deserve this,” he says. “Both of you. You don’t deserve it.”

Jimin’s gaze snaps to him, fierce. “And what? You do?”

Yoongi has a strange, furious expression on his face as he swivels his head from one of them to the other. His face has been impenetrable for the last several hours, blank in the way Taehyung knows he gets when he has several things to say that he thinks no one wants to hear, least of all himself. Information is a double-edged sword, and right now he’s holding a lot of it—flimsy and ephemeral as it may be. But he’s still the same man he was when he broke down the door of the Liberty earlier in the day, still the same person Taehyung always goes to for comfort. Taehyung *knows* him. Knows the fury isn’t at them—that it’s inward, at himself, at whatever goddamn feeling is trying to claw up his throat.

And now Yoongi blinks rapidly, something like a choked wheeze sticking in his chest, a levee of some sort breaking somewhere within. He bends forward, and Taehyung moves toward him, without thinking. Yoongi’s chest works rapidly, his fists rising to clench into Taehyung’s shirt, shoulders crumpling as he tries to breathe. Taehyung simply folds himself around him, makes himself big the way Yoongi always does for him, holds him while his body shudders like he’s going to rattle apart.

For a while they just sit there, curled into each other. Behind Yoongi, Taehyung can feel Jimin move, his hands rubbing comfortingly at Yoongi’s back, whispering small words that Taehyung can’t parse out in the sudden rush of white noise in his head. His own throat is choked with fear for what’s to come, and Yoongi’s grip on him is so tight that it hurts. That was alright, though—Yoongi is *his* to hold, and so is Jimin, and the futures scattered in notepad sheets all over the room and the hint of a plan forming in his head…it’s all for them.

To keep *them* alive. To keep them *safe*.

A big part of Taehyung just wants to stay here and never leave. He wants to curl up against Yoongi,
or Jimin, and go to sleep. He wants to push the world away, ignoring the gnawing fear in his bones, stop the looping voice in his head that tells him that he’s going to die. He doesn’t want to die. It doesn’t sit well with him, really, and he’s speaking from experience.

He just wants this nightmare to end. To breathe. To put his head in order, and destroy this mess that they created. To then stay. Preferably alive, and preferably together.

It all seems impossible. Impossible because of the sheer task of fighting something as indescribable as the Scarab, and because of what this fight would make of them. There’s already blood on his hands. There’ll be plenty more before this is done. Yoongi is operating on pure adrenaline, all of them wading through a heavy dose of fear; but when that was gone—if that was gone—he’d hate what all this has done to him. He’d hate this power that he has, this ability that’s already tormenting him. He’ll tell Taehyung now that it didn’t matter, that none of it is Taehyung’s fault, but the truth is that it is.

The Scarab is his monster to destroy, no one else’s.

Yoongi feels thin in Taehyung’s arms, quiet and depleted, and Taehyung doesn’t know what to do. How to build him back up. How to build anything back up. All he knows is that he has to. Even if all he has are ideas shifting pointlessly against a heavy tide of futility.

But what option did they have? To give up?

He doesn’t want that. He wants to tell Yoongi that it’ll be better soon, that things will work out, that they’ll find a way…

“Tae,” Jimin murmurs, hands gentle as they slide over Taehyung’s back. “Taehyung-ah. Taehyungie, can you hear me?”

“Hmm. Yes.”

“Namjoon hyung is back.”

“Okay,” Taehyung whispers. All he wants to do is stay here. Stay here, and stay low, and forget. Instead, he looks towards the top of the stairs out of the basement, at the door swinging shut behind Namjoon, and sighs. Disentangles his treacherous fingers from Yoongi’s grip and moves to get up. “I’ll go help him. You stay here, with hyung.”

Jimin ruffles the top of his hair, a gentle motion. “Are you sure you don’t want me to go, instead?”

“No. Be faster if it’s me,” Taehyung says, evasively, and stands. “I’ll be back in a few.”

Yoongi doesn’t offer more than a grunt, leaning his head on his knees, letting Jimin squeeze his arms around him and press his lips to the crook of Yoongi’s neck. Taehyung leaves them there, stops at the top of the stairs once to glance back. He squeezes his eyes shut, just for a moment, just like capturing a quick snapshot.

And then he opens the door, and walks out—towards the truth.

***

The news people crowd the Institute like dye into strands of cotton.

Slowly they come, their large vans filling the University compound. They’re all turned away, of course—by men in black that show them whatever piece of paper that have their faces going pale.
They all leave, eventually, and nothing shows up on the news, but the fact remains: there’s been a leak.

The Seam thrums with information. It comes to Taehyung via Namjoon, through Jin. He opens up channels of communication with some old contacts at the Seam, and knows that the underworld is humming too, any one family’s advantage gone, everyone equal, most of them reeling from the news. Weaponized Extraordinaries in the very system that controls and monitors their every movement? It was uncanny. Indelible. It had to be wiped out, with extreme prejudice.

“Of course, this is perfect opportunity,” Jimin says, squinting at Namjoon’s laptop screen as he shows them surveillance footage from a police van. Jin’s police van. He and a couple of others have been canvassing the Institute for days now, discreetly, watching entries and exits. “If we get him there, get him to take the bait…”

“We blow him up,” Namjoon says, exchanging a look with Taehyung. “Far from the Seam, stuck in a Talon-infused body. Does that really work, Taehyung-ah? It would suppress his ability?”

“I’d guess so,” Taehyung scratches his head. “Though it’s all guesswork, now. We thought Talon would cure Extraordinariness. We ended up creating it, instead.”

“But it worked for Seokjin.”

“So it did.” Taehyung shrugs. “It could be worth it. The plan, I mean.”

Namjoon gives him a dubious look. A why are you doing this look. Taehyung ignores it to continue staring at the screen. The grainy feed shows high security. There are less pings of his own name and description to the Seam today, lesser operatives deployed in the search for him. More operatives concentrated in the Institute, to keep the existence of it secret.

“Is he going to take the bait, though?” Namjoon asks. “I mean, it’s the Scarab.”

“I don’t think he cares about the Institute, anymore. He cares about finding Taehyung,” says Jimin. “That means he needs extra eyes looking for him. If he’s been relying on the Institute for some help on that, he’ll need to improvise now.”

“Improvise how?”

“Taking them all over, for one,” Jimin says. “All of the Eyrie. All of the Institute workers. As long as they’re focused on plugging this leak, they’re not focused on the Seam or on us. He’ll try to possess them, if only because they have the most access to information. Make them do the work for him. I think he needs eye-contact for it to work, though—that’s a little detail we got from Yoongi hyung. When the Scarab tried to get in his head, he made him look at you, Namjoon hyung.”

“Yeah, he did,” Namjoon’s voice is quiet. “But are you sure you’re going to be able to wrestle his consciousness into that body?”

“The operating principle here is that there are multiple copies of him in the physical plane, and only one of him in the Deep Place,” Jimin tilts his head, nods towards Taehyung. “We should be able to take him. Together.”

Jimin’s been trying to wrestle with his own ability, trying to figure out how the Deep Place worked for him, finding that it was much the same as it worked for Taehyung. This was both good and bad: good because this was extra leverage, obviously, against the Scarab; bad because they still don’t know why the Scarab wanted to destroy Taehyung. As far as Taehyung could tell, there was no real difference between them in what they could do.
Taehyung watches him now. Jimin’s looking away, thoughtful, the same clever eyes and expressive face that Taehyung had fallen in love with. He looks no different, not even with all the newfound power hiding under his skin. He looks like Jimin.

Taehyung’s Jimin.

He wishes that were the truth—an undeniable, inviolable truth—and not just an illusion.

“So that’s the plan?” Namjoon shuts his laptop. “We go to the Institute, Taehyung acts as bait, when he shows you two grab his spooky spectral form, and we stick him in something dead so he can’t do anymore of his tricks?”

“Sounds about right.”

“Sounds fucking suicidal. How did Yoongi hyung agree to this?”

“He really didn’t,” Jimin says, with a rueful smile. “But none of the futures were promising, and it’s not like we could just...do nothing. The Scarab is beyond law and human comprehension. This is the only way we have to deal with him.”

“And get ourselves all killed in the process,” Namjoon says. “Really, Taehyung-ah, you don’t think this is a gamble?”

Taehyung shrugs. “We only have gambles left. Are you with us, hyung?”

Namjoon splutters. “Of course I’m with—why would you even ask that?”

Taehyung doesn’t answer, just wanders off to look at the plan again. It’s plastered on the wall, steps written down and positions underlined. It is a gamble. But Namjoon hadn’t sat with the three of them, growing more and more disheartened as they listed down possible fates. Namjoon hadn’t heard Yoongi say, again and again, how futile all of this was. How they weren’t going to win, anyway. This is where they’re pressed between a rock and a hard place, and the only place out is up. And up is a gamble.

“Yoongi hyung should have more details about what’s going on in the Seam when he gets back,” Jimin says, flopping back against the sofa. “Which should be any minute. Remember, though, our purpose is twofold. We get rid of the Institute, and try to get rid of the Scarab at the same time.”

“And stay alive,” Namjoon’s voice is tight. “I don’t like this baiting business. He has many bodies to work with. Who knows how many he’ll come at you with?”

Taehyung shrugs. “Thing is, though, I don’t think he will. He wants to be quiet about his presence. Whatever the endgame is, whatever twisted thing he wants at the end of this—he doesn’t want anyone to know about it. And if he wants to keep that secrecy, he won’t show up at the Institute with a whole army. Not with so many eyes on it.”

The door to the safe-house opens, then, and Yoongi slips through. It’s cold outside. He’s shivering in his thin jacket, hair damp and seemingly skittish. He catches Taehyung’s gaze and gives a quick nod, then rushes to the little radiator to warm up.

“It’s very buzzy out there,” he mumbles, as Jimin and Namjoon crowd him for info. “A lot of talk about the Institute, lots of agitation. I ran into Hoseok—he’s working with Seokjin now.”

Jimin’s brow furrows, but he only says, “That’s good.”
“Kwon says hi, and that she can mirror people’s faces now. So that’s a new thing that’s happening.”

“Terrifying gift for a therapist. Any news on your family?”

Yoongi throws Taehyung a dark look, wincing as he pulls his jacket off. “Oh, they very much want to go at the Institute. Wipe it out before someone else grabs those Eyrie agents for their own advantage. I dropped an anonymous tip to the police that they’re looking to blow up the place. Used a code name,” he turns to Jimin. “Ravens.”

“Fitting,” Jimin responds, a small smile playing at his mouth. He makes space for Taehyung on the couch, tossing his leg over him as he does, pulling him against his chest and curling around him in a way that makes him seem bigger. “Overseeing, monitoring birds. Quiet watchers.”

“Well. We’re only quiet watchers for a day more,” Taehyung says, twisting around to press his mouth, quick as lightning, to Jimin’s collarbones. “And then it’s show-time.”

***

In the early hours of the day the next morning, Yoongi wakes him up with a small shake to the shoulder. Taehyung, stuck in a fitful doze, only grumbles and curls up tighter, but Yoongi presses horribly cold fingers right to the soft skin of his tummy, making him jump. “Wake up,” he whispers. “Taehyung-ah, wake up. We have to steal a body.”

There is some dark humor in this, Taehyung decides, while they drive through the gloom of the Seam towards the Warehouse. Gaining and losing bodies. Dropping them off and picking others up. Grim work, under grim circumstances, brought about by the grim hand that the world had dealt them.

Yoongi doesn’t talk much, just observes quietly that this plan is so convoluted, so muddled and dependent on so many factors, that he can’t make out where it begins or how it ends. Everything is a dazzle of colliding futures.

*This plan can go a hundred different ways, he says. Most of them terrible.*

“But some of them not?”

Yoongi sighs. “I don’t know. You’ve changed the game, a bit.”

“You and I,” Taehyung corrects. “Were they helpful?”

“Very freaked out,” Yoongi rolls his eyes. “Especially Hoseok. But the job is done.”

“That’s good,” Taehyung says. “I’m sorry. I know you hate having an ability. I know you never wanted it.”

“You didn’t want all this either. It’s just what we’ve got, to work with.”

The stars are still in the sky. If he leans his head against the window, they swirl in a strange fashion, as if the sky is breathing. It’s quiet for a while, as if they’re both drowning in words they’re not even saying. Taehyung shifts in his seat and his bones already feel unlike his, skin draped too tight over them, his body something he’s occupying temporarily. The reflection of his face on the windshield leaves him cold, feels unfamiliar, like a far-away thing; icy and detached.

“If this plan goes south,” he says, inflection-less, “I’m going to take away your memories. I’m going to set the block in place. I’m telling you now because I know you hate it. People…meddling with your head.”
Yoongi shudders. His face is pale, the neon wash doing nothing to make him look less stark. “And what will you do?”

“Hide, I guess. Think of something else.”

“In the Seam?”

“I’ve done it before.”

The Seam doesn’t grow on you, Taehyung thinks. It grows into you. Sinks its roots into your skin and bones, makes a home for itself in your blood. He can get by in there. He has the marrow for it.

In the shimmery aquarium light of the night, Yoongi’s pained smile is a rictus thing. “There aren’t a lot many options for the future, Taehyung-ah. I told you already, didn’t I? Most of them end with you. With him getting to you.”

“Then that’s how it’ll be,” Taehyung looks at his fingers, and then at Yoongi’s face, his wet eyes. “Won’t be the first time, will it?”

“Is that why you’re insistent on the memory block?” Yoongi asks, sounding suffocated. “So that we won’t have to know? You end up in a Missing file or worse at the bottom of a pile, not even a true memory left behind, and we just…go on? Without knowing?”

“Others will know,” Taehyung says, fruitlessly. “Seokjin will know. Namjoon will—”

“None of them are me, Taehyung-ah,” Yoongi snaps, raw and terrible. “None of them have the history we do, or know what we know.”

Taehyung closes his eyes. He can feel his synapses snap: life, love, memory, loss. Nothingness. Black water.

He says, breathless, “And that’s exactly why you have to forget. We’ve been over this. It’s worse if he uses you, hyung. It’s the worst thing. What you know can help him, make him worse, make him do worse. I don’t want you to live with that.”

The light of the Seam smears across Yoongi’s face like so much glitter. His hands on the wheel are clenched so tight, his fingers are white. He says, accusatory: “You won’t even tell Jimin.”

“You know why I won’t.”

Yoongi’s breath hitches. He’s still driving. It’s still darkness and starlight and neon outside. The physical world hasn’t changed to the tune of the twist of pain in Taehyung’s chest, hasn’t faded away to nothing.

They still need a body. This is still happening.

Everything is still ending.

Yoongi asks, “Is Namjoon sure?”

Taehyung needs to sift through information from Namjoon a little better. If Namjoon is going to be a quiet watcher in the future, a monitoring, overseeing raven to their purpose, then he needs to record all of this somewhere. For a breadcrumb trail. Make sure that the information exists, even if he doesn’t—secret, but not out of reach.

After all, his own plan is to keep the fear alive.
If not the source, if not himself—the fear.

“Yes. He’s sure.”

“Why don’t we just—why not just protect him? More firewalls, more memory blocks. Something!”

“Namjoon says it’s too late. The Scarab knows how to find him. Think of it as a trace, a tracker—except the object of the tracking is your mind. He’ll find a way in. Jimin’s vulnerable, right now.” Taehyung tries not to sound clipped, tries not to let his own terror show in his words, but there’s no point. His voice quivers. “I hate this as much as you, hyung. I hate it. I hate that I can’t trust the people I love, and that I can’t do anything to help. But there isn’t a way. You know it better than me. You can see it.”

Yoongi barks a short laugh, the light fierce and hopeless in his eyes. He says nothing. For a while, they only drive in silence.

“This plan is Jimin’s,” Yoongi says, as they pull up to the warehouses. “It could be a trap.”

“Could be.”

Yoongi doesn’t ask why they’re still doing it. Maybe, like Taehyung, he’s come to the same damning conclusion. The same grounding inevitability.

It might be a trap, but it’s the only plan they have.

Outside of the car, they work in silence. Taehyung shivers as they head to the back of Warehouse G. What a horrific, barren place—a transitory graveyard for the abruptly dead, the mafia kills, the whistle-blowers and secret-keepers. He can’t bear the ignominy of the thought; of someone’s body simply being tossed out here, left to be carted away by some man without a face. With nary a grave-marker to ever remember them, nor mourners at their side in a funeral.

Yet they’ve been here so many times now. Caught in this loop.

“We have to remove its eyes,” he says, and Yoongi stiffens. “So he can’t jump into someone else. I’m sorry. I’ll do it.”

“Fuck,” Yoongi whispers. “Jimin’s right. What have we become?”

Taehyung presses his lips together and picks a body. We’re just surviving, he wants to say. Just surviving. But there’s power already crackling at his fingertips, and the words don’t come when he has his fingers pressed against the corpse’s eyes. Yoongi balks and turns away at the smell of charring flesh, but doesn’t walk away. His hand rests on Taehyung’s shoulder, the companionship grounding him.

When they’re back at the car, body bag frozen and securely stashed, Yoongi takes his hand for a minute, crowding him against the vehicle’s side. His palms come up to cup Taehyung’s face, fingers almost bruising against his skin. Taehyung shudders, something wholly too enormous pushing against his ribcage, threatening to break him. He can’t break. He can’t break, or the whole plan will break. But there’s that rush of static in his head, and the tightness in his throat, and it’s all he can do to keep breathing calmly as Yoongi’s lips graze his temple.

“I don’t want to forget you.”

Taehyung presses his forehead to the window, turned sideways away from Yoongi because he can’t look at him now. He can’t look at either of them anymore, not until this is over. “There’s something
about me that’s not settling right with the Scarab. I’ll find out what it is. I’ll find out what it is, and I’ll leave you a breadcrumb trail. Both of you. Something to follow. Something to lead you two back to me. And we’ll stop him. Some day. Maybe years in the future. We’ll still stop him.”

“T’ll find you,” Yoongi says, in a whisper against Taehyung’s cheek. “Even if I don’t remember, I’ll find you. I know I will.”

Taehyung trembles. Swallows, and lets Yoongi kiss him, just once. Just a quick thing, the tiniest comfort.

Anymore is dangerous indulgence, anymore will shear him in half, so he pulls away, squeezes Yoongi’s hand, and settles into the shotgun seat.

There’s not much time left.

Yoongi’s phone trills. It’s Jimin or Namjoon, probably, wanting to ask how long they’ll take. Taehyung watches him pick up, make up a lie. Police here, he says, we’ll take a while longer.

When he’s done, his eyes snap to Taehyung, a slow lick of fire darkening them.

“So,” he says. “You said you want to talk to my family. What’s the real plan?”

***

Taehyung hadn’t wanted to come back here.

In the cover of the night, the Institute is familiar. The low buildings, the lawn. The wired fence, beneath which in an unbroken line lies the only strip of blind-spots in the surveillance. Taehyung has sneaked past it so many times that it’s second nature to him, treading this path.

Tonight, he doesn’t sneak. Tonight, he walks right in.

The cameras all train on him. He feels his skin prickle from their scrutiny, sees a guard jump forward with an automatic gun, a shout of hey leaving his mouth before he falls under a volley of bullets. Taehyung flinches, but doesn’t break his stride. To his periphery is a second guard, eerily silent, holding the still-smoking gun. His eyes don’t track Taehyung. They simply stare out into the lawn, empty, as if his own consciousness has vacated his body, left behind a shell for something else to fill.

Which it probably has.

The others are a constant hum in his mind. Jimin and Namjoon he can reach directly, both their presence like far-away kernels of light. Careful, Namjoon whispers in his head, we’re taking the long route in now.

Jimin’s presence flickers, uncertain, for a second. Then he says, bait him, Taehyungie, but don’t do anything stupid.

Taehyung’s stomach somersaults. He’d hugged Jimin extra tight today before they’d split up. Pulled him in close and held on until he thought he’d shatter if he did any longer. Jimin had kissed his lips, brushed down his hair. We’ll be okay, he’d said. We’ll be fine, Taehyung-ah.

Now his worry spreads clear through the link. We’re right here, he whispers. You’re not alone, we’re right here.

Taehyung shivers. He can’t find Yoongi through this link. In a way that’s a good thing, even though
Taehyung is anxious about the dark between them. In a way, that means Yoongi’s secret is guarded, both from the enemy and from the friends who are vulnerable to them. It’s a necessary evil.

Because tonight, Taehyung will need an ace up his sleeve.

He’s almost in, now. The plan’s been laid out thus: Taehyung will distract the Scarab for as long as he can, take down as many of his puppet lackeys as he can, while the others sneak into the building. There are already explosives in this building—courtesy of some of Seokjin’s friends—and a timed call is set to go out to the Extraordinary Crimes unit that this place is about to blow. Based on Yoongi’s inputs, their response time will range between ten to twelve minutes. A whole squadron of cops is beyond the Scarab’s bandwidth, the attention way beyond what he seeks, so he’s going to be careful with hijacking their skins. That—the time during which the Scarab is occupied with choosing his fighters—is the only window of time they have to take him by surprise. To grab his Deep Place consciousness and stick it in a body that no one will miss. An inescapable flesh-prison, of sorts.

Of course, Taehyung is unsure how much of the plan actually came from Jimin. This could be a trap, like Yoongi had said. They could all die here. Back when Namjoon had told him that he didn’t think the firewalls were holding well for Jimin, that Jimin’s perhaps not always alone in his head, they’d both agreed that they needed more.

More powerful allies. More power.

Yoongi’s family kept a roster of Extraordinaries on payroll. Some of them telepaths. They’re on standby, lying low in the campus grounds, Yoongi’s family paid off with information about the Eyrie and a few choice Seam secrets that Namjoon could unearth. They’re only part of the distraction, though, just like Taehyung is. The real show is in the back.

He walks in through the doors. One of the doctors that work here is waiting in the main hall, confusion flickering in his face. “Taehyung—?” he starts, before a hidden force picks him up as easily as a toy, flinging him against the wall.

Taehyung stands his ground.

Around him, alarm bells are going off. The Institute’s lights flick off, emergency red strips blinking on. A siren wails, loud. He closes his eyes, hears footsteps coming at him, and grabs for whatever Extraordinary ability had tossed the doctor away. Power ripples through him—a surge in a live-wire. He lets it go, a rush of it escaping him with a snap of his fingers. The footsteps stop.

He asks, over the howl of the siren and the flickering of the overhead emergency lights: “What do you want?”

Silence.

Taehyung walks forward, past the gleaming counters that are set up only to give out misinformation, past the primary lab setups that are here only to misdirect unknowing folks regarding the Institute’s true purpose.

“We’re back where we started,” Taehyung calls, snapping the doors in the corridor shut as faces move behind them, empty-eyed, fists raising to pound against the metal. “Back where it began. So what do you want?”

Ice begins to climb the walls. Taehyung stays still, watching, cataloging the cracking and the hissing as the temperature drops. His breath frosts in front of his eyes. Wires snap in the panels above, sparks raining through the freeze.
In the long corridor, something slams against one of the doors.

*That’s right*, Taehyung thinks, *come at me.*

One of the Eyrie Extraordinaries rips through the door, metal claws curving up from their hands. Taehyung turns and runs, down the corridor, out through the labs, past the Institute’s classrooms. He stumbles in the near-dark, slams against a table, and pushes it out at the Extraordinary. There’s a faint slam and a grunt, but he can still hear the Extraordinary behind him, their footsteps and panting, loud even through the wailing siren. The maze of corridors are dizzying through the flickering lights and the loud noise. The walls are too close, claustrophobic. The sirens distort the footsteps of his pursuer, enough so that he’s almost caught off guard when they catch up to him. It’s a split-second’s advantage: he dives into the Institute’s server-room, ducking behind a table as the Extraordinary’s clawed hand swipes at his head. It hits the server’s power supply instead, slicing neat through the metal, and he barely has time to crawl through another door before an explosion rocks the room.

It’s loud. His ears ring, eyes momentarily blinded by the light. He’s in another corridor though—this one winged on either sides by offices—and he coughs as he staggers to his feet. Rubble from the collapsed wall of the server room rains around him. The blinking lights and frayed wires of the equipment sputter and spark in his vision. Through the debris he sees the Extraordinary’s shoes, stalking towards him. There’s fire on the Extraordinary’s sleeve, clawing up his skin, but he makes no move to put it out.

Just like a puppet.

Taehyung turns around and comes face to face with a wall of ice, blocking his exit. He freezes. The Extraordinary stops, meters from him, glint of sharp steel fearsome in the red-lit twilight of the corridor. Taehyung backs up, skidding on ice. All that stands between him and certain death is this: a trip, a stumble, a fall. He doesn’t fall though. Instead, he casts his memory to back when, in the University, in their makeshift lab, he’d once reached all the way to the Seam and cut off a radio host’s ability.

It’s what he tries now. Defense, rather than offense. None of these people deserve to die, after all.

He reaches out, and the walls seem to warp around him. The Deep Place unfurls, shadows in the corners, the floor spongy and malleable beneath his feet. The Extraordinary’s ability shines like a beam, a ball of nestled light. In this altered state, out of his own body, it’s so simple to just reach out and take it.

*Just take it.*

The Deep Place howls. It feels strange today, uncannily populated; the Scarab’s presence all around him. It prickles at his awareness. He feels it all around him, trying to reach him, wild and unruly and powerful in this other dimension. His throat constricts. He pauses, listening, one hand out to take the Extraordinary’s gift, and—

*Taehyung! Take it and go!*

Taehyung snaps back to the present. The Deep Place falls away, and the Extraordinary skids to a stop, claws disappearing seconds from Taehyung’s throat. He gasps, stumbling out of the way as the man’s eyes dull, reeling as sudden, enormous gashes rip open the Extraordinary’s back. There’s blood, *Blood*, everywhere. He slips on it as he turns away, heart pounding and bewildered, wondering if this is the Scarab’s fury.

If this is the consequence of his anger at this puppet that failed to do what he set it to.
Taehyung, move, Jimin says again, in his head. Move! Put the lights out.

Lights out. Right.

Taehyung gulps and steps into the Deep Place again. Feels the same ruffle of the Scarab there, as before. Hears him say, back so soon? Taehyung doesn’t respond. The faster he gets out of there, the easier it will be to hide his biggest ace from the Scarab.

The map of Extraordinaries appear as dots of light. He feels the Scarab’s curiosity, feels it swell around him, a physical thing. It slides up to him like a miasma, sticky oil residue, and wild panic grabs at his heart.

He can’t be here. The Deep Place isn’t safe. The Scarab is occupying too much of it, spread too big—he’s all over. He’s everywhere.

Lights out, he thinks. If he can just do this—

What are you doing? The Scarab asks. Whatever it is, it’s futile. You can’t kill me.

Taehyung wheezes out a breath. He extinguishes one Extraordinary’s ability, and then another’s. Slips from one spot of light to the other as if it were as simple as a circuit board, as easy as disconnecting LEDs from a power-line. He takes it all away, bit by bit. Powers disappearing like lights going off on a drowning power-grid.

He doesn’t think the Scarab gets what he’s doing, until he’s already done it. Until it’s all gone, and there are no more Extraordinaries for him to draw from. Until all the abilities that surround him belong to telepaths, or those capable of holding fort against him. Taehyung feels him rail at his own mind, a suffocating barrage, and pulls himself back to his body. He stumbles beneath the assault. His head feels like it will split open. The pressure is incredible, like a metric tonne of water above his head, crushing his skull slowly. It doesn’t matter, though: the Scarab is not getting him this way.

It’s not impossible to gather himself and cast the Scarab out.

Like an exorcism, he thinks. We’ve created a demon.

He doesn’t have much time. Trapped in the Deep Place without nearby Extraordinaries to use, he’s sure the Scarab is going to resort to physical forces instead. Going to grab whatever bodies and whatever weapons are available to him.

He’s going to find that difficult.

As if on cue, the emergency lights shut off. There’s a momentary stillness, a pause during which Taehyung crawls away from the dead Extraordinary, uncontrollable shivers running up his spine. In his head, through the thin connecting tether that he keeps with the Deep Place, the Scarab asks: do you know why? Why I want to be rid of you?

Taehyung doesn’t get an answer. The lights come on, then, bright and piercing. From outside, a megaphone sounds, demanding anyone inside to evacuate immediately. This is Police, it screeches, loud in the sudden silence left behind by the sirens cutting off. We have information that this building is in danger. Please evacuate.

Taehyung feels the Scarab’s interest waver. The police would have guns. The police would have weapons, and strong bodies. Stronger than the other Extraordinaries in the building, who are nothing without their abilities.
He feels, in the Deep Place, the slightest give.

Momentary distraction.

Now, he thinks. He hears Jimin and Namjoon echo it as he casts himself at the Scarab. Out of his body, with the Deep Place surging around him like a wave, he slams against that presence. The Scarab laughs wildly at him, still trying to get to the cops. *That’s not going to work, Starling,* he says. *That’s not going to work at all. I’m too strong for you.*

Ladders of light rise around him, a manifestation of the Scarab’s suffocating presence. Taehyung waits for him to discover that he can’t reach the police at all. Waits for that realization to ripple almost physically through the plane around him, a series of unfolding doors that fall away like a hallucination.

*Why can’t I reach them?* He snarls, and the Deep Place fractals into shards of glass. They come straight at Taehyung but fall around him, harmless—this isn’t the physical world, after all. *Why can’t I reach any of them?*

Taehyung just waits. Waits, while he spins another lie, another little glint of a shiny something for the Scarab to chase after.

*You’ve protected them with telepaths,* the Scarab growls, after a few seconds. *You’ve protected the police with fucking telepaths, how clever. You were always very clever. Not the way so many other people are clever, with books or math or physics. Your mind just works in unpredictable ways, Starling. Why bring the cops here, huh? Unless they’re a distraction, as well…*

Taehyung can feel him cast about, looking for something to possess. But Namjoon is with Jimin and Yoongi, holding the sphere of protection around them. Some of the other Extraordinaries—now divested of their abilities—are spilling out of the Institute and towards the police barricade, flanked by Seam telepaths, thus making them immune to the Scarab’s searching presence.

A low laugh ripples out into the Dark Place, ribbons of light coursing past.

*Ah, little bird,* the Scarab says, a curling, oily whisper. *Seems like you missed one.*

Taehyung clenches his fist. *Have I?* He asks, quiet. *Where?*

He feels it when the Scarab jumps for the last available Extraordinary. The one Taehyung seemingly missed.

The trap.

*Get him,* he thinks, and hears a grim echo of it from Jimin. Taehyung has never had cause for trapping animals, had never had the stomach to watch anything caught in a trap and trying to squirm away, but now he thinks this is what it might be like. He and Jimin, they’re the jaws of the bear trap. Their combined effort, crushing down on the Scarab, pushing him into the body they’ve picked out for him. The body Taehyung has hidden a morsel of Extraordinariness in, plucking it from the Deep Place and placing it in its unbeating heart. A magpie trap, shiny but worthless.

The Scarab roars, but gains no ground. Taehyung imagines this is how any creature caught in a trap would squirm and struggle. Except the struggle doesn’t happen in physical space. Except it ripples through the Deep Place like a tsunami wave of psychic energy.

But it’s working.
Incredibly, unbelievably, it’s working.

The body they’ve chosen is blind and dead. It has Talon in its veins instead of blood. An ID in its pocket had identified the dead man as Roland Park—probably a foreign visitor with some ties to the Seam underworld. Who knows why he died? Maybe a mafia hit. Truth is, it could have been anyone. Any body, left there for Bubble Face’s taking. All it is going to be is a prison for a virus, anyway.

There’s no escaping it, once they’ve trapped the Scarab in there, but they’re going to take even bigger measures to make sure he never escapes. There’s an Extraordinary prison in a faraway country. A gaol, of sorts. It’s not known, not to the outside world, but there are some in the police that know. Some in the police that will help.

The Scarab fights them. The world around Taehyung spins like a zootrope, light and shadows conspiring into monsters. That underwater pressure squeals in his ears again. It’s loud, so loud, the Deep Place tightening like a physical vise around him until he doesn’t know where he is. The Scarab laughs again, unruly. Starling, he says, over the shrieking, buffeting otherworldly wind of this plane. Do you know why I want to be rid of you?

Taehyung clenches his fist and throws himself against him. Every bit of energy he can muster. He thinks Jimin does the same because he can feel him now, constant and steady, a calmer presence. Together, they wrestle the Scarab down. Down into his prison. The last of the screaming, shrill ringing grows as they do, the Deep Place growing smaller and claustrophobic by the second, and then it cuts out.

All at once: silence.

Taehyung slips back into his own skin, sits collapsed on the floor with his head against the wall. His breath comes in choking, gasping heaves. He bends in half, lungs screaming for oxygen, curls into a ball and just waits. There’s utter stillness in his head.

Absolute silence.

He wonders if Jimin heard it. The last of the words the Scarab had said.

Because you made me. I’m tethered to you. As long as you live, where you go is where I go.

Where he goes…

Taehyung rolls over to his knees. His skin stings and everything aches. He feels hot enough to combust one moment and then so cold that he’s shivering. It’s like shattering from the inside out.

There are footsteps now, running towards him; he thinks he hears Yoongi shout. They crowd into the room with him—Yoongi and Jimin and Namjoon—all of them alive and unhurt, Jimin only panting a little.

Taehyung fumbles, trying to get up. The pressure of attacking the Scarab has torpedoed him. He wants to curl up and never move.

“Did we—did we get him?” he asks.

Jimin just stares, wordless. He’s not panting, not like Taehyung is. He’s seemingly not as affected at all. Maybe it varies, person to person, or maybe Jimin just…maybe he just isn’t.

Yoongi nods once, lip bitten and exhausted circles under his eyes, reaching out a hand for Taehyung
to take. “We got him.”

Namjoon’s mouth is a grim line. “We have the body contained, in the safe, in the hands of the good people of the non-terrible Extraordinary Crimes unit. They’re going to take him far enough away, and keep an eye on him for as long as we’re able. He’ll need to claw his way out of that unit,” he takes a deep breath, fidgeting restlessly with his hands. “Fuck. It worked. Can’t believe it worked. Are you—are you okay?”

Taehyung nods, clinging onto Yoongi’s arm. He’s thinking about what the Scarab said, about being tethered to him. Did he mean range? Did he mean that if Taehyung could only barely reach the Seam from here, that meant the Scarab was limited to that, too? Did he mean that he is what had limited the Scarab from the rest of the world, kept him on a short leash on the Deep Place?

What were the implications of that? If he killed Taehyung, if his physical body didn’t exist anymore, did that mean the Scarab would be free? Free to reach across distances, across the seas even, to anyone?

What a terrible thought. Ghoul, almost, like the tenuous string between Frankenstein and his monster, the creator and his creation.

But inversely, if he went away…if he went into stasis and took his mind alone to the Deep Place…then would the Scarab be trapped with him, in the dark, forever?

“We have to go,” Yoongi says, urgently. “We have to go, we have to get out of this place as fast as possible. There are explosives. We might have trapped the bulk of the Scarab’s consciousness in that body, but we don’t know if there are leaks to plug, if there are little bits of him in the other puppets still walking around.”

Namjoon starts, “He can’t create any more—”

“—but there are some copies left,” Yoongi interrupts. There’s a frown in his voice, an insinuation to hurry up. Taehyung’s gaze flicks to him, wondering what he sees. Why he’s still on edge. “It’s a virus—there are carriers. We’ll weed them out later. We can take the replicas, now that the source is gone. Let’s go.”

Jimin says, softly, “Wait.”

“Jimin-ah, we really can’t—”

“What the Scarab said to you,” Jimin says, mouth pursing as he looks at Taehyung, “About being tethered to you. Is that true?”

Taehyung shrugs. “Possible. If he doesn’t have a body, maybe through whatever Deep Place logic, he’s connected to the one who cast him out there.”

“Yes,” Jimin says, impatiently, “but what does it mean?”

“We can discuss this outside,” Yoongi says, sounding harried. “Please, let’s just discuss this outside—or—”

“Does it mean that he lives as long as you do? Does it mean that he can only live as long as you do? Doesn’t that mean that to kill him—”

Yoongi gasps. “Jimin!”
Taehyung lets out a strangled laugh. *It’s not Jimin,* he wants to say. Through his still-dizzy haze, he meets Yoongi’s gaze. Shakes his head. Watches terror turn Yoongi sheet-white.

The loud ringing starts up in Taehyung’s head again. The Deep Place spirals into him, like an insistent current, pulling his feet out from under him. He screws his eyes shut against it, and against these questions. The questions feel sharp, wielded like knives, even if Taehyung knows that they are the barest, most insignificant variations of the truth. Even if he knows that they’re only being asked this way to further some new game.

This game they’re playing is beyond life and bodies and death. It’s of a different plane. Nothing will really change whether he lives or not. All he can really do is keep the fear alive.

So he says, stepping away from Yoongi, “No. But it *does* mean that he gets stuck forever in the Deep Place if I decide to simply…live there.”

Something altogether uncanny flickers in Jimin’s face. “You couldn’t do that.”

Taehyung smiles—his most terrible, agonized smile. “Oh. I think I could.”

“You’re not strong enough. Your body’s not strong enough for something like that,” Jimin’s voice is pitched higher in doubt. “You’ve never tried anything like that.”

A strange, sensory maze of feelings overwhelm Taehyung: the ringing in his ears, the cold of Yoongi’s fingers pressing into his skin, the slow thrum of fear turning in his stomach. This pain, like a knife in his ribs.

Taehyung says, very gently, “Get out of his head.”

Jimin smiles.

It’s not his smile. Not even a believable facsimile. It’s artifice. Terrible.

“You waited a while,” Taehyung says, face carefully blank, none of the tumult beneath the surface slipping through. “I thought you’d take over him and try to sabotage us a little earlier.”

“I didn’t think your crackpot plan would actually work,” the Scarab says, “Nice surprise, the telepaths. You didn’t give Jimin that info.”

Taehyung feels Yoongi stiffen beside him, gone rigid as a soldier, as if his heart has simply stopped. “We thought it best.”

“Isn’t that unfair? Leaving him out, when he loves you both so much?”

Namjoon’s spine is steel-straight, awareness entirely focused on Jimin. Yoongi’s face twists in panic, fingers twisting into Taehyung’s sleeve. Taehyung pushes him away, unwilling to have him in the cross-fire. Everything flickers like a mirage.

He had figured that this was coming. It still doesn’t hurt any less.

There is a razor. This is the edge.

Taehyung swallows. “You know nothing about love,” he whispers. “You are nothing but a monster.”

The Extraordinary Measures must have kicked in, Taehyung thinks. When the Scarab barreled his way into Jimin’s mind, the Extraordinary Measures must have wiped all his memories of them away.
Taehyung hopes it did. *Hopes*, because he doesn’t want Jimin to remember this. Wishes that Jimin has no memory of this; doesn’t gain it; not ever.

An odd force makes contact with his chest like a battering ram. It’s not physical—just the same sort of energy that Taehyung had all but fully expended on the Scarab just now. It still tosses him backward, his vision flashing the full spectrum of color before momentarily fading to black. He thinks he hears Yoongi shout, and feels pain dance through his joints. Shocked muscles twist and lock; electric pain lances up his spine. His ribs feel pulverized, his head foggy. He breathes and there’s blood in his throat, thick copper taste. His body tries to cough and chokes instead.

Taehyung opens his eyes to Jimin. Looking down at him. His face not his own, and his mind riddled with a parasite.

“Let’s end this here,” Jimin says, and even his voice sounds different. “You made a valiant effort, Starling.”

There’s a series of needling starbursts of pain at Taehyung’s temple. Then that fucking pressure again. He can’t make his brain move, can’t do anything. It sits in his skull like dead weight, seeping doubt into his bloodstream.

“Okay,” he says. Keeps his eyes on Jimin’s face. “Okay.”

He’d known that their little con with the body, their original plan, was always going to be the simple part. He’d known that this would become the real elephant in the room, the real hidden curve, the true faultline along which their fates crack.

When Namjoon had said Jimin wasn’t safe; when he said that perhaps, the Scarab’s reason to give Jimin access to the Deep Place was because he could have someone with Extraordinary power close to Taehyung—he and Yoongi had both known.

That this was the razor’s edge. The tightrope. The thin line.

This is where it all falls apart.

*Goodbye*, the Scarab whispers, in Taehyung’s head. The Scarab is faint now. His presence small. Just a few wispy strands.

But Jimin’s still strong. Jimin can still draw power from the Extraordinaries outside. From the cops, and anyone as far out as the Seam.

*I love you*, Taehyung thinks, and hopes that the real Jimin can still hear. Whether he recognizes Taehyung or not. *I love you. This is not your fault.*

Jimin’s mouth pulls into a terrible smile. He snaps his fingers and there’s a flash of steel. Taehyung squeezes his eyes shut, waiting for impact, but nothing could really brace him for the actual shocking pain.

It’s violent, paralyzing, an avalanche. It hits his chest first,rents him apart. Rips through his bones. Saves his heart for last.

There’s copper in his mouth and then the ringing again, an incandescent light in his eyes.

And then—

One
Taehyung’s standing. His chest is whole, unmarred; not simply abstract art of pink adipose and rent tissue. Jimin’s up, too— confusion in his gaze, head whipping from Taehyung to Yoongi.

“You,” he says, gaze narrowing. “You didn’t have that ability before.”

Yoongi pitches dizzily sideways. Namjoon gets in front of him, as if to protect, but it’s worthless. Jimin simply tosses him aside, and his fingers flash steel again.

Taehyung yells, “Hyung—”

And then—

Two

Taehyung’s on the ground. He’s not hurt yet, not bleeding out yet. He’s just on the ground, bones singing with pain, and Jimin’s looking at him from above him.

“Going to get tired of that so quick,” he snorts. “What did you do? Give him a quick version of your bathtub treatment when Jimin wasn’t looking? Kept him as your secret weapon? What’s he even doing, anyway? Moving us across parallel universes? Skipping through multiple alternate time-lines so that no single one holds true? Clever idea—confusing time itself. Rewriting your own fortunes by jumbling your past and present. Very clever. You still can’t kill me, Starling. Oh, look, I have a fucking gun in this one—”

Taehyung feels like he’s spilling out of his skin. Everything is heavy. His head swirls like a fishbowl.

The barrel of the gun is dark. Darker than dark.

Then there’s a flash of light, and heavy sound, and—

Three

“Run,” Namjoon is saying, even as Taehyung orients himself. “Run.”

Namjoon’s grip on his elbow is vise-like. Taehyung coughs like there’s glass in his throat. He’s so tired. He feels battered, mind and body. His mind flashes Yoongi and he looks around, tripping in his confusion. Yoongi helps him up, keeps a hand at his back till he’s moving again.

Words crystallize on his tongue in the wrong order. “Where are we—Jimin—”

“We need to get out first. As long as we’re in the same room—”

Something comes whizzing past Taehyung’s head. He turns, drawing a wave of sound from an Extraordinary, letting it rip out of his skin with the force of a maelstrom.

The corridor ripples with the force of it. Tables and doors are ripped off the wall and flung backward. Taehyung sees Jimin cower from it, hands up to protect himself from the sudden influx of debris, the Scarab’s mad hatred a terrible thing to see in his eyes.

“Run,” Namjoon says again, propelling Taehyung forward, and suddenly they’re pushing through the front door. Suddenly they’re out in the cold, beneath the stars. The barricade of police snap to attention at the sight of them, but Seokjin steps forward.

“Wait,” he says. “Wait, I know them.”

He’s walking towards them when Taehyung notices that Yoongi is moving in the opposite direction.
Back towards the Institute.

He pitches forward to grab him, tug him back to the safety closer to Taehyung, but Yoongi’s gone all shivery and clammy, and he whispers, in a litany, *no no no no no.*

There’s a moment in which Taehyung, blissfully, doesn’t understand.

The next moment both of them are thrown to the ground by the force of an explosion.

Distantly, Taehyung hears Namjoon scream. Distantly, he sees a chemical fireball, blooming through the building, turning it all to rubble. Distantly he hears beeping police radios and loud voices.

Yoongi looks at him, expression wild. “No,” he says. “No, we’ve got to—”

**Four**

Running, again.

“Go, go, go,” Namjoon shouts, near-dragging Taehyung along. Taehyung’s head is a swirl of flames and confusion. He snaps alert the moment they run out through the door. The sky rains down on them and the police barricade looks emptier but no less present. Taehyung’s taking a step toward them when Yoongi, in front of him, suddenly turns right back around.

“I have to get Jimin, I have to—”

“No,” Namjoon says, and grabs him around the waist. “No, we have to get out, we have to *get out,* he’s going to kill us—”

“He’s not himself,” Yoongi thunders. “We can’t just—we can’t leave him!”

Right.

Right, right, right—of course. Yoongi’s right. Jimin’s back there. Taehyung has to get him, there’s no question, he has to get him out of the building before it blows.

“I’ll get him,” Taehyung says. “I’ll get him, you two get out.”

Namjoon looks at him dubiously. There’s no time to argue, and Taehyung’s already moving. Yoongi protests, weakly, pushing back against Namjoon in an effort to break free, but Namjoon is stronger.

Taehyung strides back into the corridor, sparks at his fingertips. If he can knock Jimin out, if he can drag him out—

There has to be a way. There *is* a way. Yoongi is right, he can’t leave Jimin. Of course he can’t.

He looks back towards the exit. He can’t see Yoongi and Namjoon there, so they must have made it out. He walks toward the pathology lab, where the bulk of the explosives are, and finds Jimin there, toying with a lit match.

“This game is boring,” Jimin says. “Burning this body is an inconvenience to me, but I still have a couple of other usable copies. What do you say, Starling? Fancy some fireworks?”

Taehyung’s throat constricts. “No,” he whispers. “No. Please don’t do this.”

“Smart thing, blocking all his memories of you. *Very* smart. Can’t make any Extraordinaries with half-information, can I? But that also makes this puppet a bit useless. Too much to *work* on, before it
gives any sizeable results. Maybe I’ll try the other one next. The skinny, pale one. What’s his name?”

Taehyung makes an aborted movement. The match drops.

His next breath is flame. For a single second he can taste it: black oil, chemical ash. It coats the back of his throat, then hits his heart. He coughs—explosive, choking, ash in his mouth.

The explosion billows. Fire claws through his skin, atomizes his tissues, torches him down to nothing.

Game over.

Or—

Five


Explosions. Murder. A knife in his chest, a bullet in his eye. Running. Namjoon, jumping in front of him, getting cut down instead of him. The police, storming the Institute, and the fire swallowing them all.

For the twelfth time, Taehyung’s running down the corridor. He’s stumbling. He’s nearly pushing Namjoon and Yoongi ahead of him, hopelessness stirring in his gut, lungs burning.

This time, Yoongi freezes the moment they’re out. “I can’t,” he whispers, “I can’t switch.”


“I don’t—don’t know. Feels like something—someone is blocking me.”

Taehyung feels a fist clenching into his shirt, yanking him backwards. Seokjin, he thinks, because Namjoon is wrestling on the other side with Yoongi. He’s still trying to switch time-lines. To find something where they all leave this place, alive. Taehyung’s mouth tastes of ashes and his skin stings with the phantom pain of multiple erased assaults. He sinks, hopeless. He’d fall if not for Jin holding him up.

“Stop this,” Namjoon is yelling, and Taehyung has never heard him sound like this. Like something visceral is being ripped out of him. “Stop it. We got the Scarab, mostly. We got most of the folks working in the Institute evacuated. We can’t save everyone. Yoongi—”

Taehyung closes his eyes. Yoongi’s not going to quit. Of course he’s not going to quit. Taehyung doesn’t want to quit, either—he wants to run back into the building. Like he did two times already. But Seokjin’s holding him, and his thoughts aren’t looping start to finish. He can’t figure out what ability to use, what way to transform fate so that he can stop this—this horror, this madness.

“I can’t,” Yoongi wails, and the sound is arrows, in Taehyung’s heart. Blinding white pain. “I can’t do it, he won’t let me.”

Namjoon asks, immediately, who. Who’s stopping him. Who’s cutting him off from his futures now. Taehyung knows.

He knows.

If he closes his eyes, clears his mind for just a second, he can still hear Yoongi say to Jimin: you fear
hurting him.

That’s Jimin’s base fear. The thing that he modeled his firewall on. Hurting Taehyung, or Yoongi. Having no control while doing it.

And now, over six times, time has looped and tugged and turned itself into a nautilus spiral where it’s all Jimin did. Hurt them. Hurt them both.

“He doesn’t want you to,” Taehyung tells Yoongi, slipping out of Seokjin’s grasp and sidling up to Yoongi. “He doesn’t want—not again, not a thirteenth time. The real Jimin.”

Yoongi looks at him, stricken. Taehyung grabs his hands, forces him to look at him.

“I don’t know how he did it, but he wants you to stop,” Taehyung’s voice is a croak. “You have to stop. Please, hyung.”

It had been Taehyung’s idea to build a maze of possible, collapsible futures. If there were too many probabilities, too many conflicting universes layered atop each other, then perhaps the end result of each one would not matter. Perhaps the flow of time will superimpose, lose definition, become unpredictable and entropic enough that the way it ends become unpredictable. Perhaps then they can all get out of the Institute alive, no one under the Scarab’s thrall, at least a temporary solution and a happy ending.

It had been the secret in their arsenal. A bouquet of second chances. A chance of survival, in an improbable situation.

But in this last, torturous version of time, it’s raining. The police still have the safe with Roland Park’s body, and the Deep Place still holds only wisps of his presence. In this last, torturous version of time, a number of cops and Extraordinaries died at the Institute, caught in a tussle when the order of events had changed slightly. In this last universe, Yoongi tries futilely to use his ability to take them anywhere else instead.

“Taehyung,” he says. “Help me. You’re stronger than him. You can win over him, you can help me make the switch—”

“It won’t matter,” Taehyung says. “It’ll keep working out the same, hyung.”

Yoongi turns on him, cold. “You don’t know that.”

Taehyung feels a sob, claw up his throat. “But you do. You do. You know it’s futile. You know.”

Yoongi’s expression is so raw that it’s like a punch to the stomach. He runs his hands through his hair, frantic. “No, no, no,” he says, moving forward again, and Taehyung grabs for him so fast that they both tumble to the ground. They’re still there when the earth quakes, shockwaves rippling outward from the explosion, that massive fireball brightening the sky for the third time that night. Yoongi screams, thrashing under Taehyung, hands clawing into the dirt. Taehyung just holds on and sobs. Here, at the edge of this razor, he doesn’t know what else to do. He has nothing clever to pull out, like a magician, hey presto. He has no solutions. He just has the rain and the mud and Yoongi, whose hands come slowly around him, encompassing him, his own breath too quick and erratic and wild with panic. Yoongi’s wet nose presses against the side of Taehyung’s neck, and he’s still whispering no, like a prayer. Like an incantation, a conjuring. Like if he says it enough it will work like magic, will undo this terrible thing, will summon Jimin right back.

It doesn’t work that way. Nothing works that way.
The rainwater is good, because it washes everything else away. Taehyung sits up, pulls Yoongi up with him. Yoongi’s shoulders twitch, his eyes falling shut as he tries to navigate through whatever possible futures he can envision. He’s still trying to save them. Taehyung knows him enough to know that he’ll never quit. *Never.* For as long as he is able, he will rinse through futures, because Yoongi hates giving up. Hates giving up on those he loves. Hates giving up on the ones he thinks he was supposed to protect.

He’ll never quit.

But he *has* to quit.

They’ve already lost Jimin. If they ripple change through many more time-lines, they might lose the Scarab as well. They might lose whatever work they’ve done to rid the world of him, end up dying anyway. There are, always, worse fortunes than the one they’re presently at.

There are sirens now, of approaching fire-trucks. The air is full of smoke and heat. The water from the rain sizzles off their skin, vaporising even as it hits. The fire crackles, loud, a baiting tease. In the glow of it, in the hazy shimmer it brings, Taehyung puts his hands up to Yoongi’s cheeks. Cups his face in his hands, trying to see through the blur of his own vision, holding him as tenderly as he can, as much like a precious, precious thing as he can.

He takes a slow, rattling breath. Yoongi’s face twists in puzzlement.

Taehyung says, as loud as he can, considering his heart is rending itself apart, “I’m sorry.”

Yoongi will never quit looking for loopholes. Won’t ever stop bending time and space to his will, in his pursuit to keep them all in one piece.

He’ll never stop— Unless he can’t remember.

Taehyung’s hands shake. Lips tremble. There’s a strange sound that seems lodged in his chest, a wheeze and a whimper. His blood feels like acid, like liquid fire under his skin. But when he breeches the barricades he himself set up to protect Yoongi—when he brings the firewall crashing down and locking Yoongi’s memories behind it for *good*—he makes sure that he does it as gently as possible.

He doesn’t want to hurt Yoongi. Not even in the smallest of ways.

He just has to do this. Has to live with this loss. These *losses*.

For Yoongi’s own sake.

“I’m sorry,” he says again. The apology tastes like bitter ash. “You have to forget.”

“No,” Yoongi says, his eyes going wide. “No, you can’t. No.”

Taehyung never says goodbye. There’s no need to. He just brings the wall down, and erases every trace of himself, of Jimin. When it’s done he leans in, to ask, “Who’s the king of the birds, hyung?”

Yoongi blinks at him, dazed. Before his mouth can shape *what*, before it can shape *who are you*, Taehyung stands up and staggers away. He crashes into Namjoon, who he pushes in Yoongi’s direction. He’s only dimly aware of Seokjin’s arm settling around him, his strong grip keeping him upright. Taehyung feels very far from his body, floating on a string, somewhere far above all this. He can barely see; too much haze in his vision. Must be the rainwater.
The rainwater, in his eyes.

They walk through assembled firefighters and mafia telepaths and Institute workers and police, quiet in the rain that cascades around them. Taehyung doesn’t ask where they’re going. Seokjin knows enough that it can’t be anywhere without teeth. It can’t be anywhere that isn’t built up from blood and bone and the gears of shifting power. Taehyung wouldn’t fit anywhere else. Not after all this.

A second explosion rocks through the Institute, the noise so loud that a flock of birds take flight, shrieking, to the sky.

Seokjin curses under his breath, sounding so rattled that it surprises.

Taehyung doesn’t look back.

***

It’s late when they arrive at their destination.

It’s somewhere in the Seam. Taehyung had spent most of the journey here silent and staring out the window, this strange numbness growing in his heart until he thought he would burst with it. Seokjin skipped through radio after radio station, settling on nothing, making idle chatter. He said things that Seokjin rarely said, like: I’m here, or, you’re not alone. Taehyung said he believed him, because he did, because Jin was his brother and they’d always schemed together and he was both brilliant and brutally honest. He wouldn’t lie.

You need to breathe. Find your feet. Become someone else. You know this isn’t over yet.

At some point he had to ask Seokjin to stop the car so he could climb out to throw up what little liquid and bile he had in him. He attempts to think of Jimin and Yoongi and everything in him revolts, a panic so horrid and all-encompassing that he very nearly folds under its weight.

But he doesn’t cry.

“We’ve had worse,” Seokjin says, at some point, which is cold comfort. He knows it is. He’s not saying it to comfort, Taehyung thinks—he’s just stating it. Like fact. “You’ll survive.”

“Where are we going?”

“You need a friendly face.”

Taehyung doesn’t think he knows very many friendly faces. He’s surprised when Seokjin stops at an old, dingy apartment in the Seam.

“Is—is whoever this is helping you out? With Crimes?”

“Maybe. To some capacity. Come on. I’m going to have to leave you here, for now. I have to go back and help control this mess.” He folds his arms around Taehyung for a minute. Holds. He says, “You really will be okay. You did—you did good, with the Scarab. What you did—it matters. I think you’ll be okay.”

Yeah, well. I don’t.

Taehyung buries his distress. I created it, he wants to say. This whole mess. Doesn’t matter if I fixed it.

“Go, knock on that door,” Seokjin says, pointing him towards an apartment. “I’ll come find you
“I need time,” Taehyung mutters. “I need some time.”

“I can give you that.”

Taehyung looks at him. It’s not really the response he expected, considering the danger isn’t wholly past. He’d thought they’d need him, maybe, to pick up more of the pieces. But Seokjin gives him time. Gives him patience and assurance.

It feels like undeserved kindness.

It’s morning in the Seam. Where the fog burns off, the copse of buildings all clustered together like trees emerge from shadows. There’s a child in front of one, levitating on her little tricycle, big eyes wide as she stares at Seokjin’s police car. Everything smells like dust to Taehyung; tastes like ashes.

He feels strangely stranded. Heavy, at the shores of some lost, dried-up ocean. Nothing really to get back to. His only thoughts vague and circuitous, a pointless spiral of regrets.

“Go,” Seokjin says again. “You need rest. I’ll—I’ll take care of Yoongi.”

Taehyung nods. His throat is so tight he thinks he might still choke. “I’ll be okay,” he promises. “Just come back. Just don’t—”

(don’t turn into something else, don’t disappear, don’t die, don’t become a puppet, a maelstrom, a monster with a beloved face)

“—don’t take too long, okay?”

Seokjin nods. Taehyung waits until the car’s pulled away, and then takes a slow walk down the street. At the end of it, he turns around and walks back, unobtrusive, hiding his face under his hoodie. This is the Seam, after all. He doesn’t want any passing eyes to put a face to the man who got out of a police car.

He knocks on the apartment door. For a few minutes there’s nothing, just him alone out in the cold and the upsetting gloom. Then the door cracks open, and a familiar face stares out at him.

“Taehyung hyung?” Jungkook blinks, long and confused. “Come in, come in, you look—you look awful.”

His hand, squeezing Taehyung’s shoulder as he pulls him into the apartment’s warmth, is strong and familiar. A shudder ripples through Taehyung, and then another. Jungkook pushes him onto an old, torn sofa, and mutters something about tea.

“You don’t have to tell me anything,” he says. “You don’t have to say anything. I just—I’ll get you something warm.”

Taehyung says nothing. He breathes. He doesn’t know how long he sits there, without talking. Doesn’t know how long Jungkook sits with him, asking nothing, making small, distracting observations about his life in the Seam and what he’s been doing now that he’s free. He doesn’t bring up the Institute at all. Doesn’t bring up anything.

This too, is kindness.

Taehyung finds that he can’t close his eyes. If he closes his eyes, he ends up back there. Running
down the corridor, being chased by fire. Being chased by a monster, wearing the face of someone he loved. If he closes his eyes, he remembers the Deep Place cutting into fractals around him as the Scarab whispered that parting thought.

*I’m tethered to you.*

After a while, he becomes aware of a reckless, searing burn in his chest. He presses the side of his face against the soft surface of the couch and digs his nails into his thighs. His insides boil down to the clean poetry of simple hydraulics—no pain, no hopelessness.

For a wild minute he wants to borrow an ability and rip up this street. For a wild minute he wants to go mad, string bodies from the telephone lines like birds that got too close to a live-wire.

Then that wild crimson rage is gone, and he diffuses to matte gray. Subtle. Methodic.

He’s sure the flesh-prison alone won’t always hold the Scarab. That the few copies of him they didn’t manage to eliminate wouldn’t pose a sizeable threat one day. They’ve contained an outbreak; not destroyed the pathogen itself. Their monster is a memetic virus, and viruses were best known for their adaptability.

For how they mutate.

And when he came back—when it came back, with strength—Taehyung would need a better plan. A plan that didn’t depend on him being dead or alive. Something to kill the unkillable.

He had promised them both a breadcrumb trail. Something to lead them back to him, now or fifty years in the future.

Taehyung thinks he could start with that.

“Jungkook,” he croaks, the first word he’s said in hours. Jungkook looks up, wide-eyed. “Would you—maybe—have a notebook I could use?”

***

In the days that follow, it feels like he’s lost a dimension. Like mass, length and time has no definition, no meaning where he’s involved. He stays in Jungkook’s apartment, writing meandering notes, thinking through possibilities. Seokjin updates him that the safe-box has been moved—far out to the Middle East, to an international maximum security prison, hidden somewhere on an off-shore island. Yoongi’s settled back into university, confused as fuck but none the wiser of any of the events that had occurred. His trainers and professors had fussed about missed classes and undone projects for a week, but Yoongi is clever. He’ll catch up. He’ll graduate.

“We’ll bring him straight to Crimes,” Seokjin promises. “Keep an eye on him. Kim Namjoon, too.”

“And the Institute?” Taehyung asks, curled up in the couch, in the same position he’s been in for hours. “The bodies—?”

“All incinerated. Given the inexplicable circumstances, we’ve had to list them all as Missing cases.”

Taehyung nods and swallows. Shadows move outside of Jungkook’s window—the sun, shifting light. It’s almost three in the afternoon. Taehyung can tell, just by their shapes. He’s been watching the walls for a while now, lost in his head. He’s been letting the weight of everything that’s happened pin him to the floor, unable to breathe. It’s been slow going, learning how to feel human again. But now he thinks he can stand up. Now he thinks he doesn’t want to just let the world pass
him by.

“What are you going to do?” Seokjin asks him, dropping down on the couch next to him. “You can’t
stay cooped up in here forever. There’s work to do.”

That’s true. There is work to do. Impossible work.

“Do it, I guess,” he says. Seokjin pats his shoulder. “Make sure we’re ready. When it all starts
again.”

It’s a rainy evening the day he and Namjoon drive up to Yoongi’s family house. The man who meets
them there is probably his father, surmises Taehyung, but he’s a severe contrast to Yoongi. Not
physically—physically there are similarities, that’s clear to see. But Taehyung knows the opportunists
when he sees them, knows the sharks sniffing blood in the water when he meets them.

That’s why he’s here with a business proposition.

“You have strange demands, boy,” the man says, smiling. “First you wanted telepaths. Now you
want an unused safe-house, protection, and a bunch of odd drugs. What, exactly, is your design?”

“That doesn’t concern you,” Taehyung says, easily. “I can pay for it.”

“I have no need for money.”

“In secrets,” Taehyung corrects. “Like last time. Seam secrets. Government secrets. For example, the
investment you’ve just made with that cartel of Extraordinary drug traffickers? That’s not going to
earn you profits. Check their digital signatures. They’re not from where they said they are.”

A raise of eyebrows. Namjoon stays close to Taehyung, not hiding his fright at all. Taehyung has to
remind himself that this not his world. Namjoon’s only here because he doesn’t want Taehyung to go
alone. It’s some misguided attempt at looking out for him, when it’s not Taehyung who needs to be
looked out for.

“Okay,” says the man, after a long pause. “I’m listening.”

Taehyung’s breath leaves his chest in a whoosh. He smiles, stepping forward, gathering up the
pieces of himself from his Seam days long ago. “Good,” he says, sticking his arm out to shake. “You
can call me Starling.”

Chapter End Notes

LOL things will be less torturous next chapter. (WHY AM I KIDDING I still have
another murder to explain.) But. BUT. This moved most of my plot, so even though this
is ANOTHER past-heavy chapter, when the present sections come back and the latest
plan comes into play…you’ll understand better.

>>> I really slaved over this chapter because I had to keep going back and checking
every few paragraphs if I was making a mistake so any thoughts you have are
GREATLY appreciated. But also my computer was acting very wonky and kept displacing paragraphs/words while I was doing edits, so if you noticed any very jarring missing lines or sentences, please hit me up <<<

Come say hi on twt
There’s now too less of a distance between a love scene and a war scene.
And this is how we go to war.

IMPORTANT NOTES!

> Usual trigger warnings apply. This is a violent, grim fic. Please exercise caution and message me for any worries regarding specific triggers.

> There are TWO PARTS to this last chapter. This is the first part. This is the part that will have a format of diary entries, transcripts etc. The second part will be posted sometime during the weekend/Monday and will wrap up the story!

> Please pay attention to dates! All will be clear in the last part, but I think it'll be fun if you can put together a picture of what happened anyway :) According to the story timeline, the Present is in November 2018.

> Codenames!

Starling is Taehyung.
Wren is Jimin.
Raven is Yoongi (Namjoon also uses this codename, as drawn from the Norse Myth of two ravens.)

> FEEDBACK. PLEASE. THIS IS SO MUCH WORK.

> Love you! Thank you for sticking with this fic till the end!

> Playlist: https://open.spotify.com/playlist/140wnHDEHFgHqTuztdYdWA?si=loBuYb6SmityvIG0vLmHg

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
A PRELIMINARY REPORT REGARDING THE STRING OF INCIDENTS THAT LED TO THE EXTRAORDINARY EVENT AT THE HOTEL ACE

PREPARED BY [REDACTED] IN YEAR 2020

THE INCITING INCIDENTS:

A) In late 2015, the Extraordinary Crimes unit of the Seoul Metropolitan Police picked up on a surge in crime-rate in the Seam. Previously unheard phenomenon—such as Extraordinaries with dual abilities—began to emerge, leading to general public unease. Further investigation showed involvement from multiple active Seam gangs (see Appendix 1.1). The Flock launched its private investigation, informed by the Scarab situation of the previous year, and enrolled [REDACTED: hereafter Code Name RAVEN] to obtain information from Informant Starling. Starling personally requested the non-Flock officer “for his own safety” and refused to co-operate with any other Flock officer.

B) In November of 2015, Starling alerted Raven of a “video” that was making the rounds among Seam gangs. The Flock, through agents in the Extraordinary Crime unit, tried to obtain this “video” but was unsuccessful. Starling estimated that most of the top 10 gangs had the “video” in question, but feigned ignorance of what it was.

C) On December 24th of 2015, Starling contacted Raven for a meeting at a diner of his choice, stating that he has information to pass on. Later, Raven reported to other agents that Starling was “off” for the entire course of the meeting, having taken the Extraordinary-suppressant drug Talon into his body, and mentioning that he has connections to the purported “video” passing around in the Seam. Starling mentioned a gang previously unknown during the meeting: “The White Lily”. He also mentioned that he has “seen the video” and implied that he might be in danger because of this. Following this, there was an Extraordinary attack at this diner, allowing Starling to escape the scene. Flock agents monitoring the scene confirmed later that the Extraordinary attack had been coordinated by the Min Estate, to which both officer Raven and Starling has had prior connections. It is widely believed that this was a smokescreen, designed to let Starling disappear without facing more questioning.

D) Unofficial Report: On December 28th of 2015, Informant Starling placed a call to Officer Raven sometime post midnight, asking to meet. Officer Raven complied. While there is no official record of
what their conversation entailed, monitoring agents later reported that Starling looked visibly
distressed upon meeting. Officer Raven accompanied Informant Starling to his residence.

E) On December 29th of 2015, Informant Starling placed a call to the Seoul Metropolitan Police
Extraordinary Crimes Division, where he was patched through to Flock agent Kim Seokjin. He
spoke briefly regarding a meeting of multiple gangs at a Hotel Ace. He promised information in the
form of the names of the attendees at this gathering, and demanded political asylum in return. Agent
Seokjin noted that this was highly unusual, his request unbelievable. Agent Seokjin requested to send
backup to the Ace. He [and officer Raven] was denied due to the Starling’s highly unstable nature.

F) Early in the morning of December 30th, 2015, a group of unauthorised officers— Flock members
and others— organized by Agent Seokjin and officer Raven, stormed the Hotel Ace. Upon arrival,
they noted that the scene exhibited signs of extreme violence, with evidence of struggle and blood
found in the building, but no bodies. Further investigation led them to find Informant Starling,
critically injured. Informant Starling is reported to have succumbed to his injuries in the Hotel Ace.

THE HOTEL ACE INVESTIGATION:

A) The Flock conducted its personal investigation into the Hotel Ace. There were multiple
irregularities reported:

A.1) At the Medical Examiner’s office, Medical Officer Jung Hoseok confirmed that the blood type
of Informant Starling’s body did not match his original type.

A.2) CCTV records from the Medical Examiner’s office on the early morning of the 30th show
highly suspect events (Please see: Appendix 2). Officer Jung was questioned multiple times after the
records surfaced and plead that his presence of mind had been hijacked externally in the video.

A.3) The additional person in the video was later confirmed to be Jeon Jungkook, otherwise known
as the Seagull, a necromancer Extraordinary who was friends with the Starling. The boy has since
stated for the Flock that he had been trying to revive Starling, and thought himself finally
unsuccessful.

A.4) At the Hotel Ace, forensic technicians noted that the DNA in the blood did not match any on
the system, and any fingerprints found were not present in any citizen database or biometric fields.
This led Flock investigators to theorize that the attacks on the Ace had been carried out against
Extraordinaries who are either unregistered, or part of Governmental experiments.

A.5) 2:21 AM on 30 December, 2015, [REDACTED: hereafter Code Named WREN] reported to a
police office in Yongsan-gu. He claimed confusion, disorientation, and memory loss. Wren’s
memory-loss was later confirmed to be entire, and spanning multiple years.

A.6) After Wren’s appearance, multiple other stations reported people with memory loss as well (see
Appendix 3 for independent investigation into this section.)

A.7) Recent investigation of Wren’s clothing (confiscated that day) provide DNA evidence of blood
that matches Informant Starling.

A.8) It is unknown what became of Informant Starling if he did indeed fake his death - the Flock has received no information regarding this.

B) On December 31, officials of the Extraordinary Crimes division were asked to stop pursuing the Hotel Ace case by higher authorities. They complied. The Flock investigated through back-channels, but the Seam was radio-silent.

B.1) Officer Raven and flock agents Kim Seokjin and Kim Namjoon continued to investigate the Ace. See Appendix 4 for transcripts from later interrogations.

C) Agent Seokjin reported later on in the investigation that the people present at the Ace had been the same as those that had been present and presumed dead during the Scarab Event at the Asan Institute. These people would later go on to become victims of the killer dubbed “The Ghost”. It is widely believed that they had no self-autonomy, and were merely puppets of the entity called the Scarab. The Scarab could have been using Necromancer abilities to keep them alive.

C.1) Please see Appendix 5 for Transcripts of Starling’s Interrogation for details on the Ghost murders, conducted January 2019.

D) In early 2018, Wren was inducted into service in the Extraordinary Crimes division, as per the Flock’s decision after the Scarab incident. It’s believed that he will be safer in the police, among those that know better about his case, and the levels of his involvement during the Scarab case. We will continue to monitor him for any anomalies or re-emergent memories.

Excerpt from Evidence A-#665E-Victim’s Notebook, Retrieved from Scene, Decrypted, Pages 61-65.

( Note: It’s unclear who Starling is referring to, as names are never used. It’s inferred that the audience is meant to be more than one person—perhaps two individuals.)

December 27, 2015:

I figure if this notebook gets to either of you now, that means I’m dead. Or worse. We’ve established that dying is actually pretty bland in the whole scheme of things.

Ah. We’ve fucked up a lot, haven’t we? But it’s all going to be over soon. I’ve got a plan.
You’ll both say this is a stupid plan. I know you will. But you both aren’t here, and it’s the only one I have— so. I’m going to go walk into a hotel full of his puppets in a few days. It’s probably going to kill me. That sounds fucked, but it’s going to be a good thing.

I can see you both rolling your eyes reading this.

Anyway. This is me listing down a few things that only I know. Since, if my plan actually works at all, I won’t be able to tell you myself.

A) Firstly, hopefully, if all goes according to plan, H and the Flock will make sure the Wren gets into the force. Hopefully, that means you two will meet again, and this book will pass to him somehow. I’m certain that he can decrypt this cipher. He’s possibly the only one who can. Funny how things connect, right? This is a secret language, invented between two people, used by a third person.

H would call it fate. Destiny. Something like that.

It doesn’t matter what it is. Without Wren, this cipher is as good as useless. But if you’re reading this, you’ve cracked it, so let’s move right on to the next thing.

B) I think we all fucked up, but that this is not the worst scenario.

You know, most of my dreams are about getting stuck in awful time-lines where things got even worse? Did you know I have memories of a whole day that never happened? A whole day where I sneaked out of the Institute, and we went to some amusement park. I think we were all on edge after we buried the Scarab’s body the first time. In this universe, hyung suggested it. That we go somewhere. Somewhere we could lose ourselves in a crowd and no one would notice.

I’d never gone anywhere so bright. So full of light.

I remember two things with the most clarity: a stupid roller-coaster that both of you were so scared of, and strawberry ice-cream.

I wish we could have just stayed in that day in an endless loop.
Ah, I went on a whole tangent there. Anyway. Multiple time-lines exist, and of all of them, this is not the most terrible scenario. If you crack the code to this book, and you don’t know who I am still, I’ve left a USB with Jeon Jungkook. You’ll know him as the Seagull. It will help. If not to answer your questions, to at least get you to ask the right ones. Like who we are, to each other. What we’d built.

C) Why I’m going to the Ace. What’s going to happen there. To know this fully, you need to access the server I used for my videos. The ones I kept recording, remember? No, you probably don’t remember. Just watch the last few. You’ll understand.

[SERVER DETAILS REDACTED]

RADIO COMMUNICATION TO EXTRAORDINARY CRIMES DIVISION, SEOUL METROPOLITAN POLICE, NOVEMBER 2018

Patrol Vehicle: Hullo? Hullo? I’m reporting a Seam disturbance, the Liberty’s burning—

Responder: Can you come again? Did you say the Liberty? The Liberty Hotel?

PV: Yes, yes, the Liberty Hotel, there’s a crowd in front of it, it’s strange—


PV: Send someone. Yeah, send someone now! Something weird is going on here, there’s a bunch of people in front of it, they’ve got weapons, they’ve got fire—

R: Can you see, can you see what they’re doing? Are they Extraordinary? Is there — ? What, what’s that noise?

PV: Earth worker… Earth elemental just destroyed half the fucking hotel— get people here NOW!

R: We’re dispatching backup, officer, hold your position. Can you tell me anything about the crowd? Any visible gang affiliations?
PV: No, they’re just— they’re quiet. They’re silent. They’re destroying the hotel but they’re all… it’s like there’s nobody home. It’s eerie.

R: Do you mean they’re not speaking? Is it a very organised attack?

PV: No. No, I mean like— like they’re zombies.

R: Like zombies.

PV: Like they’re all just dead! Like puppets! Like they’re being controlled or something, I don’t know. Send— send backup— oh. FUCK.

R: Officer? Are you there?

PV: Oh. Fucking hell. They just— they just stopped.

R: … stopped? What do you mean, stopped-

PV: — they just fell down. Like— like something cut their strings. They just fucking stopped.

R: How many people are we talking about?

PV: Twenty? Thirty? Fuck, I think they’re dead! I think they just died. I have to go, I think they’re—

R: Officer? Officer, what do you mean? Officer, hold your position. We’re sending backup.

[Call terminates.]
Agent M: After the fire at the Institute, you disappeared. Agent Seokjin’s testimony puts you in the Seam for a small while, with the boy Jungkook. What happened after that?

TH: … I told you, I don’t want to talk. Can we just stop?

M: Take a deep breath. You need to relax. These tapes will prove important for your case.

TH: I don’t want to relax. Where’s… What’s this place? Where am —

M: No, don’t try to get up.

TH: I don’t want to talk to you, I want to see… I don’t understand—

M: I’ll answer the questions you have in a minute. But before that, you have to answer some of mine.

TH: I don’t think so.

M: Come on, Taehyung. There’s no point in staying quiet about any of it now. It's frankly surprising, given the nature of your crimes, that you’ll choose to stay silent at all.

TH: How does it matter? The die was already cast. All that’s left is to see how it lands.

M: You know we can be very cruel to you. It’ll surprise you, how cruel we can be. We can hold you
down and extract your memories, right now. We can cut your throat and still get the answers we need.

TH: (pause)...then why don’t you just get on with that?

M: Don’t be silly.

TH: I’m not the one with the empty words here, Agent.

M: If you’re thinking at all, you also know we can get you out of this mess. If you cooperate. Or mire you deeper, if you choose not to. It’s up to you, really.

TH: Threats. I thought vague government agencies like the Flock would be past that.

M: Call it what you want. Without your story, the situation simply works against you. Do you know the sheer amount of damage in the Seam? Not to mention that multiple accounts from Flock agents now identify you as the Ghost. You are directly or indirectly responsible for multiple counts of murder and aggravated assault. Does that sound grim to you?

TH: Not really. Not anymore. I’ve known nothing but blood and death for a while now.

M: Believe me, that’s a way lesser hell than courtrooms.

TH: I didn’t know you were hiding a sense of humor there, agent.

M: You’ll go on trials. Multiple ones. They’ll be long. You won’t get many avenues to tell your story, because everyone is impatient to brand this the work of some depraved killer. You will not get to see or talk to the people you love. If you don’t tell me what I want to know, I’ll simply have to leave you to the justice system, and you won’t see any of them ever again.

TH: I really don’t care.

M: That’s not what it looks like from your cell monitoring cameras.
TH: I’ve always had terrible dreams. This isn’t new.

M: You don’t want to know where they are? The people whose names you scream? In your dreams?

TH: You’d never tell me.

M: You don’t strike me as particularly resigned or suicidal. You’ve never cared for the law. You’ve actively operated outside of the law for years and years now. But whether or not you skate out of the justice system depends on what you’re going to tell me. Is your silence worth a lifetime of imprisonment?

TH: So you’re the altruistic agent determined to prove the truth and save the poor informant who’s had a bad past? That’s the role you’re playing?

M: I’m not playing roles. I just want to know about the Scarab. How you fought him. What you did to stop him, for good. The whole truth. You’ve had your dalliances with fringe science and taking matters into your own hands, Taehyung. It’s time to face the law now.

TH: And you think the law’s just going to let me go. The court’s just going to let me walk free. After all this. Surely you can’t believe that?

M: There are … some circumstances in your case that we can use to build your case. Some loopholes to deal with. Some, ah, benefits to be reaped.

TH: Ah, okay. More experimentation. More Extraordinary weaponization. You’ll stop them from putting me in jail because I’m too useful, despite the body count. Because I’m a possible weapon. Is that what you’re saying?

M: Fuck off with that. I know you don’t care.

TH: Don’t care about the body count, or don’t care about being used?
M: Either. You’re not stupid, Starling. You know you don’t want a jail cell.

TH: Don’t I?

M: You’d kill me with your mind right now if you thought I wasn’t useful to you. If you thought I wasn’t being serious about my conviction that you’re way too useful to rot in a jail cell.

TH: …

M: Wouldn’t you?

TH: …

M: I guessed so. So tell me, then, Taehyung. What happened after the Institute?

(Transcriber’s note: At this timestamp, there’s a lengthy pause. The interrogator notes that the subject shows no signs of distress, but seems to be lost in his own mind. It’s an uncomfortable pause, not merely like Starling is thinking, but as if he’s communicating in some Extraordinary manner with others weighing in. The interrogator notes that Starling does this often - ‘disappear into his head’. One or two times, the interview notes imply that the subject has ‘difficulty coming back to himself’.)

TH: I stayed with Jungkook in the Seam for a while. I planned. Yoongi hyung and I had gone over some futures, before the Institute burned down, you see. But the problem was that I didn’t know what timeline we were in. Which future we belonged to. It was confusing. So I stopped going over those, and Namjoon hyung and I went to find the Min Estate.

M: The Min Estate.

TH: Yes. Yoongi hyung’s father traded us a safe-house and large supplies of Talon in return for secrets. That’s how I started trading secrets— there are always enough in the Seam, and the right ones can buy you anything you need.

M: You began working as an informant for the police several months later. After Min Yoongi joined the force. What did you do in the intervening time?
TH: I traveled.

M: You *traveled*.

TH: Yes. I did some more research with the help of the Min Estate. But it wasn’t enough. I wanted to know more about the Deep Space. What it was, its properties, how it was supporting something like the Scarab. If I’m fighting a virus, I need to understand the vector.

M: And you never informed the Flock.

TH: I don’t trust government agencies. Especially shadow ones.

M: Even if your brother does? Even if we’ve helped both your boyfriends?

TH: Your intentions are hardly saintly.

M: Where did you travel?

TH: I went to other Seams.

M: What other Seams?

TH: Japan has an island, uninhabited except for Extraordinaries. Hong Kong has a quarter, like old Kowloon, a walled vertical city full of crumbling skyscrapers. Both have temples bang in the middle. Temples have priests and shamans. The Deep Space, the etheric plane, *olam mithal, yetzirah*. Whatever you call it, it’s existed for centuries. Spiritual Extraordinaries have accessed it. There are reports of it in every major religion - astral plane, astral bodies, chakras, whatever. I went to see if I could get some information about it.

M: And Kim Namjoon accompanied you.
TH: He’s smarter than me. When we were told about how each person’s astral plane is unique to them, I couldn’t grasp the concept, but he explained it.

M: Explained it how?

TH: Imagine three people, each with a halo of a primary color. Red, green, blue. The halos could interact—making secondary shades: yellow, magenta, or cyan. But the source-color remains the same. I can interact with you using the Deep Space I access, but mine is as different from you as red light is to blue. Now extend this metaphor to the entire population of the world. That’s billions of unique, individual variations of the Deep Space. None of them the exact same.

M: This is an abstract science. How does this help you with the Scarab situation?

TH: Because, on the night the Institute burned, the Scarab told me that he is tethered to me. And that - according to the experts we saw - wasn’t possible.

M: Why not?

TH: The Scarab doesn’t have a body. He doesn’t have a motive. He’s hijacked host bodies without reason, created chaos without vision. The only motive the Scarab ever showed was in killing me. In wanting to destroy me. That struck a lot of people we spoke to as very odd. Have you ever heard of something so methodically evil operating without a motive?

M: … Continue.

TH: The etheric plane isn’t a physical dimension. It’s an abstract, psychic space attached to a human body. Monsters, or even consciousnesses, can’t just float around in there. There needs to be something they’re tethered to, someone who’s pulling the string. A body. A host. Something it’s connected to! Um — imagine the Deep Space like water. It’s given shape by the container. Without the container, it cannot be held. Without a body, things can’t move around in there.

M: You’re saying the Scarab shouldn’t have been existing without its body.

TH: No! I’m saying the Scarab should never have existed, because the body it belonged to was long dead. It’s like believing in the existence of a ghost. Without your body, floating around in the Deep Space should be an impossibility. It’s like expecting a helium balloon to stay in your hand without a
M: But the Scarab did exist.

TH: Don’t you see?

M: …

TH: I made him.

M: I … don’t see, actually.

TH: The Scarab is a psychic virus without a body, without a motive, living in a different plane! It wants nothing except to kill me. It forms no patterns of true logic. It can pass from person to person like a disease. It leaves its host bodies with Extraordinary powers, signaling a disturbance in their Deep Space.

M: Yes, and that makes it dangerous -

TH: (impatient) It can give, take, and amplify abilities.

M: So?

Th: Do you know anyone that has similar abilities?

M: You.

TH: Yes! Me.

M: So the Scarab’s abilities simply mirrored yours, but in a bad way.
TH: No! The Scarab’s abilities were my abilities, because I made him. He is me. He can exist without a body, because I exist. He came from me. Not from something external. Not from that man at the Institute. From me.

M: I still don’t get it.

TH: I’m not feeling well. Can we stop this?

M: I’m afraid we can’t do that, Taehyung. You can, however, speed up the narrative for me a little here. What do you mean you made him?

TH: (after a pause) Agent, have you ever had an imaginary friend?

M: No, but I am familiar with the concept. You’re saying you… what…dreamed him up?

TH: Imagine you have unmitigated access to power and abilities that no one’s ever had before. Imagine you then live in extreme stress, pushing yourself constantly to near-death experiences, straining your Deep Space to boundary-breaking points. Imagine you actually die in the course of your experimentation—not once, but several times. That breaks you down. Imagine then, that someone tries to break into your mind, while you’re ill-equipped to completely protect it.

M: That professor at the Institute you spoke about … The one who became the Scarab.

TH: You see, that’s where I was wrong. No one ever became the Scarab. Maybe it was the combination of stress and my new abilities. Maybe it was that, plus the questioning by the Professor at the Institute, his invasion of my mind. Whatever it was, the fault was mine. I was frightened. I killed the Professor, then explained it away by creating the Scarab. I hadn’t really killed him, I told myself, because a part of him was still alive and evil in my mind. Not that that Professor wasn’t evil—he was. But at that point of time, I was many times stronger than him. I could have crushed his consciousness. Instead, I took it, and unknowingly made a monster out of it.

M: You made the Scarab.

TH: Yep.
M: Like a super-charged, manufactured, murderous imaginary friend. One that exists outside of your head.

TH: Yes.

M: This thing that killed so many people — you made him. Starling, do you know what you’re saying?

TH: (Laughing) You don’t think I’ve lost sleep over this?

M: How does this even work? It's like a creature from a nightmare made reality?

TH: Exactly. Like a manifestation. Have you heard of thought-forms? They’re well documented in Tibetan mythology.

M: No.

TH: They’re a sort of disturbance that’s created in the Deep Space under extreme stress or duress. Something that forms there and is then manifested into the real world. Like an Extraordinary ability, but in the form of a malicious entity.

M: This monster responsible for… everything…

TH: The Scarab was never an external threat. He existed because I existed. I made him. That’s why he’s tethered to me.

M: …

TH: It was my fault. The monster was always within me. It took me a long time to see it. A long time, and a lot of travel.
M: Did anyone you know take that well?

TH: (laughs) No. No, they didn’t.

(TH is quiet for a while after this, and asks for a break, stating that he is ‘not well’. The interviewer notes that he’s still not visibly upset, appearing calm, composed, and emotionless. The interviewer posits that a complete psychological evaluation of the subject be carried out post the interrogation.)

Excerpt from Evidence A-#665E- Victim’s Notebook, Retrieved from Scene, Decrypted.

[Undated and scribbled over.]

Sometime tonight, when we were together, I told you I was afraid.

And you said you wouldn’t leave. You said you’ll stay.

But you don’t know the truth! I think of telling you everything, hyung. And then I think of what the look in your face will be, when I’m done. When the whole story is out. And I don’t think I can take that, yet. I don’t think I can, ever. I asked you once, didn’t I, if killing the Scarab made me bad? I won’t ask you again. I think, if you know what I know now, your answer will be different. Won’t it?

I can’t keep you. But I can’t let you go either.

I’m sorry.

Video Transcript #443 - Thought-Forms:

(Collected from Starling’s video collection, transcribed as is)

Scene 1: jumpy greyscale video, taken in what looks like a monastery or something of that sort. There are eight people, standing in a circle. In the middle of the circle is a woman, crouched on the floor, arms wrapped around her knees as she rocks back and forth. At the 01:23 mark, on the wall
right across the woman, a strange sort of shadow forms. It’s shapeless for the most part, vague intimations of a form under a shifting cauld of grey. As the video continues, the woman’s rocking intensifies. At the 02:26 mark, she can be seen mumbling under her breath, sounding tormented. At the 3:01 mark, the shadow begins to take greater shape. Its hair lengthens. Its torso stretches and then flattens out, facial features peeking through the murk. Its hands gain fingers. On the screen, the woman doubles over, gasping. The shadow rises to its feet. Standing, it’s exactly the shape and size of the woman. An almost double, if not for its inhuman pose and awkward limbs. The shadow strides forward. There’s something glimmering in its hands, like a blade. At 4:22, the video goes dark.

Scene 2: The tape jumps forward to a snowy mountain. On first glance, it appears to be the Himalayas. The camera pans out to show snow. The microphone registers the heavy breathing of the climber. At 5:00, the climber can be heard gasping for breath as he ascends. It sounds fast, whistling, like he’s panicked. At 5:32, the edge of the camera catches a glimpse of color, and the climber pauses. At 5:46, the camera points down to show someone else on the mountain. A silent climber. This new climber is just below the one with the camera, clinging to the rocks. He wears the same clothes, the same equipment, the same camera. At 6:00, the climber asks, who are you. At 6:05, the other responds: who are YOU. Its eyes roll strangely in its head. When it pulls itself up, its hand ripples through shades, as if it’s not as physical as it is illusive.

Scene 3: At 6:49, a man and a woman appear on screen. They seem to be part of a documentary. The following is their dialogue:

MAN: There are a lot of names for it! Tibetan thought-forms. Tulpas. Mind-made body. Emanations. Etäimen. They’re all the same thing.

WOMAN: And sometimes they gain independence from their maker?

MAN: Oh, yes! Sometimes they start thinking for themselves. They become sentient and autonomous, and tries to break out of control of the maker. Sometimes this means they want to kill the maker, so they can be completely free. In the 20th century, a Belgian-French explorer reported creating one such thought-form in the shape of a jolly monk which later developed a life of its own and had to be destroyed.

WOMAN: And this- this phenomenon hasn’t been linked to Extraordinary ability?

MAN: Well, it has. Positive thought-forms created by monks, for example, are easily regulated. Most thought-forms as we see in the present world, however, come from confused, abused Extraordinary children. These children focus all their energy on a particular thought— mostly negative— thus giving it a physical shape. Usually, they’re not strong enough to harm anyone but the maker. But a person of exceptionally powerful Extraordinary ability could in theory create something far more destructive—

Scene 4: At 8:13, the tape returns to the monastery from Scene 1. The monks overseeing the exorcism are all lying dead. Knife wounds seep blood through their robes. The woman in the middle is crying now, screaming; hysterical sobs wrack her frame as her strange shadow walks circles
around her. Metal gleams in its hands.

**Scene 5:** At 9:30, the video jumps to what looks like a psychiatrist’s room. A child about the age of five sits on a chair, furiously drawing on a chart. As she draws, something forms in the corner of the room. Antennas on its head. Bright, glittery scales on its skin. Odd, over-large eyes, sliding strangely on its narrow, snout-mouthed face.

At 10:20, the tape fades into the gray wash of video snow.

[END]

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**Excerpt from Evidence A-#665E-Victim’s Notebook, Retrieved from Scene, Decrypted, Pages 70-75.**

**December 27, 2015**

(Continued from Previous Page)

—and I’m sorry. I’m sorry. You know I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry.

When I first came to know, I didn’t want to believe it. How could something like the Scarab have come from me? But the more I thought about it, the more it made sense. His abilities. His lack of proper motive. The fact that it was impossible to completely destroy him, because as long as I’m alive, he can’t die. This also means that the flesh-prison experiment was a failure, you know? I tested that out. Dipped my toe into the Deep Space and tried to call him out. He came. Of course he came. He said, “so you’ve figured it out, then.” I panicked. Wanted to walk right into traffic. I didn’t, because I realised that something was keeping him inactive. If not the flesh-prison, then what?

I tried to figure it out. That’s why I came back to the Seoul Seam, and asked to work with the Extraordinary Crimes’ newest rookie.

It was hard seeing you, hyung. Hard seeing you look at me without recognition, like I’m some common crook. But being close to you meant I could use some of your clairvoyance, even though it was muted due to the memory-block. Being close to you meant I could see the future. I can’t skip through probabilities the same as you. I don’t know how to access the Deep Space that way yet. But
I can see them, at least. The probabilities. The permutations.

(I tried to see if you remembered anything, you know? I asked you about Roland Park. You didn’t know who he was.)

You were right before. There aren’t any futures where we win. Most of them, I can’t see past my own death. But I did get one nugget of information. The Scarab wasn’t actively hunting me because he believed his flesh-prison. Because I believed in it.

It seems that he shares not only my abilities, but also my convictions. It’s why he thinks he’s not powerful enough, not at this moment. It’s why he’s biding his time.

He thinks he’s weak, because I thought him weak.

Isn’t that fantastically strange?

It still doesn’t explain why he wasn’t doing anything to increase his power over me, but I have my suspicions about that. We’ll come to that in a bit.

Maybe you realised this, but I planted that video.

A trick, you know. For a while I’d suspected that he had been keeping a secret. A trump card, of sorts, to play against me. That’s why he wasn’t actively looking for anything to use against me — because he already had something in his arsenal. I was rather certain what it was, but I had to be sure. Before I do anything else at all, I had to be sure.

So I made up a gang. I called it The White Lily. I used it to put out news about this ‘video’ that had information on how to create Extraordinaries. Everyone was talking about it. Nobody had it. I gave some people multiple Extraordinary abilities, to make it seem believable. They were mostly the Min Estate men, in the Seam. Or sometimes Jungkook’s friends. It just had to be believable.

The Scarab thinks he’s special, you know. He thinks I’m weak to not play with the abilities I have. He probably thinks being free of me will make him stronger, or something like that. It’s why he doesn’t live in my head so much. He wants to pretend to be real. Pinocchio is a Real Boy, and all that. But Kwon Yuri has been learning about the Deep Space, too, and she thinks that the Scarab really might die with me.
That bit is going to be important. The ‘him dying without me’ bit.

But I’m getting ahead of myself.

The video trick is meant to lure him out. To get him to expose his tricks. I figured, if his specialness was threatened, then he’d know that it was me. If he thought I was going to tell everybody how to gain abilities and create Extraordinariness, then he’d come at me with everything he’s got. And what he’s got is what I’m interested in.

There was a contingency plan. If he came at me too early, I was going to pretend to fake my death, slip under the radar, and then go at him, all guns blazing. Jungkook was supposed to help with the ‘faking my death’ part. H and I thought that it would also help us understand something crucial: how the Scarab operates in a situation where I am not completely alive.

But I had one big concern.

One big question, without whose answer I couldn’t do anything too drastic.

I was meant to meet someone the night I asked you to come to the diner, hyung. A mysterious man, who sent me a message through the Liberty. I was supposed to dress a particular way, go to a particular place. You asked me why I was dressed like that, then, like the punchline of a joke. I suppose that was the Scarab’s intention. To tell me he thinks this is all a joke. That this is all some minor inconvenience in his campaign of evil.

When I got the message, I knew it had to be him, working through someone. Again, there was a contingency plan. If it looked like he was going to disrupt us, or hurt you in any way, I was going to signal, and the Min Estate people were going to cause a distraction.

I didn’t want you in any crossfire.

I just really wanted to see you.

You asked why I wanted the Talon signature on my throat. I was weakening myself. Signaling to him that I had diminished power. That I had used Talon the way it’s meant to be used— as an
Extraordinary power suppressant. That was another bait. To attack if he dared. To come at me, with everything he’s got.

I gave you a meeting place for the next day because I wanted to give you this notebook. I wasn’t going to tell you how to solve it. But I had to get this to you, because it was important. I was going to write everything in it so that, in the future, if you ever remembered for any reason...you’d have something to look into.

But then something happened yesterday.

Again - I get ahead of myself. At the diner, H alerted me of strange people hanging about the area. I was afraid that he’d use you in some way, hyung, like a shield between us. So I signaled for the waiting men to create a diversion, and got out of there. I waited for someone to show, but no one did. I guessed we spooked him off.

But then, the next day, I went early to the cafe to wait for you. To give you this notebook, at the time and place I told you I’d meet you. But before I could, I saw him.

Wren.

This was what I’d suspected, you know. That he was only content to wait and not make any moves because he had Wren, who can work with Deep Space like we both can. That he had never let him die in the fire— instead, keeping him around, memories lost and mind-controlled, to use against me when the time came.

This was my suspicion, and my biggest question. My concern.

I’d need to break him out of the Scarab’s control before I did anything else. Both to reduce the threat, and because I need to fix this whole mess.

So part one of my plan had worked, then. The video trick- and my Talon-weak state- lured him out to expose his big trump card. I have my answer now.

Wren’s alive.
I ran from the diner because I didn’t want to engage yet. It was hard enough seeing him. I didn’t expect the shock of it, you know? It felt like it was all my fault. It kind of is, I guess. But I’m going to fix it now.

I didn’t mean to call you today. Didn’t mean to cry on you. It just was a lot, seeing him. Seeing him alive, and not himself. Lost in his own head for years now. Fuck, it’s terrible. And it was selfish, but after I saw him, I needed you. Both of you. I told myself I didn’t deserve that. Would never deserve it, not after all this. But then I couldn’t help myself. I couldn’t walk into what I’m going to without seeing you once more.

Anyway. The mysterious man who is none other than him has asked me to come to the Hotel Ace in a couple of days. There’s no running away this time, no causing diversions.

I’m going to go. I’m going to go, and try to fix all this. To end all this.

If you can read this, if you ever read this, that means I did something right. I saved Wren.

I want a life without fangs and claws. I want a kiss without blood and metal. But the trouble is, none of us are made for weeping. The trouble is, we go at lightspeed from function to disaster. There’s now too less of a distance between a love scene and a war scene.

And this is how we go to war.

Appendix 4: INTERROGATION TRANSCRIPTS

Being a transcript of the joint testimony of AGENTS KIM NAMJOON (NJ) and KIM SEOKJIN (SJ) conducted by Flock Agent (M) in relation to the events of November 2018

Dated January 2019

(Continued from Page 3)

M: And you didn’t know what your brother knew. About the Scarab.

SJ: No. Not about the Thought Form stuff, I didn’t. He kept that to himself.
M: Why do you think that is?

SJ: I don’t know. The less people knew, the better? I am around a lot of telepaths at work. It would have compromised him to the Flock if I knew.

M: But you knew?

NJ: I did, yeah. I knew what he was planning to do.

M: And what, exactly, was that?

NJ: He was going to free Jimin from the Scarab’s hold. Then we were going to try something — a way to make the Scarab think he was dead, to fake it as accurately as possible, and see what happens then.

M: How were you going to do that?

NJ: With some drugs that simulate near-death experiences. The idea was to see if the Scarab would die along with him.

M: Would you call that suicidal?

NJ: No. It was a scientific experiment.

M: You wouldn’t call the boy’s actions emotionally motivated?

NJ: I don’t think I want to give you an answer you want to hear in place of the truth, Agent.

M: You really think he was scientifically driven, and not just self-sacrificial considering what he thought he’d done?
SJ: Taehyung is not stupid. If he can stay alive and fix this mess, he’d take that option over throwing himself to the wolves.

M: You place too much stock on the boy’s mental fortitude.

NJ: Has he been spacing out in your interrogations? That’s a side-effect.

M: A side-effect?

NJ: Of the drugs. The near-death simulation drugs. Which he took to keep the Scarab under control.

M: So you’re saying his plan worked, then.

NJ: No, not exactly. No. No, it didn’t work the way we planned.

M: Why’s that, do you think?

NJ: He was outnumbered.

M: Please, feel free to elaborate.

SJ: You don’t *stop*, do you?

M: You know I’m a demanding creature, Seokjin.

NJ (after a pause): Jimin was supposed to be the only large threat at the Ace. Nobody else. He was expecting to have to maybe overpower Jimin. Maybe a few others, with low-grade Extraordinary abilities. But the Scarab had played a little trick. He knew of their experiment, right? From using it on Jimin. He knew how it worked, and he’d tried it once already. So he’d saved not just Jimin from that night, but a bunch of Extraordinaries from the Institute. No one missed them because everyone thought they were dead. The Scarab kept them around, unlocked the doors to the Deep Space for all
of them. A bunch of puppets, all with incredible power. He’d one-upped us.

M: Ah. I see.

SJ: I didn’t know he’d go to the Ace, but I knew he was in trouble when he called.

M: How?

SJ: He asked for political asylum. That’s code between us. He needed help. So we got together some people— Yoongi helped. And then we went to the Ace.

NJ: But we were too late.

SJ: He gave me the list of names. All the people who were at the Ace. He gave me that list, and they were all Extraordinaries who were also at the Institute.

M: Do you think he wanted you to get rid of them? Is that why he gave it to you?

SJ: I don’t know.

M: You didn’t give it to the Flock.

SJ: No.

M: Why is that?

SJ: I didn’t know if I should. I didn’t know if he wanted me to. I didn’t know how I could explain all of it without throwing him under the bus.

M: But you believed he was dead.
SJ: Namjoon gave me reason to believe otherwise.

NJ: How did I do that?

SJ: Yoongi put you in charge of the crime scene with Hoseok that night. Once we had moved his body to the ambulance, you spilled something in the crime scene. While the forensic techs cleaned it up, you were gone for an unnaturally long time. The next I saw you, you had blood on your sleeve, and you were fussing around the ambulance. It made me wonder. If you’d moved the body.

NJ: But you never asked!

SJ: What was I supposed to ask? Yah, Kim Namjoon, did you move my brother’s body somewhere and replace it with some fake?

M: As a matter of fact, did you?

NJ: Yes. Kwon Yuri, who knows about the issue, is a face-changer. We substituted a fake body to send to the Medical Examiner’s office.

M: Where did you get the body?

NJ: The same place we got all the other bodies. Warehouse G. It turned out well for us.

M: Why’s that?

NJ: CCTV evidence from the Medical Examiner’s office shows that Jeon Jungkook tried to revive who he believed to be Taehyung, later that day. He almost succeeded. But the Scarab was watching, and hijacked Hoseok to make sure Taehyung didn’t survive.

M: So you sent the Scarab after the wrong body.
NJ: We did.

M: What did you do with the right one?

NJ: We were supposed to go to the Safe House. We didn’t. He…disappeared, before that. Simply vanished. I didn’t know if it was him or the Scarab that did that. Considering Taehyung’s original blood loss, I just thought—thought we’d failed. That he was truly dead.

M: What do you think really happened, at the Ace?

NJ: I think he destroyed those Extraordinaries, but they came back. Resurrected. Just like Taehyung can. That explains the blood but not the bodies. I think that fight, with all those super-powered Extraordinaries he wasn’t expecting, significantly weakened him. But he managed to free Jimin. However, sometime in that particular scuffle, he was stabbed. Sometime after that —with or without somebody’s help— he was revived.

M: Why do you think he didn’t let you know that he had survived?

NJ: Dunno. Maybe he thought we’d won the battle. That we’ll never win the war.

M: When did you think he was alive, the next?

NJ: When the first victim of the Ghost was named. I knew that name. That was somebody at the Institute, somebody who would have been at the Ace. One of the Scarab’s super-powered puppets.

M: You think he was getting rid of all of them? One by one?

NJ: Oh, definitely. The ability the Ghost used—

SJ: My ability.

NJ: Yeah, that. There’s no resurrection from that, really. And even if the Scarab tried, he wouldn’t have been able, because the eyes were taken. The way the thought-form works is through the eyes. I
think that’s because that’s how mind-controllers generally work.

M: You helped the Ghost. Got him out of some sticky situations.

NJ: I still would, if he needs it. I’m sure hyung agrees.

SJ: I do.

M: You don’t think you’re supporting an unstable murderer?

NJ: I don’t think so, no. Has he made mistakes? Yes. Are they deliberate? No. Regardless of its origin, the Scarab is a very large threat. He just wants to stop it, as much as anyone else.

M: The Scarab killed over thirty people in the Seam. In one fell blow. Where do we place that kind of responsibility?

NJ: Where do you place the responsibility for all the illegal things that went on in the Institute? For all the children taken from their parents and the Extraordinaries brainwashed into shades of themselves?

SJ: If we begin to look for moral high ground in this story, Agent, we’ll be looking until the end of the world. I suggest you look for compromises instead.

M: Those boys that were with the Starling. Did they feel the same way? All forgiving and forgotten?

NJ (hesitates): That’s not for me to answer.

SJ: That’s between the three of them. Agent, where’s my brother now?

M: That’s classified.
NJ: Alright. That’s not concerning at all.

M: He’s in safe hands. We’re keeping him safe, and we’re making sure everyone else is safe. From him.

SJ: It’s been twelve days.

M: And it will be many more before decisions are made. This is a matter of national security.

NJ: How many more days?

M: I cannot tell you anything about that. I’m sorry.

[Pause]

SJ: Is that all you wanted to ask us, Agent? Are we free to go now?

M: That’s the bulk of it, but—

SJ: That’s great, then. We have nothing more to say to you. Thank you. Good day.

[Tape ends.]

ARCHIVED: NOTES MADE BY INFORMANT STARLING, 2015, REGARDING PLAUSIBLE ‘FUTURES’

— future #22: in this future, I go to the Ace. I try to speak to Jimin, but the Scarab thinks I’m trying to break him out of his mind control, so the Scarab lets go of him. If the Scarab lets go of him without him willfully pushing the Scarab out, he’ll die. Like all the other puppets, he’ll die.

- future #23: this one is not clear. I gave Yoongi hyung a whole case to solve today while I sat and
tried to peer into this one, but this one isn’t clear at all. It doesn’t end well anyway, so who cares. So many of them don’t end well.

- future #24: this one is unclear, too. But in this one, I don’t speak to Jimin. I fight him. I fight him, and I let him win. I let him stab a knife through my heart. And then he wakes up! He wakes up, because his dream routine of killing me over and over is true now. It’s not a nightmare anymore. The dream is run its track and now it’s time to wake up.

So he wakes up.

And for the briefest moment, for when he has his memories and knows who I am and knows that it’s my blood on his hands— I need to tell him to run. To get away. To go as fast as possible. I need to compel him to do this, and hopefully he’ll push the Scarab out because he’s awake and alert, and so hopefully he’ll stay my Jimin. But not for long, because I have to take away his memories again. It’s the only way. If I don’t, he’ll try to revive me, and then the Scarab will definitely kill him.

This has to work. This has to work.

All that’s left is to save him. And then it can all stop.

[End]

ARCHIVED: A Simulated Rendering of Events from 30th December 2015, The Hotel Ace.

PREPARED BY [REDACTED] IN YEAR 2020

[Transcriber’s Note: What happens here is complicated, so I’ve tried my best to splice it into a play-by-play scene. Footage compiles the following: recovered surveillance video from cameras 11, 8 and 3 (Hallways), Cameras 6, 12 and 4 (Stairwells), tampered memory extracted from Subject Wren (Date of Extraction, January 2019). NB: Subject Starling refused any and all memory extraction procedures]

We begin in the dark.
There are boxes surrounding the subject so it’s a fair guess that this is some sort of storage room. There’s the oddest humming throughout Wren’s memories here which we’ve taken to mean is a consequence of being Extraordinarily possessed. Muted voices pass by. I haven’t been able to decipher anything in particular except for this one line from Starling:

[TH: Brought a lot of friends, did we?]

It’s not clear who he’s speaking to. Cameras in the hallways show multiple people, standing with unnatural stillness. Since it’s clear what became of those people from other interrogations, I will focus this transcript on Wren.

Subject Wren is in remarkable distress for someone so still. The distress appears to be mental, because the extracted memory shows a rapid loop of a nightmare over and over. In the nightmare, Wren is walking down a hallway, being chased by something frightening. In front of him is a boy that looks highly similar to Starling. The nightmare restarts every time Wren stabs the boy. [For a detailed explanation, please refer to Appendix 11: Panic Routines] Only a small part of Wren’s true consciousness is aware of his real surroundings. The rest stays trapped in this looping dream. [We believe that he was trapped in the dream because the Scarab possessed him without intention to jump into his memories. While his mind remained intact, the alien presence looped the panic routine interminably to Wren’s waking mind.]

Jumping to the cameras in the stairwell - Starling is winning a fight against one of the last Extraordinaries left. He’s remarkably unharmed except for a gash on his arm and his forehead. Everything else, however, is chaos around him.

The staircase is littered with bodies. Sparks burst from loose electrical wiring. Panels have come loose from the ceiling. The camera does not catch what is beyond the stairs, but the red splash of emergency lighting is visible at the edge of the hall. Starling seems to stay steady.

[TH: Thought you were looking to kill me?]

He’s baiting it. Whatever he’s talking to. But before you write this off as some brave standoff, please note that the surveillance video shows him in a defeated fashion. Like he’s waiting for something to attack him.

My guess is that he’s waiting for Wren, because that’s the next thing that happens. The storage room opens, and Subject Wren steps out. They have a brief conversation here which is not clear in any cameras, and drowned out by the high-pitched droning in Wren’s memory. Wren is actively fighting the nightmare now, trying to break out, as is clear by increasing panic response to whatever is
occurring. By studying their gestures and speech patterns, this is what is postulated as their conversation:

W: There never was any video, was there? Was it all a lure? Just to get me to show you this face?

TH: He’s all I care about. Let him go.

W: You’ve really weakened yourself. With Talon.

TH: You wouldn’t have brought him here, otherwise. He’s the strongest host you have, and you know it. He’s your chance of winning against me.

W: So this is your suicide mission.

TH: You’ll just have to see, won’t you?

I’m not sure what happens next. There’s a blur in Wren’s memories, and the cameras short out for a brief bit. I’m assuming there’s some surge in Extraordinary power here, some sort of attempt at a fight. The nightmare loop repeats. Hallway, knife, monster, boy. The ringing sound peaks. I think Wren fights the Scarab tooth and nail here. But all I can see from the actual memory is the ‘panic routine’.


And then the sound ends. The ringing stops. There’s one moment of incredible clarity where Wren sees Starling, a brief moment where he takes in the boy, the knife, the blood.

I think he knows immediately that this is not a dream. He knows immediately that this is real.

They struggle, but not because they’re fighting. They struggle because Starling’s gone limp, all of his weight against Wren, and Wren’s still battling the dregs of his nightmare.

This conversation is clear in Wren’s memory.
Wake up, Jimin hears first. Wake up, Jimin-ah, please.

No, he thinks. No, no, no, no. There’s blood on his hands, a lot of it, and he’s steadying Taehyung by his shoulders without thinking.

But they’re sinking. They’re both sinking.

Taehyung’s hands are on his wrists. His head’s pressed to Jimin’s shoulder. When he pulls back, there’s blood in his mouth, on his lips.

Hi, Jiminie, he says. He looks gaunt, like he’s lost weight, and Jimin hasn’t seen him in…in—oh god, how long has it been? How long has he been lost in his head?

I found you, says Taehyung. He’s smiling. His knees hit the ground. Now you have to go.

“I’m not awake,” Jimin mumbles. “I’m not awake, no, this is just a dream—”

”You have to fight him,” Taehyung says. “You have to push him out, before he—”

And Jimin does. He feels the Scarab, trying to gain control over him again, and he scrabbles to gain a foothold on his own thoughts. He kneels next to Taehyung, horrified, grasping at Taehyung’s arms in terror as he fights.

“You’re—you’re hurt,” he says. “How did you wake me— how did you—?”

“You don’t have time,” Taehyung rasps out. “You have to go.”

“No, I—”

His hands press uselessly against Taehyung’s wounds. It’s pointless, Jimin thinks, he’s bleeding too much. He’s bleeding too much and he’s pushing Jimin’s hands away and none of it makes any sense.
, none of it computes because how, how is Taehyung here, where is here? The Scarab keeps crowding into his mind, but now that Jimin knows what’s happening, now that he has full control of his own Extraordinary abilities, he can do what Taehyung had done once and construct walls. He can keep the Scarab out.

He’s going to be okay, he thinks. But what of Taehyung?

“You have to run,” Taehyung says, and there’s something in his voice now. Something like a spell. “Go.”

“I’m not leaving you,” sputters Jimin, but his body’s already disobeying. Taehyung’s using some ability, then. To compel him. To make him go. “Taehyungie, no, stop it!”

Taehyung looks at him. He’s white-faced now, blinking slow, teeth grit against the pain and fingers clenching into his thighs. “You have to forget,” he whispers. “You have to forget, Jiminnie, I’m sorry. You have to forget.”

“What?” Jimin asks. He grabs Taehyung’s arms tighter. “What do you— no, don’t!”

But he can already feel the walls coming down. And even weakened with Talon, even losing blood, Taehyung’s still spent a longer time working out how to use his abilities. He’s still stronger.

“Go,” Taehyung tells him, and this time, Jimin gets up. Stands, swaying, looking down at the boy, the knife, the blood. “Go before he finds you.”

His memory blanks. A strange sort of calm descends over him, and everything sort of fades into a blur of light and color. When he can see again, when he’s thinking straight again, he’s not in that room anymore. He’s not even in the same street as the Ace. He’s far away, on a street in the Seam. He looks down at himself, at the blood on his clothes and on his hands, and shudders.

On the wall of a nearby restaurant, the calendar says December 2015.

Jimin’s breath catches in his throat.
M: Are you ready to continue?

TH: Can I say no?

M: If you want to. I won’t take it as an answer. Now, sit down and look at me. I need you to fill in some holes I have in this timeline I’m building for your case.

TH: I’ve been thinking about your motives. Do you even really care about the cost of everything that’s happened?

M: Frankly, no. I just want to know the whole story so I can keep you from being fast-tracked into life imprisonment at the same gaol that you sent Roland Park’s body to.

TH: And whatever you want with me is going to be such a walk in the park…

M: Let’s worry about that when we get to it. Tell me what you did after you saved Wren at the Ace.

TH: I died.

M: Don’t be taciturn. Tell me in detail.
TH: I literally died. Hurt like a bitch.

M: But then you were revived.

TH: Yes. [Pause.] It’s cold in here. Can’t you tell me where this is?

M: Not yet. Would you like warmer clothes?

TH: I’m alright.

M: Have you been getting your meals?

TH: …

TH: I want to know where I am. And how long I’m going to be here.

M: In due time. Give me answers first. After the Ace, how were you revived?

TH: Did it myself. I paid—paid the Min Estate people in secrets. Enough secrets to furnish a lab. When things had calmed down somewhat at the Ace, I removed myself from where Namjoon hyung had placed me.

M: You didn’t tell him what you were doing.

TH: I’d inconvenienced him enough. I made this monster. I’m supposed to find a solution.

M: And where did you go?

TH: I went to the lab.
M: What did you do in the lab?

TH: Nothing.

M: I need more than that. You were gone for more than a year after the Ace, Taehyung, what did you do?

TH: *Nothing*. I did nothing. I took myself into Deep Space. I stayed there. I took a risk, but I paid some people with enough knowledge that they kept me alive in that place.

M: And you simply — left your body?

TH: Hmm.

M: Is that how the Scarab simply stopped functioning over the course of the next two years?

TH: Yes. I trapped myself. So I trapped him. With me.

M: If you’d died, truly died, would that have been a solution?

TH: I didn’t want to take that risk. The Scarab was fully separate from me by then. He’d become sentient and malicious. What if my death simply freed him entirely? I preferred to find a way to trap him.

M: But you failed.

TH: I had a momentary lapse of alertness.

M: You were…conversing with him? In the Deep Space?

TH: Sometimes. It’s not exactly a real place. He tried to break out a lot. I stopped him at first. But
then I was...doing something else...and he chose that moment to break out.

M: And he succeeded?

TH: Somewhat. The Extraordinaries I killed in the Ace — before I saved Jimin - he’d revived them again, before I could trap him. After the Ace, he made them go hide somewhere. His little Extraordinary platoon. That’s why there were never any bodies at the Ace. During my time in... stasis... he began to reach out to them again.

M: And that’s why you ripped them apart. As the Ghost.

TH: I was panicking, by then. If I couldn’t hold him, not even with my full consciousness in the Deep Space... and with their level of abilities, those Extraordinaries would be dangerous...

M: Has he ever been able to use your body? The way he’s used other hosts?

TH: Once or twice. When my control slipped. But I got it back quickly. [Pause.] My friends. Are they alive?

M: I cannot give you any information about that right now. Sorry.

TH: I don’t want to talk anymore, then.

M: I understand. Are you feeling better?

TH: Please get out, Agent.

M: I will. I just have one more question. That entire time you locked yourself in the Deep Space. You couldn’t have been sitting idle.

TH: I wasn’t.
M: What were you doing, then?

TH: Thought you said one question.

M: Taehyung.

TH: You’ve put me in a windowless room with no access to anyone I know. You tie me down. You keep telling me you have vague interests in saving me, or using me. I don’t know who you are, I don’t even know if you’re Flock like you say you are. I just want to know — just want to know if they’re alive.

M: Okay. Alright. What do you think happened?

TH: I don’t know. I don’t remember. I wasn’t meant to live.

M: Tell me what I want to know and I can negotiate. We can give you some details.

TH: …

M: You’re smart. You know you’re not going anywhere.

TH: You don’t know that.

M: Your Extraordinary abilities are muted. There’s enough Talon in your bed to permanently subdue them, if you were a lesser Extraordinary. You’re not going anywhere, Taehyung. And so, like I’ve said ad nauseam, I’m your best bet.

TH: Fine! I was building a cage.

M:… a cage?
TH: When I was in stasis. When I was locked up in the Deep Space. For a fucking year. I was building a trap.

M: A trap. For the Scarab.

TH: Yes.

M: In the Deep Space.

TH: Yes. A thought-form is caused by disturbances in the Deep Space. A similar, controlled disturbance could trap him there. That’s what we learned from the other Seams.

M: A mental prison.

TH: Yes! All of Yoongi hyung’s probabilities only said we couldn’t kill him. They never said we couldn’t trap him. So I built a cage.

M: Alright. I’ll make a note of that.

TH: Please. Just tell me—

M: I will negotiate, on your behalf. Now stay here, quietly, like a good boy, and eat your meals. I don’t think stasis has done much to keep flesh on your bones.

TH: My head hurts.

M: That’s expected. I’ll be back, when I have news to give you regarding your request for information. Please cooperate with the psych evaluator.

TH: I just want to know the answer to a yes or no question. Are they alive? Agent. Agent. Please—
NOTES FROM STARLING’S PERSONAL DIARY, WRITTEN WHILE DETAINED

They gave me a fucking pencil because they’re afraid I’ll stick the pen in my eye or something.

I don’t know how long I’ve been here. There’s no window. No clock, either. Meals come at unpredictable times. When the agent comes to ask me questions, they strap my arms down, like that can do anything. Doctors (or scientists, I’m not sure if I’m a lab experiment or a patient now) keep coming to take my vitals and check up on me. A psych evaluator came and made me do sheets and sheets of questions.

Have I ever had an out-of-body experience.

Have I ever felt like my body wasn’t mine.

Have I ever found myself thinking that the world around me wasn’t real.

Ha. Those questions were a joke.

She says I’m of sane mind. Funnily enough.

I don’t know what happened. I can’t remember beyond a point. What happened, after the Seam burned? After we tried to trap the Scarab? What happened in the station? I can’t get into Deep Space. They make sure I’m toothless, here. Multiple injections of Talon a day. They’re smart. I wonder if Seokjin hyung told them about the Talon. Sure he didn’t think this is what they’d use it for.

In fact, I don’t even know if this place is real. I wish he’d just tell me one thing. Where we are. How long I’m going to be here. If anyone survived.

The agent says the Seam burned that night. He says people died. I remember that. I remember most of what happened after, too. What we did. I can’t write it here because I don’t trust them.

But it scares me. Scares me that there are parts missing. Scares me that I don’t know how I got here. Or how long this detainment is going to be.
For once in a long time, my head is completely empty.

I’m scared that I will always be afraid. Afraid of what exactly is out there. What exactly I’ll find if they let me go.

If they let me go.

This place is so incredibly bright. The light is unbearable. Maybe this is how butterflies feel, pinned under microscopes.

I think about you both. All the time.

ARCHIVED: NOTES MADE BY INFORMANT STARLING, 2015, REGARDING PLAUSIBLE ‘FUTURES’

# 221: You’ll kill everything you love, eventually.

Chapter End Notes


See y’all soon for the VERY. LAST. CHAPTER. (Will there be tears. I don’t know.)

Come say hi on twt
Peregrine

Chapter Summary

A single starling is a frighteningly small bird. But a murmuration is a force.

Chapter Notes

We are? At the end??????? At last???

If you've followed along from the beginning, or the middle, or just getting to this now after it's all done - thank you so much. This fic has been a labor of love. It has been in the works through major life changes, multiple countries, many Dunkin Donuts, MANY Lotterias, a staggering amount of Starbucks, and too many office chai counters to count. It has had spreadsheets, annoyed betas, plot holes, and insurmountable issues that were - with help and with love - surmounted. It has kept me writing, past tangles of plot I was sure I didn't have in me to untangle in a satisfying manner. It has taught me a lot about writing.

Also it kept me entertained at work! It made me learn about Tibetan theosophy and Kabbalah and birds! It helped me completely adopt Scrivener!

But it must all end, so here we are.

Can you believe I posted chapter 1 almost a year ago? How the fuck did a whole year go by?

I hope you enjoy the ending. I hope that it ends with what these characters are really good at, which is -

(contd)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

PRESENT

SAFE HOUSE BASEMENT

With all his memories accounted for, Jimin remembers the night at the Ace. He remembers being cooped up in some small room, staidly listening as Taehyung destroyed the other Extraordinaries who’d arrived there in pretense of obtaining the ‘video’. He remembers the Scarab’s fury at being tricked, at his realization that the video is nothing more than a dangling bait for him to snatch at.

Jimin remembers being very marginally awake. Aware that all this rage and murderous hate was
directed towards someone he loved. Aware that there was a monster in his brain, controlling his every move.

It’s not too much of a leap now, to believe that Taehyung had created it. They’d always known he had, in some way. Jimin thinks it changes nothing. Whatever its origins, the Scarab was now its own monster. It made its own rules and ravaged its own path.

It’s a very odd feeling, this. Now that all is said and done, and everything is on the table, he feels number than ever. What’s he supposed to think, he wonders, staring from one face to another in the confines of the basement. The secrets and the winding paths they’d taken to get here aside, what’s he supposed to do now? Is he angry at Taehyung, for every decision he’d made on their behalf, for every terrible mess dogpiled on another? Oddly, it doesn’t feel like he should be. It’s not like either he or Yoongi are completely blameless in this situation.

He tries to catch a glimpse of Yoongi, and thinks he looks similarly confused. Taehyung, across from them, looks haunted and not all-there. In the telling of this entire tale, he’s spoken the least, only filling in when there was no choice. Namjoon and Seokjin have spoken the most. Jimin thinks Taehyung is still having trouble staying in the now, like he’d been in the Liberty. Or maybe he’s just tired.

The police radio spits out statistics of casualties. Yoongi keeps staring at it, like he wants to physically turn time back around, like all these numbers of dead can be erased if only he could find the right switch to flick in the universe’s space-time.

It’s Hoseok who asks the question they’ve all been meaning to ask. “So…what now?”

“We’ve to go find him,” Taehyung whispers. “Before he burns the Seam down. We’ve to go stop him.”

“How are we going to do that?” Yoongi snaps, rubbing his temples. “Haven’t we already tried that, multiple times? What’s the point in failing again?”

Namjoon winces. “Awful as it might sound, I agree,” he says. “There’s no point in going at him without a plan.”

“I have a plan.”
Jimin looks at Taehyung, warily. “What plan? The trap you just told us about? That you don’t know will work or not?”

“What choice do we have? You know he’ll burn down the whole city if we don’t show ourselves. It’s what he wants now. Now that everyone is in the know and I’m not holding him back in the Deep Space. He wants us to show ourselves, so he can end it for once and for all.”

The silence that follows this is claustrophobic. Nobody moves. Seokjin’s phone rings, and he stands up hastily, moving towards the stairs. They all watch him exit the basement wordlessly.

“I think we should all just take a break,” Namjoon says. “For a few hours. Think about this, about what reinforcements we can get if we do decide on offense. I can speak to the Flock. You three can… can strengthen your trap, or whatever. Jungkook, you can try to round up some of your friends.”

Jungkook nods. “I’ll make some calls.”

“I’ll figure out if I can get some triage units,” Hoseok mutters. “While we wait.”

Namjoon stands, then pauses to scratch his head. “It doesn’t matter how many reinforcements we have, though,” he says. “What matters is how well you can hold him. Hate that this is a pressure situation, but I need some confidence from you on this, Taehyung-ah.”

Taehyung’s mouth pulls into a bare, stripped-down smile. He says nothing.

In some minutes, the others are gone. They have the basement to themselves. Jimin’s stomach churns from the tension. He thinks of how he hasn’t had a moment with them since the night at the Institute, the night where everything went so wrong.

“Plans and plans and counter-plans,” Yoongi says, after a long silence. “I feel like we’re just going in circles.”

Taehyung’s whole body is taut as a wire, tension laced through his words when he speaks. “I’m sorry,” he says, and then his next breath is a wheeze. “I’m sorry that all these horrible things — all these awful things have happened to you. You lost two of years, Jimin-ah—”
“Yeah. So did you.”

“— and I’m sorry I had to manipulate you, to keep you safe, I’m sorry I had to use my abilities on you—”

Yoongi barks out a harsh laugh. “Just don’t get into my head again.”

“You were going to hit me with a chair, hyung.”

“Yeah, well. You pushed me to the fucking edge, didn’t you?”

Taehyung lowers his gaze. “I did.”

“All the times we were working on the Ghost case and wondered, what sort of depraved monster…” Yoongi shakes his head. “And then it turns out that’s not the story at all.”

Taehyung bites his lip. His eyes look huge in his gaunt face when he responds. “They were already gone. Their minds…”

“I know,” Yoongi says. “I know, Taehyung-ah, you don’t need to justify it. We’re all on thin moral ground here, I know. And we’ll fucking deal with the— the ramifications and the law and all that bullshit. After we’ve caught the Scarab.”

Taehyung nods. He folds himself into his chair like a folded origami puppet, head falling to his knees, eyes closed. The back of his neck looks incredibly vulnerable, Jimin thinks, a frisson of terrible sadness cresting over him all at once. He just looks small, like a frail little bird, like he can barely hold himself up let alone the Scarab.

“This trap,” Jimin whispers. “Taehyung-ah. What’s this trap?”

“It’s like the panic routine,” Taehyung says, muffled. “A feedback loop of endless possibilities in the Deep Space. Impossible to break out of. Like a puzzle box.”
“You think it can hold him.”

“I’m convinced it can. And if I’m convinced, then the conviction flows to him. We’re the same thing, after all.”

Yoongi sucks in a sharp breath. “Don’t say that. You’re not the same thing.”

Taehyung laughs, shortly. “I don’t mind. It’s the truth.”

“It’s not you out there murdering innocents, is it?” Yoongi asks, a thrum of anger in his voice. “It’s not you that kept Jimin prisoner for two years, is it?”

Taehyung shrugs. “The whole point of Frankenstein is that the creator is the true monster.”

“I don’t want to think about you making that thing,” Jimin says, quietly. “And neither should you. Because it doesn’t matter anymore, Taehyungie. It’s taken on a whole life of its own, hasn’t it? It’s hurt you as much as it’s hurt us. Maybe more.”

Yoongi sinks into the couch, somehow seeming depthless, his face gone flat of emotion. “It had me looking at you like you were a total stranger.”

“Yeah,” Taehyung says, pulling his fingers through his hair, rough like he doesn’t care if he rips through. “But would you trust my plan, now? Can you forget the Ghost killings? Where do we go from here, hyung?”

Jimin can’t parse what the appropriate response to this should be. He wants to refute Taehyung, instantly, tell him that they trust him — but is that true? He trusts that Taehyung has the best of intentions, he always has, but there’s a landscape of violence they’ve left behind them. A tornado of destruction. When he closes his eyes, Jimin sees the blood-covered walls of the Ace. He sees the grotesque murders of the Ghost. He sees the multiple timelines that flipped past at the Institute, where he either died or attacked Taehyung viciously; he sees the multiple timelines at the Liberty just this day where he leaned, breathless, over Taehyung in the tub.

Jimin feels a little like the world is sliding around him, like sand shifting when he moves. He
wonders what Yoongi’s thinking. What horrors and heartaches he’s seen. What more is waiting for them in the future. He wonders if all Yoongi wants right now is to skip to the part where they’re done with this. One way or another.

Taehyung wipes a hand down his face. “I thought you wouldn’t have an answer,” he says, in a terrible voice that strikes ice straight into Jimin’s heart. “I couldn’t think of any, myself.”

“Tae—”

Taehyung’s stare is unwavering, blank. “I’m tired.”

Jimin’s heart cinches at the reduction. The dismissal. He watches Taehyung and thinks of how he wants that jaw in his hands, those hands in his grasp.

He massages his temples. He needs time, he thinks. Time to just think, to get his head in order. He needs time so he can figure out the shape of his forgiveness and his apologies both. He needs time so he can sit with Taehyung and Yoongi, catalog their injuries, look for the unseen ones that form the deepest cuts. It’s a stabbing want, his need for time, his need for a semblance of quiet so he can tell himself that all, at least, is not lost.

But this is a war, and he can’t have any of that. In his mind’s eye, he can already see the Seam, going up in a caustic cyclone. A blazing inferno.

There’s really no time for anything.

Jimin doesn’t know how long he sits there, just thinking. They all go quiet after a while. He thinks Taehyung falls asleep, though it’s hard to say, what with him flitting in and out of Deep Space.

“It’s probably our fault,” Yoongi says, into the quiet, almost like he’s talking to himself. There’s nothing in his voice, just a strange impassivity, like he’s fast-forwarded to not caring about anything much. “The Seam. You know? It happened because in this timeline, we escaped the Liberty.”

“They were being manipulated. They would have killed us.”
“They didn’t deserve to die, Jimin-ah.”

“What good would dying there have done? The Scarab would still be at large.”

Yoongi smiles, mirthless. “It’s always for the greater good, isn’t it?”

“Sometimes that’s not too bad a thing to believe in, hyung.”

“That’s what war criminals say, too.”

“Well, we’re not,” Jimin mutters. “War criminals.”

Yoongi says something hardline but ultimately useless. Doesn’t even pretend like he believes it.

“What would you have preferred?” Jimin asks. “That our spines were broken, our bodies crushed, so the Scarab can simply use us as he wants while he destroys the Seam? Or that we never made it to the Liberty at all? Are we more honorable in a world where I pushed a knife into his chest, and he didn’t live? Or in a world where I burned down the Institute and both of you were incinerated in a flash? Which one of these probabilities would have taken all blame from us?”

Yoongi’s face shutters. He looks towards Taehyung again, his gaze lingering a long time on his body, folded into the smallest he can be in that chair. His chest moves up and down, steady. He bites his lip, as if he’s cataloguing Taehyung, and coming up short. Too many missing parts. Too many spaces caused by absences that no amount of explanations can fix.

When Yoongi turns back to Jimin, there’s a heaviness to him that tries to sink Jimin, too. A bone-deep ache that tastes like sorrow.

“I don’t know,” he says. “I don’t know.”

“Maybe if we’d never met,” Jimin says. “Maybe then.”

“Taehyung would’ve stayed a lab rat in the Institute forever, then. I don’t want that.”
“He’d have found a way. He’s resilient like that. Things brush off him like chaff in the wind.”

“Not this thing. Not right now.”

Yoongi keeps watching Taehyung. “Yeah. Right now is different.”

Here’s a thing Jimin’s only just re-realizing about Yoongi: he’s stubborn where his love goes. He’s loved Taehyung for so long. After a while, all their moral lapses become self-care, instead. Yoongi’s unwavering when it comes to Jimin, when it comes to Taehyung. There’s no unmaking the past. There’s only recalibrating the present, to make their future into something livable.

“So then what do we do?” Jimin asks. “Live in the now? Just let the past go? How do we do that?”

Yoongi says, softly, “We don’t forget who we love. We don’t forget.”

They both look at each other and then at Taehyung. Jimin feels loss like an earthquake, grinding its gears, coming for him from far away. His insides feel like glass.

He wants to cry.

Instead he says, “I feel like I haven’t slept in years.”

“Can you believe we went to the station less than two days ago?” Yoongi marvels.

“We didn’t even know, then. We didn’t know anything.”

Yoongi grunts. His gaze slips to Taehyung, who’s still curled up and quiet. He purses his lips. Jimin wonders if he’s thinking the same thing as him. If he keeps looking at Taehyung and thinking in a frenetic ticker-tape loop: I’m losing you.

He’s right there, Taehyung, but in the slowest fucking way, Jimin feels like they’ve already lost him.
To test his theory, he says: “I keep thinking of the Ace. I keep thinking of waking up and seeing all his blood on my hands.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“None of us did.”

That’s a lie. They’ve done what they had to survive, including lying and murder. They’ve done most of those things in a panic, without a second thought. They’ve been scared and confused and backed into a corner - all of them - and they’ve reacted with violence and impulse.

Yoongi seems to think about that. Jimin wonders how deep his moral calculus goes. He knows that out of the three of them, Yoongi had always been the voice of the conscious, the voice of reason and empathy. There’s a softness in him, untempered by curiosity or ambition, that neither Jimin nor Taehyung possess.

“I keep thinking of the night he called to meet me,” Yoongi says. “After he saw you alive. I didn’t know what it was, then. Didn’t know what had hurt so much. He wouldn’t stop saying that he was going to fix it all. I keep thinking, would I have broken, too, if it were me?”

Jimin gives a very small nod.

Yoongi continues: “And the answer is no, because I wouldn’t have been alone. Wouldn’t have made myself alone. I couldn’t have stood either of you looking at me like I didn’t exist. Like I was nothing, a stranger.”

Jimin pulls his knees to his chest, tugs his bottom lip into his mouth. He whispers, “Do you think he expects his plan to work?”

“No.”

“Do you think he’s given up?”
It’s hard to say. Jimin hates saying it, hates the feel of the words on his tongue.

“I wouldn’t blame him,” he clarifies, because he doesn’t want Yoongi to think this is an accusation. “It’s in his head. He’s fought the longest.”

Yoongi deliberates. He takes a long fucking time. Jimin feels decentered, tachycardic, his head full of a horrible rush.

He wants Yoongi to say no.

He needs Yoongi to say no.

“I don’t know,” Yoongi says, finally, which isn’t the right answer. Jimin feels the cold of it in his teeth, in his knuckles, but then Yoongi continues. “Even if he has, we don’t leave behind those we love.”

Jimin feels his own weight like he’s drowning. It feels like coming home after a long time and finding dust on every surface. It’s like he’s finally fully inhabiting his own body, fighting for it, to keep the things it has loved and wants to love.

“We have to end this,” he says. His voice is thin, broken. He doesn’t care at all. “Together.”

Yoongi takes a deep breath. He keeps his eyes on Taehyung, like he’s afraid that if he blinks just a little too much, Taehyung will simply disappear right from under their gaze. Like they’ve both bled into him too much to let him go now, to whatever irreal, uncanny future he’s taking them to.

“Hyung.”

Yoongi nods, and his fingers steal into Jimin’s, holds tight.

“Together.”

***
One moment there’s stillness in the basement, such stillness that Jimin thinks he has hated nothing more than this. They’ve all run quietly aground, and no one knows what to say, and he thinks both Yoongi and Taehyung are choosing to catch up on sleep rather than solve the problem at hand. It’s defeated, but what does Jimin know of how deep their current demons are? There’s a gulf between them all he just doesn’t know how to cross yet.

So, for one moment there’s the stillness born from sleep, a quiet that burrows into Jimin’s bones like a fucking saw drill.

And then there’s no stillness at all.

Taehyung makes a thin, reedy noise, and shakes with a strange sort of hypnagogic tremor. Yoongi startles up like he doesn’t know what’s going on, but expects pain, or something similar. He knocks something off a side-table: a utility lamp, or something of that sort—it clatters, anyway, and Taehyung jerks awake and scrambles like he doesn’t know how quickly he can get away and in which direction.

Jimin makes a noise that’s half laugh and half cry. Taehyung stares at him with wide, panicking eyes, so he slips off the couch and goes to sit next to him, on the small chair, crowded in so close that he has to hold Taehyung in his arms, so he doesn’t fall off.

Yoongi watches them.

Taehyung makes this aborted gesture, still in panic mode, wide-eyed like he hasn’t yet computed who Jimin is.

“It’s just me,” Jimin says, “Did you have a bad dream?”

Taehyung turns his head away.

He, however, doesn’t push Jimin away. Instead his body goes pliant in Jimin’s grasp, the set of his anxious shoulders falling. He’s warm and soft, and Jimin needs it. He needs him. Just for this moment, just once, just to feel real. Jimin whooshes out a held breath and thinks of what it might have been like for Taehyung to look at him and see a monster. What it might have been like for him to watch helplessly at the Institute as Jimin dropped a match, burning everything away. He contemplates the idea of seeing Taehyung like that.
A beautiful, awful copy of himself. Merciless eyes, fingers that scorch with every touch. That eerie simulacra of a face so loved, so well known, turning on you like a tide.

The idea makes him ache. He holds Taehyung to him tighter. He slides his fingers down the side of Taehyung’s neck, and watches him shiver. “What was your nightmare?”

Taehyung whispers something unintelligible. His skin is cold, clammy to touch. His eyes look glassy.

Jimin traces the tremor along Taehyung’s jaw. Coaxes the words out clearer.

“I dreamed that I woke up here alone,” Taehyung says. There’s quiet horror in his voice. “Alone.”

“Taehyungie.”

Taehyung picks at his nails. Doesn’t look at Jimin. He looks boneless, hollowed, something made of scrap-metal and twine.

Yoongi clears his throat. “But you’re not,” he says, and peels himself off the couch. It takes a while. It’s like he has to struggle to give his body depth. “You’re not alone. Look. We’re right here.”

But they weren’t, Jimin thinks. For so long, they weren’t.

And sure enough, Taehyung says, “You left.” Taehyung says, “You hated me.”

He starts to cry.

Jimin tries to let him know that he’s loved. Runs his fingers through Taehyung’s hair and dreams of some open, faraway place, with a night sky and a bunch of stars and freedom like they’ve never known. He kisses the top of Taehyung’s head and says it’s okay, even if it isn’t. It’s okay, it’s okay.
It's just a dream. Baby. It's okay.

There’s no space in the chair but Yoongi’s always been malleable. He fits all the spaces in the middle like something warm and molten. Jimin’s not certain how he manages to slot himself between them so impeccably, but he does, and he pulls Taehyung’s head in close like he’s telling him a secret. Jimin presses his cheek to Yoongi’s shoulder. They stay like that a while. The gray, salty wash of Jimin’s panic begins to ebb out, but Taehyung just sobs louder, clinging to them like a child.

That’s good, too, Jimin thinks. There are sorrows that well up like water in dams. Sometimes they need letting out.

Yoongi’s explaining something to Taehyung, in a low voice. Jimin thinks it’s everything they discussed - how there’s nowhere in the messy architecture of this story that they could have chosen better, how there’s no way in hell that they’re leaving now. Jimin lets him explain, because Yoongi is good at this, because his calm voice and the gentleness of his fingers is like a steady anchor on a stormy sea.

Jemin - Jimin doesn’t let himself be soothed. He scares himself alert instead. He picks at his fears like a bruise and holds Taehyung’s hand tight enough that it has to hurt.

I wish I knew what you were going to do, he thinks. Tells himself the worst scenarios while he presses his mouth slow to the curve of Taehyung’s ear. Tells himself all the terrible things that can happen, so that he can be iron-clad and impenetrable when it does.

This too is an act of war. This putting on armor. This battening of hatches. This chronicling of terrors.

An hour later or so, Taehyung says, quietly, “We should go.”

They’re still piled together. Yoongi breathes out, a puff of breathlessness that probably has something to do with Jimin’s elbow knocking into his ribs. Taehyung’s eyes are still puffy and red.

“Go where?”

“To the Seam.”
“And then?”

“I’ll meet him in the Deep Space,” Taehyung says. “You can both…come. If you want.”

“The trap,” Jimin croaks, his voice scraping through the dregs of his fears, “Taehyung-ah, how sure…”

Taehyung shrugs, slow and bleary. His fingers tap an arrhythmic pattern on the chair. Silence tightens its grip on them.

“This is not a suicide mission.”

Jimin and Yoongi look at each other.

“There is a trap,” Taehyung continues. “It exists. It could work.”

That’s all they’re getting, then.

Jimin’s eyes ache with the light when they emerge from the basement. The others are waiting. He wonders if they’ve been waiting long, knowing that their only chance against this threat is with Taehyung.

“The Seam’s in riot mode,” Namjoon says, when they’re all present. “That’s a significant problem. The Flock knows-- knows it’s because of the Scarab.”

Yoongi’s eyebrows furrow. “Why’s that a problem?”

“They’ve been putting two and two together. Senior management knows you’re involved in the Ghost murders. It’s not a problem right now. But they’ll call you in for hearings later.”

“Big believers in the system,” Seokjin adds, from where he’s sitting on the floor. “And in gaming the
system. For the greater good.”

“You don’t sound enthused,” observes Jimin. “Why’s that?”

Namjoon rolls his eyes. “Every single thing in the world is made corrupt by one thing. Power.”

“And you’ve got it. Tons of it.” Seokjin sighs. “But I’d take the Flock over the Scarab.”

“Blatant evil versus possible corporate greed— just another day in the world,” Namjoon shakes his head. “Please tell me you have a plan.”

They do not. Apparently, Taehyung’s idea of a plan is to walk right into the fray and meet the Scarab head-on. Hoseok starts shaking his head even before Jimin finishes explaining.

“He’s got half the Seam under his control, and the rest in panic. Triage units can’t even reach them. It’s murder out there.”

“We’re not meeting him in the Seam,” Taehyung says. “We’re meeting him outside it. In the Ordinary world.”

Namjoon startles, eyes going wide. “You can’t be serious.”

“You can get your people to guard the borders,” Taehyung says. “Not let any Extraordinary cross. He can’t kill us without a physical body anyway so that’ll slow him down considerably.”

“We can go to the station,” Jimin suggests. “It’s easily guardable.”

Namjoon disagrees. “The risk—”

“Is honestly the same, isn’t it?” says Seokjin, smoothly. “Whether it’s Seam lives or Ordinary lives. The numbers are the same, aren’t they?”
Their eyes meet. Seokjin’s gaze is an anchor.

“Alright,” Namjoon says, with a stilted nod. “We’ll empty the station.”

Next to Jimin, Yoongi draws a sharp breath. Jimin wonders if he’s thinking the same thing as him. That this is all ending exactly where it started.

“We’ll guard the Seam,” Seokjin says, patting Taehyung’s shoulder once. “Just come back. Don’t take too long, okay?”

Taehyung’s throat convulses. If those words have meaning to him, Jimin doesn’t know yet. “Hyung,” he says, and Seokjin gives him a one-armed hug. He looks at Yoongi and Jimin over the top of his head.

Don’t let him be stupid, his face says. Don’t let him disappear in there.

Jimin lifts his chin. He means to try. Even if he must wrestle the demons himself, spit out blood, wade through the mire of a hundred nightmares -- he means to try.

***

They pass through the Seam on their way to the station. Taehyung sits in the vehicle that Kwon and Jungkook doused with Talon, trying his best not to touch his abilities, to keep himself hidden for the duration of this trip. He sits with Jimin pressed up next to him and his face pressed to the window, watching the fire blaze as they pass.

It looks like a warzone, he thinks. He rubs his fingers together and finds that his own skin feels icy. His heart feels ready to burst open, like rotten fruit. He wonders what the other two are thinking.

When they pass, he sees someone fall. Their knees give out beneath them. They fall, and whoever they’re fighting must have some strange Extraordinary power, for they twitch and jerk in a shroud of ravenous, acidic gas. Red spots bloom over their skin, peels black over their bones- like a flower in a pool of ink. The whole thing happens in seconds.
“Don’t look,” says Yoongi, but Taehyung doesn’t care. He watches. He watches as much as he can.

Rage too, is ammunition.

So, he watches the Seam burn, and shatter, and drown. He watches cops shout orders through mist and megaphones, and he watches them topple down and suffocate in the gas. He watches the unnatural stiffness of bodies he knows must be the Scarab’s; their jittering limbs unwieldy as he tries to manage a whole host.

They die quick, the marionettes. They’re fast at offense, but weak at defense. It’s not like dolls know how to defend themselves.

So, they fall, and they twitch, and they die.

Taehyung’s anger begins to ebb pathetically, silently away, and then he’s left with silence and echoes. They pass the border of the Seam, and a Flock agent stops them for a moment before nodding to let them go.

Taehyung lets Yoongi hold his hand. It keeps him from wanting to go searching for that dark, pulsing presence in his head. Keeps him from wanting to scream out that they are here. To come get them and leave the rest of the Seam alone. To stop killing for spectacle, for performance.

“We’ll get him,” Jimin says, in a litany. “We’ll get him, we’ll get him, we’ll get him.”

The station, when they reach it, is empty. Taehyung’s been here before, more than a few times. He remembers sitting across from Yoongi, giving him some little morsels of secrets to work with for his cases, stealing glances when he wasn’t looking, wondering if he ever thought...if he ever dreamed...

If Taehyung had to pick out the days in the last few years that weren’t bad, he’d probably pick some summer days in the station. From the Extraordinary Crimes division’s floor, the Namsan Tower was visible, a far-away beacon of normalcy. Taehyung would look at it while Yoongi went to get him something from the station’s vending machine, and then he’d sit and sip and spill his secrets while parsing through futures, through probabilities, trying to find anything at all that was of interest. Fighting his little war, even as through the window people spilled out of a nearby subway stop, the CU right across from the station continuously swallowing and spitting out policemen in search of smoke.
There’s a mundanity to it he had loved. Like a temporary salve on everything that’s happened.

He wonders if Yoongi remembers.

Of course, he thinks, as they make their way inside: the memory sours if he thinks of Jimin. If he thinks of Jimin still lost and held prisoner in his own mind. Stuck in the same looping nightmare while Taehyung sipped at his shitty vending machine lemon drink and watched the pout of Yoongi’s mouth as he leaned over his reports.

There’s a sobering thought.

In the basement, he pulls a chair from behind a desk, and sets it in the middle of the room. Hoseok and Jungkook have come with them - they both have exceptionally useful skills after all - and between the two of them, Yoongi and Jimin, there’s a venerable fortress of Extraordinaries physically between Taehyung and whatever the Scarab chooses to bring to him.

But this battle is not physical.

He sits on the chair, and they wait, surrounding him. It feels too meagre. The whole setting, this chair, this Trap. It feels too sparse.

“This trap,” Hoseok asks. “What’s it like? Is it like the nightmare loop you talked about?”

Taehyung nods. He hadn’t thought up that himself - just repurposed what Jimin and him had already created, long ago. Just another panic routine.

Except, this would hold the Scarab instead of stopping him from getting in someone’s mind.

“Don’t let him get in your head.”

“But that’s exactly what I’m going to do.”

Jimin frowns. “You know what I mean.”
Yoongi and Jimin both look at him, and at the end it’s like drowning in his body. At the end it’s like wanting the shore but letting the sea pull him away. At the end it’s like all the words he has gets caught in the soft space between his tongue and teeth, and silence fills the room like quicksand.

“Alright,” Taehyung says, with a hard swallow. “It’s time.”

They both frown. At the end, this whole night feels like splinters sticking in skin, and so Taehyung decides to get on with it. His mind falls, dives, into the wash of dark as if it belongs there. But before he lets himself slip - just as the bloom-cloud of the Deep Space closes around him - he hears Yoongi speak: “You have ten minutes.”

***

Ten minutes.

You have ten minutes.

They couldn’t be thinking of following him. They just couldn’t.

It would be dangerous. Unpredictable.

The other world is a rising storm of clashing energies. Celestial colors flash in the dark expanse of it. Taehyung waits for that icy dread to come, for the harsh presence of the Scarab to register. He’s waited and waited for this moment - when all other distractions are held at bay, when he’s got no one more to save. One last true effort to make certain that this thing he wrought - this creature he brought into the world - ends where it began.

The Trap is an elaborate thing. He’s planned it and built it over more than a year. In the expanse of black, the Trap itself hovers massive in front of him, a great glimmering unnatural thing that’s slashed right into space. It changes shape continuously. Its edges become bone, become leather, become brick, become origami paper. It hovers in the form of words. Alphabets. Characters. It drips light continuously, blood-red and golden-bright.

Taehyung’s idea of thought-magic comes from anime. He guesses that’s why the Trap looks so
much like alchemical circles, or wards made of light. In truth, it can probably look like anything he wants. It’s simply a thought-program.

A list of looping instructions and variables all programmed to optimize for a simple outcome: to hold a malicious virus.

Taehyung waits.

_Calm, he forces his mind. Calm down._

The Trap flutters like a silk-screen. A tapestry. A picture scroll, with his own memories circling the surface like images in a zoetrope. He sees his parents in it. Seokjin. He sees the Seam and the Institute.

_Hey fucker,_ he thinks, as the Trap shifts its shape into granite and gold. _I’m here. Come get._

It only takes a few seconds before he _feels_ it, in his mind, a crushing weight. The Deep Space folds under the onslaught, edges collapsing, gridlines fracturing like fast binary code. Everything compacts until the space is small, just Taehyung and the Trap, and the immeasurable, impatient hatred of the Scarab filling the rest of it like something physical.

His heart begins to hammer.

The Scarab looms in his mind, imposing and ravenous. He’d realized last year, while in stasis, that he should have always known what he was dealing with. That the Scarab is something so far removed from human, he can scarcely describe it. How had he ever mistaken it for a thing with logic, with human-like motives? It hangs in front of him now, the shape of it as unfixable as the Trap-- a thing that shifts from a fiery-winged Phoenix to a broken, burning version of himself.

It forces him towards it, buoying him up from the ground, Up-close, it looks at him with empty, black eyes. He tries to pull away from it, but it’s akin to a sparrow trying to escape the eye of a storm- he’s too light against the overwhelming force, too human against the crushing strangeness of the Scarab.

But: _you came from me,_ he thinks. _You came from within me._
Taehyung needs to distract the Scarab. Bait it into the Trap.

*You are not a God,* he thinks, and feels the Scarab’s hold on him waver. *I don’t care how powerful you think you are. You are not a God. You are not unkillable.*

The Scarab falters. Taehyung breathes out, harsh, as the winds calm. The Trap glimmers, growing rapidly, about the size of a tower now. The Scarab looks like him now- wears his body and his face. But the expression on that face is inscrutable, a wall of blankness, nothing alive at all in that eerie gaze.

*I’m going to stop you now,* Taehyung thinks, and that’s when the winds cease entirely. Everything just stops. A silence descends over the Deep Space, weighted and thick.

The Scarab unhinges his jaw. It speaks: “Did you think it would be that easy?”

And then he - *it* - laughs. It laughs so hard that everything shakes, the whole world, Taehyung’s body rattling so hard he thinks he might fragment. It laughs, and the wind rises again, an invisible hand clamping tight around Taehyung’s throat.

“Did you really think I’d *let* myself be caged? I’m not part of you anymore. I’m not part of anything. I’m my own.”

Taehyung has the hysterical urge to laugh but breathing hurts too much. *Calm,* he tells himself again. *He can’t harm you in here.*

Or at least, no one could, so far.

Around him, the Deep Space changes shapes rapidly. A mountain juts suddenly off the ground, his feet stumbling against snow as it sprouts. Far, far below, he spies a lake, somehow blood-red in color. The sky above turns a vibrant blue, so achingly bright that it rings in his teeth.

And still the Trap hovers exactly where it had been, a blot in the scenery.
Anger - incandescent - pulses through the Scarab. “Why doesn’t it move?”

“Because I don’t want it to,” Taehyung says. “And you’re nothing but a thing in my head.”

He sees his own mouth pull back in an unholy snarl. Sees his own hand rise to make a fist.

A shower of arrows spills out of the sky. Most of it hits the Trap, without damaging it at all, but one strikes Taehyung’s shoulder. There’s no pain. His blood floats around his face in large drops, like something in zero gravity. The Scarab roars and pulls the ground out from beneath his feet.

So, he plummets.

It’s frightening - terrifying - he’s scared of heights and he can’t breathe, and he thinks: of course, of course the Scarab knows that, because they’re kind of the same, aren’t they? They know each other. They’re built from the same mind. So, he falls and he’s scared and his concentration snaps -- and for a single horrifying second the Trap wavers.

It flickers out.

This place is not real, Taehyung thinks, closing his eyes hard against the wind and the cold and the pull of gravity - everything that tries to lie to him that no, no, he’s really falling, he’s really going to die. This place is not real, and neither is this monster.

The lake-water takes him. Like in the real world, water rushes into his nose, into his mouth, shuts his eyes. He chokes. His body goes numb, and he tries to look up, to see if the Trap is back where it had been, but he can’t shake this nightmare off.

This-- the drowning, the ice, the body sinking to the bottom of the lake --

This is how it all started.

An icy lake.
An accident.

Every single terrible thing that happened, they had all started from here. From where he nearly drowned, and then was revived, with an Extraordinary ability that doomed his family.

Somebody’s screaming. Somebody’s *screaming*, and it sounds like his mom, and she’s screaming their names, both her sons’, but the ice --

*Should have all ended there*, the Scarab whispers in his ear, and now it sounds like his mother. *All of it. Imagine how peacefully, how quietly it could have all stopped. Nobody would have died. The Seam wouldn’t be a river of blood. You’d have died a bright, precocious, beloved child - not a killer.*

It doesn’t feel like a complete lie. It’s wonderful here, cool and white. If he only let himself relax, he can sink to the bottom of the lake, give up control, stop struggling. It would be quiet. So quiet--

Someone seizes him hard. He feels his body being pulled from the water, but then suddenly there’s no water, only cool stone, and he’s in a different place. A courtyard. Kneeling on the ground while a sprawling, modern house spills itself in steel-and-chrome shades around him.

He still can’t breathe. Hands take hold of him and pulls him upright. He can barely lift his head. And then he starts to panic, and something holds his arms. He flails, and something grasps his face with their hands.

Something presses against his mouth - another pair of lips. They push down like a seal, and a bubble of air passes from them to him. Taehyung coughs, limbs burning, lungs seizing; turns his head and spits out a stream of bubbles.

His eyes shoot open.

“Your ten minutes are up,” says Yoongi, who’s holding Taehyung’s face. Ice-water drips from his hair for a second before turning to sunlight. “So, we thought we’d come help.”

“Not much sense in here, is there?” Jimin asks, from where he’s standing with his back against a pillar. He looks at the Trap. “Is that it?”
Taehyung sputters. More bubbles.

He looks wildly from Yoongi to Jimin. They shouldn’t be here, he thinks. If they’re here, they’ll know an obvious flaw in his plan. He doesn’t want that. Doesn’t want them to know, not until it’s done. Suddenly, the importance of this slaps through the fugue of horror and memory he’s been living in. Suddenly, he’s more awake than he’s been since they’d found him.

“He’s only as strong as you,” Yoongi says. “And he’s definitely not as strong as all three of us put together.”

Jimin steps closer, wraps an arm around his shoulder. “How were you planning to get him into that thing?”

Taehyung gasps. Pushes Jimin out of the way as the ground ripples erratically, and bloody pillars crop up from nowhere.

He can’t speak.

Taehyung sits there on his knees, something gear-toothed stuttering to a start in his chest. Pain, he thinks. And fear. If only he could find enough defiance to get them both out of here…

“Taehyung-ah!” Jimin calls, from somewhere amid the earthquake. “What were you planning to do?”

Rock crashes around them: huge, unnatural boulders. Taehyung wants to laugh. The Scarab, in the Deep Space, fights like Taehyung thinks cartoon superheroes fight. This is what the Scarab knows; what it expects. Its mind is shaped exactly like Taehyung’s, only poised for evil.

Yoongi’s voice sounds in his ear. “Were you planning to go into it?” he shouts. The cascading rock breaks up his voice. “You were, weren’t you?”

The accusation is clear in his tone. Taehyung swallows, looks up at the Trap. It flutters like a tapestry of silk.
“It’s the only way he’ll follow.”

“God damn it, Taehyung.”

“He’s tethered to me by thought, and that thing is a thought-prison. It’s the only way he’ll follow, it’s the only way he can be contained.”

Yoongi asks, “Can you get out of it?”

“Door locks from inside.”

Jimin’s mouth twists in anger. “You idiot.”

“What was I supposed to tell you?” Taehyung asks. “That I wasn’t planning to wake up at the station, triumphant over the Scarab? Things are not that easy. There are no magical solutions. This is how it must be, because I can’t kill him. All I can do is lock him up, and the way I can lock him up is to make sure he stays in my head. That’s how he stays in my head.”

He points to the Trap. It hovers like an obelisk now, a pillar of smooth stone. Lacy light climbs up the sides.

“It’s not fair,” says Jimin. “You don’t dare say it is, Taehyung, I swear.”

“But it’s like how you stayed in your nightmare loop, Jiminie. The moment the loop breaks, your memory floods back. The moment I leave the Trap, he can leave, too.”

Their faces give away that they had expected this. There’s no flicker of surprise, just resigned indignation. At least to a small extent, thinks Taehyung, they had always known.

“So, we go with you,” Jimin says. Before Taehyung can protest, he continues, “We can always leave if we want, can’t we? But until we have to, we’ll go with you.”

Above them, the sky turns a piercing white. Alarm rings in Taehyung’s head, but it’s useless.
Pointless. They won’t leave him, no matter what he says. Maybe that’s benevolence, but maybe it’s also a curse.

“Go,” Yoongi urges. “Finish this.”

In a flicker of a second, the Trap materializes in front of them. It’s shaped like a revolving cycle of glyphs now, ribbons of light spilling sparks as the glyphs grate against each other.

A door opens in the middle.

_Come find me, Taehyung thinks. Come get me in here, asshole._

And then, with one last look at Yoongi and Jimin, he steps into the Trap.

***

Yoongi finds himself sitting at the dinner table.

The table’s set for four, but no one else occupies the seats. This is not a room that he recognizes at all, not a house that he knows, and through the windows, the scenery outside is that of a winter landscape. There’s a camera on a table in the living room, and umbrellas hulking in a stand near the door. Comic books litter the floor next to the radiator. House slippers are arranged neatly by the door: four pairs.

Yoongi swallows. He thinks he knows where he is. A thought-prison, after all, is constructed from thought. From memory. This is a palace of memory, its architecture that of the mind.

“Taehyung,” Yoongi says. “Where are you?”

No response.

Yoongi stands up and moves around. Everything feels incredibly solid. There are scorch marks on the walls. A pan on the stove boils over. An empty leash lies on the floor, the leather all melted into the wood. The smell of smoke floats down from above.
Yoongi walks upstairs. Stumbles into a bathroom where he finds Jimin, watching the ground simmer with flames. Smoke’s getting thick. Everything in this floor is singed, metal warping, steam hissing. If there were bodies, somewhere in this heat, they’d never know.

“They burned it down.” Jimin says. “He told me that. After his parents, they burned the house down. It was-- a terrible scene, apparently. There was no way they were going to be able to sell the house.”

The floor burns. Yoongi waits for it to collapse, for the fire to rush at him and scorch his bones, eat hungrily through his flesh, devour him. None of that happens. Instead, he sees an unmarked door, the handle cool to touch, and steps through it. Jimin follows him.

In this room, the Seam opens up like a set in a theatre. It’s how it used to look a while ago, when Yoongi was still in his early teens. He recognizes some shops, the dimly lit alleys, restaurants that advertise chicken and hof. He recognizes Taehyung, too. He looks younger, watching them from across the street, but it’s him. There’s an Extraordinary man with him, wearing gang colors that Yoongi vaguely identifies, a bloodied knife held in one hand and a sheaf of currency notes in the other. Make me stronger, he says, hand on Taehyung’s shoulder as another shadow begins to walk towards them. Make me win. Steel flashes. Even from across the street, Yoongi can see the flash of terror on Taehyung’s face, gone before it fully settles into his features.

“This way,” Jimin whispers, and pulls Yoongi through another door.

In this room, white and sterile, people in coats move about. Steel gurneys fill the hall, mostly with young Extraordinaries on them. The heavy, smothering haze that hangs in the air feels like diffused Talon. The door in this room is at the end of the hall, so Yoongi and Jimin start to move, shouldering past the doctors, trying not to look at the occupants of the gurneys at all. Trying not to see exactly what had been happening at the Institute - what sort of drugs and terror and pain…

But still they catch glimpses. Restraints. Gloved hands, probing skin, drawing blood. Vials of strange substances, monitors, and at one point the floor becomes bloody, sticky-wet in the way it is at crime-scenes where Yoongi knows it will never come off…

Hurry says Jimin. Hurry, I don’t want to see.

He catches a glance of something as he shoulders through the next door. Something like a shadow, growing on a wall.
“Jimin,” he whispers, “Look…"

But in this next room, they’re in the lab. In their lab, back at the university, except this one also has a bathtub, which spills over. And in the next one, they’re watching a man with a cruel face sit across from a boy at a table, asking questions, sifting through the answers with pincers. And in the one after that, they’re in the Seam again, but this time the streets abound with bodies, all killed in the same way that the Ghost...

And the shadow grows. Yoongi notices it - how the shadow in each room is bigger and bigger, how it becomes more and more substantive. He thinks it’s the Scarab. He thinks this is what the Scarab grows from: power, and guilt, and terrible memories.

Awful things, all making up an inescapable labyrinth in the deepest parts of a soul, then given shape by unmitigated power that should never have been anyone’s to use.

They move again. Another room is another memory of the Seam, night spilling diffuse blue light. Yoongi thinks he catches a glimpse of himself, as remembered: a fragment of a memory that flits past. Yet another room is the Hotel Ace, surely, dark interiors spackled with Extraordinary light. And in this one, a mountain of books on how abilities work. And in this one, walls and walls full of diagrams and equations, all crossed out.

And in this one a storm, a diner, a bathtub, a station.

This is a barrage of malicious memory, all tied up in knots, each one more painful and pernicious than the one before.

How far does it go, Yoongi wonders. How deep and in how many loops? He holds onto Jimin’s hand and imagines they’re not lost. That they’re following some invisible red thread through this Minotaur’s labyrinth, towards whatever sits at the very center.

“Keep moving,” Jimin says, because they can feel them now. The Scarab, behind them, blazing through the corridors of memory. Taehyung in front, lost from sight, somewhere within the suffocating alleys of all this looping thought.

The rooms full of transgressions grow. There are more of the dead, the deeper they go. A burning Seam, in one, and the Liberty’s bathroom in another. The dumping ground behind Warehouse G,
where they’d made multiple morbid trips. Fire rages. The dead watch silently as Yoongi and Jimin pass. Marionette-like people go up in flames, in one room, like a scene from a horror movie.

And the farther, the deeper, the narrower it gets, more of them appear.

Below the lip of a warehouse’s roof, Yoongi sees himself, his own disbelief, the twisted fright on his own face as he looked at Taehyung, knew him as the Ghost, for the very first time. In the Hotel Ace’s ballroom, he sees the disbelief and terror on Jimin’s face, the moment before all his memories disappeared.

When they pass through the second last door, they enter a place that’s empty. There are no features to this place, no story to derive from its shape. It’s frightening in its nothingness, in its blankness. Yoongi doesn’t understand it, and he thinks neither does Jimin. All they know is that this is the end. This is the last of the terrible Trap. Beyond this is freedom.

But: Taehyung.

Yoongi’s awareness tracks. Spins.

Taehyung.

He smells iron in the air, and fire, and smoke. Distantly, he thinks he catches glimpses of a burning building. The Institute, maybe. The Institute, on that last night, before he and Jimin forgot it all.

The floor here is littered with paper, and Yoongi pauses to pick one up.

They’re numbered. Black ink spills in careless alphabets over the surface. The edges are curled in, black from flame.

#26, he reads. *In this one the fire takes them both.*

#34: *In this one the Scarab wins again.*
#46: *In this one, I don’t save Jimin.*

Futures, he thinks. These are futures. Discarded ones. Hopeless ones. This whole place is a litany of hopelessness. A graveyard of possibilities. Taehyung must have got them from him.

#212: *Even if you do everything right, there is no getting rid of the monster in your head. You made it. You get to live with it.*

Yoongi’s been saying since he became Extraordinary that there’s no way to win, that they’re doomed, that there is no point in hoping. And with it, with all those words, this is what he has done. He’s the architect of this, even if it doesn’t belong to him.

The tightness in Yoongi’s throat seems to snap, and he coughs out a hard laugh.

*Oh,* he thinks. *Oh.*

Oh, this entire Trap is a maze of defeat and regret. And he understands why, why it seals from the inside, because of course. Of course, it does. How can it not, if you’ve convinced yourself that the only way to get rid of the monster you’ve made is to live in a nightmare, a terrible loop of your own worst memories? How can it not, if you’ve been told over and over that there is no way to win?

Yoongi is still only for a moment. “Where is he?”

A flinch, in the still black of the Deep Space, and then Taehyung is there. His jaw is tight, his body shaking a little. “Now you’ve seen,” he says. “This is the only way I can trap him. In my own mind. In what I’m made of.”

#221: *You’ll kill everything you love, eventually.*

But the futures are just that: empty predictions. *Could bes,* that need never be a *would be.*

“But you’re not made only of those things,” Jimin says, from behind him. His face is white, lip red and bitten. “You’re not. You *have* to know that.”
Yoongi wonders if he *does* know. If he knows what they feel at all, or if the twists and turns of fate have finally brought them all to a breaking point.

As if reading his mind, Taehyung shrugs. “It’s what made him. So, it’s what will trap him.”

“And you.”

Taehyung nods. “And me.”

“But you can still leave,” Yoongi says. “If you walked out through there, you can still leave, and we can lock the Scarab in here with all the terrible things. Why won’t you leave?”

Taehyung’s gaze flicks towards the last door.

*You’ll kill--*

Jimin asks, loudly, “What’s in there?”

“You can’t go in there.”

He says it so sharply and so viciously that his entire body shudders with the words.

-- *everything you love--*

Jimin starts forwards. “Tae--”

Yoongi yanks him back. “No. Don’t.”

-- *eventually.*
His skin prickles. Jimin’s staring at him in disbelief, but Yoongi thinks he knows, knows exactly what Taehyung is hiding, knows exactly why he looks so terrified.

Yoongi’s seen enough, he thinks. He thinks he knows what to do. But he can’t do it from here. He can’t do it from this world, at all.

They have to go back.

He thinks Taehyung understands what he’s going to do, a moment before he does it. He thinks he sees his face fall, just for a second, just the tiniest instant before he hides it all.

*I love you,* he thinks.

*I love love love--*

And then Yoongi grabs Jimin’s hand and gets the hell out of there.

***

*You’ll kill everything you love, eventually.*

Taehyung’s not certain how long it is that he stays in that room, with those fortunes spilling around him like lace. Not certain what amount of time has passed between Yoongi and Jimin disappearing and now. How does time matter here, anyway?

He waits for the Scarab to show. Then he sits and watches in silence as it tries to leave through that last door. It can’t, because Taehyung is its maker, and Taehyung is here. Entrapped, by his own volition. They can torture each other in here for years if required, there’s just no real out.

When they designed the panic routine, Taehyung had insisted that there be two terrible things. One that’s easy to quantify - like Jimin’s fear of hurting him, or Yoongi’s fear of destroying *everything.* One that’s less so. Like the monster hunting Jimin down, or what’s beyond that door.
Take your worst fear and raise it. That’s how you trick your mind.

In this case, trick it into keeping him here.

The Scarab turns utterly inhuman at the unveiling of this trap. It hits the room like a catastrophe: forces so strong that the space shatters into chaos. It settles back, seconds later, but the door holds. Taehyung blinks and imagines falling, falling upward through strange blue light, and comes back to the eerie artifice of his own face staring at him from inches away.

*How do I get out*, the Scarab queries. It cannot be mistaken for anything approximating human anymore. Its face - still roughly the same shape as Taehyung’s face - has become hard agate. Its eyes are yellow quartz. Its skin scabs over like a phenocryst. *Answer me. How do I get out?*

“Through the door,” Taehyung says, pretending to be contemplative. “Ah, but you’ve already tried that.”

The rusty laugh that leaves his chest sounds nothing like him. The Scarab’s fury rips up the Deep Space again. It takes him, too, unravels him, leaves him breathless and convulsing a moment later when all of him stitches back together again.

*I can do that forever*, says the Scarab. *How do I get out?*

Taehyung watches it, not bothering to hide his sheer, delirious glee anymore. It’s stuck. It’s stuck, he’s done it. He’s reined in the monster. He’s unmade his creature.

*If I’m stuck, so are you*, the Scarab wails. *So are you, you stupid child!*

“Wasn’t that the plan?” Taehyung asks. “Quite certain that was always the plan.”

The Scarab screams its rage. Everything dissolves again. This time, it takes longer for him to come back, to hold the shape of his own body. This, he thinks, is going to be tiring.

“Don’t you understand?” he yells at it. “I’ve won! I’ve won over you, and you’re never leaving this room.”
The Scarab changes form. It becomes strange and silvery, thread-like. The thread links itself to Taehyung, somehow, too sticky to get off, and every cell it touches burns, in a strange distant way. It doesn’t really hurt, not in the way he thinks it will, but it does make him foggy, the roots disappearing right into his soul. He wonders if this is how the Scarab took control of its victims - if it’s trying that very technique now with him to get him to open that door. The root saps his energy, drinks it up like liquid. He tries to visualize scissors, to cut the roots, remove the disease before it can contaminate him any further, but his mind just...doesn’t work...and…

… everything is utter fog. Utter white. He can fight, if he wants, but does he want? What’s the point? That door will stay locked, whatever the Scarab does…

… but it’s still bad, the fog, because he can see faces in the fog, faces of people in the Seam, burning, and then somehow he’s in them, burning, all of the Scarab’s marionette-men, their skin sizzling off their bones and their minds trapped and screaming and…

…and the Ghost, too, that cruel stolen ability. He realizes that the Scarab remembers what the victims felt - remembers what it had been like to endure that crushing, destroying, grinding pressure…

Open the door, it says to him. Open the door, and it can all stop.

Through the fog and the memories of pain Taehyung sees the Scarab, the granite dark of its imaginary flesh, the sparkling inhumanity of its eyes. Its body comes alive with more of the threads, all of them whipping and curling about, and a hundred new victims and their stories all come pouring out of them. Hullo, again, Taehyung thinks, to the victims of the Ghost, the dead men at the Liberty, the boiled marionettes from the Seam. Hullo, hullo.

Open the door, the Scarab says, or this is going to drive you mad. Do you want to see what they saw? Do you want to know what they felt? Do you want to know everything I did? YOU are responsible. YOU made me. Do you want to know what I did because of you?

Taehyung laughs. He points at the door. “What do you think is behind that?” he asks. “You don’t think I felt it already? You don’t think I knew already? Did you really think I need you to remind me of consequences? Of responsibility? I know it all. And it’s there. Behind that door. That, and every little happiness I have. Every little morsel of joy that came with love. With being loved. All of my happiest days are behind that door, because guilt and pain are empty without it. They mean nothing without it. So do what you want here. All of it means nothing without what’s beyond that.”
The Scarab jerks in surprise. Taehyung gazes at it steadily.

“I’m never going to open it. Because I need all that’s good that’s there to feel anything about the bad. And I’m afraid of feeling anything.”

You can’t trap me, it says. Not without trapping yourself.

Taehyung looks at it. “I already knew that,” he says, pitying. “I always knew that.”

Its rage dissipates. It goes from three dimensions to one, flattening out, becoming nothing more than a slash in the room. Light pulses steadily from it. Taehyung gets up and walks around it once, shaking. Watches it watch him with a single, tired metallic eye.

It begins to weep.

Taehyung watches. It feels like all of this is no longer happening in his head. It feels like it has grown into his heart, his lungs, the shape of his bones. He thinks of how much has to be scooped out of a person to hold something like the Scarab. He wonders why there hadn’t been enough of him to fill him up, to the brim, so nothing like this could have happened.

He sits on the floor and shuts his eyes.

***

He’s woken up by an earthquake.

At first he thinks it’s the Scarab. He thinks it’s angry again, ready to rent him apart, torment him for the sake of it, if not for any chance at escape. But then the Scarab stays in its depthless, volume-less shape. It does not move.

So. Something else is happening here.

In a sudden blur of understanding, Taehyung stands up. Looks. Looks through the dark and the
gloom of this room and towards where, beyond the unopenable door, a section of the wall begins to unstitch itself.

The Scarab stirs. Taehyung flinches when it moves, but it doesn’t go far. Only to the locked door.

Taehyung moves too. He walks to the section of the wall that’s been torn. He walks through the rent and into the dark, which slowly resolves into a large house. He sees kids, running. He sees a man, familiar, at a high table, speaking on the phone. He sees a woman whose touch turns the world into pain.

And he sees a small child.


“Hyung?”

The child turns. And then it’s no longer a child, but Yoongi. Yoongi, whose memory they’re in. Yoongi, who looks at him and says, with the gentlest smile, *hi, Taehyung-ah.*

“What are you doing?”

Yoongi shrugs. Behind him, another section of the wall is renting open, the scenery beyond it that of the burning Institute. The memory of him trying to change time again and again to save Jimin, and failing every time.

Taehyung draws in a deep, slow breath. He thinks he feels Jimin, somewhere close by, making similar rents in the space, pulling from his own memory.

He doesn’t understand.

Yoongi takes his hand. Laces his fingers with Taehyung’s. He says: “We’re making this prison bigger.”
M: Do you know why we’re meeting today?

TH: The trial.

M: Right, the trial. It’s tomorrow. Have you gone over what you’re going to say?

TH: Yes. There was a lawyer.

M: Indeed. She went over everything with you? What you did during the Burning of the Seam? What you’re allowed to say?

TH: I’m allowed to say that I found a way to defeat the Scarab. I am not allowed to say that I created it in the first place. I’m allowed to say that I was the Ghost. I’m not allowed to say that I was operating of my own volition. I have to pretend I was possessed.

M: Good. And?

TH: I’m not allowed to space out during trial.

M: Do you think you’ll be able to do that?

TH: … I don’t know.
M: I can’t accept that answer.

TH: It’s not something I can control, is it?

M: Your lawyer confiscated your diaries. They said you weren’t happy about that?

TH: Those were not for you to read. There was nothing in them.

M: You’re in a very precarious position here, Starling. We can’t have you keeping secrets from us. You won’t agree to memory extraction, and you still haven’t told us anything about what happened to you after you trapped the Scarab.

TH: Nothing happened. You lot found me. I don’t remember how, or why. I thought I made that clear.

M: When Flock agents found you, you couldn’t stop drifting into the Deep Space. It took you hours to regain some semblance of consciousness. We detained you because we thought you were a danger to yourself and to others. That’s the whole truth.

TH: ...and the others? What about the others?

M: Your brother and the man you call H in your diaries were interrogated and let go. They’ll be making their statements in court on your behalf—Why do you do that?

TH: Do what?

M: Zone out like that. Like you’re listening to someone else. Into Deep Space, or whatever. You shouldn’t be doing that, with all this Talon.

TH: Maybe I’m just damaged.
(The interviewer explains this instance as a more frustrating display of Starling's clear inability to stay completely conscious and focused. Medical imaging is recommended to suss for any concerning issue, although Starling's history with Extraordinariness is complicated and we’ll need an Extraordinary medic in place to identify abnormalities.)

TH: And everyone else?

M: Who?

TH: Everyone else at the station. Yoongi, Jimin.

M: We have them.

TH: You have them.

M: They’ve been similarly difficult to get answers from.

TH: You’ve detained them? Like you detained me?

M: We have.

TH: What did they tell you?

M: Nothing. Same as you. That you three stopped the Scarab, somehow. That it’s not a threat anymore.

TH: Then why won’t you believe that?

M: Because you lie, Starling. You’ve lied extensively. You’ve lied and hidden misdirection in your diary. You’ve lied and misdirected in the notes you’ve written here, while you’ve been contained. You’re playing victim, saying you don’t know where your...friends...are, saying you don’t know exactly what’s going on, but the truth is that you’ve always been a step ahead. You’ve always had a plan, a counter-plan, a contingency plan - if you’ve ever failed it’s not because you hadn’t planned
for it, it’s due to something else. I bet you knew they were fine. I bet you’ve found a way to speak to them, even. Why else would you have been such a good boy, taking your Talon shots and all? You don’t fool me.

TH: Getting a bit frustrated, are we, Agent?

M: Don’t get mouthy with me. Remember - your trial starts tomorrow.

TH: *(Laughing)* You and I both know you’ll find a way to acquit me. You need me too much.

M: And you’re just going to go along with me, after that? I don’t trust that. I think you have another plan.

TH: No, I don’t think so. It’s a quiet life for me, here on out. You want to monitor what I do, stick a tracker on my ankle? Sure. You want me to stay here, in the Ordinary world, and never take another step into the Seam? Fine. You want me to come and let you poke at me with needles while you take our experiment and use it to fuck up the rest of the world? *Fine.* I’m not going to stop you. I just want - I want to see them. I want to see Yoongi hyung and Jiminie, and the others, and I want to be out of this dour little room, so if you’re worried about my co-operation, don’t be.

M: And the Scarab will never be a problem again?

TH: No.

M: He’s gone for good?

TH: *It.* And yes, it is.

M: *(Pause)* There won’t be a tracker.

TH: Then?

M: It’ll be an implant. We’ll put it in your arm, and it will dispense Talon in controllable measures,
into your bloodstream. You will not use your abilities. Any of you.

TH: Did they agree?

M: Who?

TH: Yoongi and Jimin. Did they agree to this?

M: They’ve been more amenable than you in general.

TH: That’s not an answer, Agent. Spell it out for me.

M: Yes, they agreed.

TH: Fine, then.

M: You’re okay with being Ordinary. For the rest of your lives.

TH: I’ve always wanted to be Ordinary. That’s what started this whole mess in the first place. You’re doing us a favor.

M: We will require you to undergo some testing.

TH: It’s not like you’re giving us a choice.

M: You...really don’t want all that power?

TH: It was never about power. Never. No one wanted it, Agent. We wanted to get rid of it. We wanted to make things equal. We wanted to cure Extraordinariness, especially abilities that hurt. There were never any intentions to the contrary.
M: A lifetime of Ordinariness might not suit you, Starling.

TH: *(Laughing)* Trust me, Agent. I don’t think ordinary is in any of our cards.

***

In the Deep Space, after Yoongi and Jimin break down the Trap to make it anew, it’s nearly impossible to hear anything in words. There’s a furious reverberation from the Scarab, savage fluctuations of pressure and gravity. Images spin in a kaleidoscope - memories, desires, reminders of pain long buried.

Taehyung is terrified that it’s all folly. That they’ve all trapped themselves here now.

But they move together through rapidly collapsing memory, and he learns them. He learns them both just as much as his own self. He learns about Yoongi’s days in that big, loveless house, the years of neglect. He learns about the whole year Jimin had spent trapped by the Scarab, and the night at the Institute when it had taken everything he had to offer them both a flicker of hope. He learns about their fears, and their hopes, and the dreams they still hold inside of them like dun, flickering light. He wanders through the landscape of the worst of them, the ugliest thoughts they’ve held and the anger they’ve nursed and the despair they’ve carried around shrouded in denial. He learns of their little loves and happiness too -- for how were they to build something out of twigs and pain without knowing what joy is?

He wants them to stop. The Scarab is his monster, and his to destroy. He wants them to stop so they can hold onto themselves, to their joy and their sadness, without letting his own swallow them. He wants them to stop so he can be alone in his head with his torment.

*I don’t like this,* he thinks, he says, but they don’t stop. They don’t want to stop. He thinks, maybe, that they will never think of stopping.

That they will never dream of it.

Yoongi and Jimin will see this through. Even if they have to rip open the fabric of the universe, they’re going to see this through. Even if this makes certain that they never speak another word to each other again, or close their hearts entirely, they will push this through.
And when they wake, when they’re finally free and alone and themselves again, they’ll look each other in the face. They’ll brave through the silences. They’ll find ways to heal.

*But, Yoongi tells him now, you have to let us do this first. You have to let us do this.*

*We’ll end this,* Jimin tells him, like reassurance, but he’s faceless, a blur of motions. Taehyung shudders, and his fingers close around Jimin’s hand. *You’re not alone. We’ll be okay, as long as we’re together.*

You’re not alone.

You’re not alone.

You’re not alone.

He’s loved them, made them forget him, missed them for years, found them again, loved them again. He can trust them.

Love is not always only sacrifice, despite what he believed. Sometimes it’s a headlong leap into trust.

Yoongi takes one of his hands and Jimin takes the other. The Deep Space spills outward like a jazz refrain. When they finish the Trap, made from all their memories instead of his alone, the whole of it seems to seem to burn. Everything is fire - gold and red and brass. It comes apart like a magic trick. It sinks out from beneath them, dissolving to nothing, but their own gravity seems to assert itself. They don’t fall. Fog curls around them like gunsmoke.

“What now?” Taehyung asks.

Yoongi tells him.

***
How long can a person go without sleep before they turn into a pale husk of themselves? Eight days? Eleven? The voices in my head won’t let me rest.

The trial’s long and getting on my nerves. It’s been months. Most of it is staring at a blank judge, trying not to look too bored at the city prosecutor. Some of it is wondering why we need to be there at all. A lot of it is me, looking at you from across the court, and you looking back at me. They tell me they’re keeping us all separate, and I wonder how things are at your present accommodation.

Namjoon hyung managed to get me a plant. I can’t think of a name for him, yet, but I talk to him sometimes. He’s spiny and short, a survivor. He’s a good choice.

I’m bored. The greatest thing of interest in the last couple of months was the implant they put in my arm. It hurt a lot, and there was some blood, and I nearly bit right through my lip. They’re not very gentle, the Flock.

I told them I’d co-operate if they just get me out of here. I told them I didn’t care about being Ordinary or acquiescing to their demands. Part of it was the hope that they’d let me talk to you, but mostly I meant it. How else is it going to end?

It doesn’t matter, I think. None of it matters.

As long as I have you, I think we can figure it out. We can figure anything out. We did, didn’t we? We stopped the Scarab.

We’ll be all right.

***
Dear Taehyung,

It’s Namjoon. I know you’ll find this, inside the plant, because I know you and I know you’ll look. Seokjin hyung and I have perfected the craft of cactus carving. It’s surprisingly relaxing.

We don’t know where they’re holding you, but we can presume the trial is going well. The Flock is dead-set on getting you acquitted, for their own purposes, but I count that a blessing. They’ve helped a lot. Obviously, they have their own stake in helping, but what man doesn’t? We’re just hoping they’re a better devil than the Scarab.

The trial is expected to continue for a few more months. That’s expected. They’ve kept a gag order to ensure no one speaks to the media. There are still some reports, but most of the nation believes the Ghost is now dead, and that he was killed in a police apprehending that happened the night the Seam burned. Ordinaries are unbothered that so much of the Seam suffered. Extraordinaries are calm because they’ve been told the threat of something like the Scarab has been neutralized. Overall, it’s just good enough. Just good enough that we’ll all slip through the cracks, back to our old lives.

Do we deserve to? That’s something we need to ask ourselves over the course of the rest of our lives. Are good intentions enough, if they cause a butterfly effect of awfulness? How much do we remain culpable for our actions? I’m unsure. I know you are, too, because I know you think with a big heart. It’s why we want to tell you that we don’t think you’re a monster.

You didn’t mean to create the Scarab. You gave everything you had to contain him. It’s easy to pin the blame on one thing, especially if that thing took origin within yourself, but please don’t.

Please live.

Live without reductions, without guilt. You’re paying for it through the Flock. You have paid for it in the two years you lived in the Seam. It’s been a long journey, but now you’re alright. Now you’re alive, and somewhat well, and you can live how you want without some new terrible thing to worry about every day. Leave your plans and your counter-plans in the dust, and live. Live with the people you love. Live.

That night, we came to the Station after you three had found some way to contain the Scarab. You
wouldn’t wake up. None of you. It’s why we couldn’t stop the Flock agents from taking you, because they were afraid something would cause you to die. Their involvement was to protect an investment, after all. They believe you will be their instrument for ‘greater good’. I believe that, like all things, you’ll only contribute to creating a weapon. I’ll continue in the Flock, and so will Seokjin and Hoseok and Kwon. We’ll stay. We’ll do what we can to stop them from spiraling off track.

Jungkook says hi. He’s back in the Seam, and he’s been doing well. We saved some of the Scarab’s victims with his help. I say some - obviously, his ability has its limits, and the night was violent. But I thought you would like to know.

We don’t know what happened there. In the Deep Space. We don’t know how you destroyed the Scarab. We don’t even know what your frame of mind is, Taehyung, because we haven’t been allowed to see or talk to you. You look tired in court. So do Yoongi and Jimin. We know that’s probably because you’re all being held in a tiny sterile room, but we do wonder.

If you can talk to them. If you can connect.

I know you won’t write about it in your diaries. (They show me those, because they think I’m good at deciphering you.) I know you’re too smart for that.

If you can talk to them, if you’re speaking to each other every night in the other place...I hope that makes you less lonely. I hope you three are okay. I know there’s a lot between you, and that the road to normalcy might be difficult. But we both hope you find some happiness. All three of you. You deserve it. Please choose gentleness, always.

We’ll stay by you, be here if we ever need to set forth again.

A single starling is a frighteningly small bird. But a murmuration is a force.

Yours,

Namjoon.

***

2020
The restaurant is small, specializes in pork, sits in one of the narrowest of tiny alleys off Namdaemun. The entire front of it is hidden behind large aquariums full of lobsters and crabs. Inside, the clientele are mostly shoppers and tired office-people, nursing bottles of soju or beer while chattering about their day. A television plays tired, old news. Trials End Over Seam Arson Case, the ticker tape reads. Extraordinary Circumstances Lead to Acquittal of Suspects.

There’s a low murmur of chit-chat around this. The servers in the restaurant, lounging by the counter, are bored of this case already. No one had been caught. No punishments had been involved. Besides, the whole thing had happened at the Seam, which felt so far removed from their ordinary lives that they aren’t sure why any of their patrons care in the first place.

Someone rings the bell. The gentleman who looks like a cop. He’s come here often the last few weeks, this pale man with a police badge. His eyes are sharp, and he always orders for two. The single plate of pork belly is for him. The jjangmyeon is for someone else. The servers have bets on whether this second person is some imaginary girlfriend. Whoever they are, they never show.

Today, too, he orders the same thing. Jihyun, who takes the order, shakes her head as she walks into the kitchen.

“Same thing today,” she says, and the entire kitchen groans. “Ah, whoever he’s waiting for, so heartless. It’s been weeks. Why doesn’t he give up?”

“Maybe they’re dead, Jihunnie,” somebody calls. “Maybe he’s just trying to keep their memory alive.”

Everybody groans further at that.

Outside, the TV continues to play conspiracy theories about the Seam case. Things like secret factions in the government, working to save the accused for their own purposes. Things like dangerous Extraordinary abilities, capable of stripping you off your very will, that led to the whole case in the first place. Things like monsters and unauthorized experiments and human test subjects and mind-hacking.

It’s the stuff of dramas. The stuff of pulp novels and action films.

Unreal.
When Jihyun takes the food out to the drawn young detective, there’s someone sitting across from him. She nearly drops the tray in shock. It’s a young man, she realizes, in clothes three sizes too big for him. He’s sallow and gaunt, just like the cop is, but it’s very easy to see that he is also very beautiful. His hair is slightly long, dark, and gathered at the back of his head with a careless butterfly clip. A scar runs down his right forearm, thick and prominent. Jihyun has seen a similar scar on the detective too - she wonders if it means something.

“Oy!” she says, setting down the plates carefully amidst the banchan. “You know how long you’ve made him wait? Have you got no heart?”

A tiny, amused smile crosses the detective’s face. “Ah, at last the food won’t go to waste, eh?”

Jihyun glares at the young man. He tries to smile back. “Ring if you need anything else,” she says. “I suppose a drink might help you both.”

“That’s alright, thank you, Jihyun-ah.”

She walks away. When she turns at the counter, she sees that the beautiful-looking man is reaching one-handed for chopsticks under the table, while the other holds the detective’s hand tight.

“It’s not a girlfriend,” she announces, in the kitchen. “The detective. He has a boyfriend. He’s right out there.”

“What?”

“Really?”

“A boyfriend?”

“Where was he, all this time?”

There’s a rush as most everyone goes to check. Jihyun stays back, eyes to the television. Seam Arson Case Suspects: Rumored to be Lovers, the ticker tape screams. Cops Involved in the Case was in Love With Extraordinary Informant, Sources Say.
Jihyun rolls her eyes. This is the worst news channel, and she’s been trying to get her boss to keep the TV on a drama channel forever.

“Bullshit,” she says to herself. “Utter bullshit. Who even believes this stuff?”

She hopes the detective and his boyfriend are okay. They must be, if the detective had waited for this long. They must be.

***

Yoongi’s playing Minesweeper on his computer when the call comes in.

“Hyung,” says Namjoon, draped over his desk. “Hyung, please pick up.”

“No.”

“Please. Please, I have three normal cases and a Flock case. I can’t take anymore.”

“I didn’t ask to be back here. I don’t want to be back here. You take it.”

“What’s the Cold Cases division without resident gremlin Min Yoongi?” Namjoon grumbles, but reaches for the phone anyway. “I don’t know why they can’t just call you on your cell-phone.”

“It’s probably a CI.” Yoongi says. “Besides, I have a terrible headache.”

“You get those a lot these days. Better check that out.” Namjoon grunts again and picks up the phone. “Hullo? Huh-- what? Oh.” He offers the phone to Yoongi. “It’s your boyfriend.”

“Which one?”
“Oh, ha. Does that ever get old? Yeah. Yeah, it does.”

Yoongi takes the phone from him. Decides Taehyung definitely sounds odd when he says, over a crackly connection, “I’ve got something on that trafficking case. But if you’d rather just play Minesweeper and pretend you have no leads, I wouldn’t blame you.”

“What’s the alternative?”

“You can blow off work to come see me, your critically handsome criminal informant.”

“And hear you complain about how your job is much tougher now that you’re not allowed in the Seam?” Yoongi draws a breath. “Where are you?”

“Hm,” Taehyung says, trying for light even though Yoongi can tell from his voice that he’s close to tears. “Here at Taemin’s.”

“What’s wrong?”

Taehyung drops his voice, the way he always does when he actually gets to the fucking point. “Jimin is here.”

Yoongi puts down the paper weight he’s been playing with, very deliberately. “Hmm.”

“He wants to see you. We-- we want to see you.”

“I’ll come.”

Taehyung’s voice is shaky. “Okay. We’ll wait here. Usual booth.”

Yoongi looks to Namjoon, who only shrugs. He grabs his coat.
It’s been a few months since the trial. Yoongi had been first to let go, his participation in the entire mess deemed the least offensive, the charges racked up against him a much lesser number than the other two. It was unclear, his lawyer said, how much he was a perpetrator versus a compliant victim. Yoongi hated those words. *Compliant victim.* He wanted to get on the stand and scream it to the heavens that no one had made him do anything. That he was not exempt from blame. That he and Taehyung and Jimin were all equal partners in what had begun this, and been equal partners in what had ended it.

Not that it mattered. Their freedom was already paid for, their lawyers confident of victory. Yoongi walked out of the courtroom that day to nobody waiting for him except Hoseok and Namjoon, both their smiles bright and eyes full of relief.

He didn’t feel relieved. He doesn’t think he ever truly will.

For a while after his trial was over, he hadn’t been told anything about Taehyung and Jimin. There was no way to know what was going on in the court, because gag orders ensured nothing went through. Other Flock agents were mum. Those involved with them, like Seokjin, weren’t allowed to know much beyond the basics anyway.

It felt excruciating. Those few days, with no contact with the others, with the implant in his arm trickling Talon into his blood, with the rattling in his head and the horrible, creeping belief that something would go wrong, *something* - with Taehyung, or Jimin, or both - something will tip the scales in the balance of the prosecution and they’ll be taken away, to some gaol or somewhere far away, and Yoongi will never see them again. Will never know about them again. These people were connected, smart: they could make the two of them simply disappear. As if they’d never existed.

For those few days, Yoongi kept looking over his shoulder. Expecting an Extraordinary to jump him, take his memories again, make it so that he did not remember his boys.

They let him back into the police. He supposes they did it so they can keep a better eye on him. He gets his old desk back and everything. It had been months since he’d left it, but no one had touched it since. Cases accumulated on it, cold as ice.

Upstairs, some newer rookie had taken Jimin’s desk. Yoongi wonders if Jimin will want to come back, if they’ll let him. They probably will, he thinks. Taehyung was always going to be the problem. He’d been failed by every system at some point, and what he knows to do best is peddling secrets. With the Seam being out-of-bounds to him, what was he going to do?

But, Yoongi surmised back then, that was a distant problem. The problem at hand was Taehyung
never getting out of court a free man.

Yoongi waited for them. Waited for both of them at places they’d pre-determined in the Deep Space before all contact had been lost due to the implants - at a pork restaurant for Taehyung, at Taemin’s cafe for Jimin. He waited and he hoped. He thought a lot about finish lines. The claustrophobic tension prowled his head, like a caged animal.

And then, when he’d felt eyes on the back of his neck one night and seen Taehyung slide into the seat across from him, alive and free and beautiful, he’d cried. Taehyung held his hand and said nothing.

He looked haunted.

Yoongi supposes they’re all haunted now. In more ways than one.

Taehyung had fallen easily into peddling secrets, again. Yoongi guesses that he never really needed any abilities to charm people into giving up the game. It comes to him, easy, and the Flock points him in the directions they want. It’s probably not freedom the way he envisioned, but Taehyung says it’s a far cry from being locked up somewhere and goes along with it. He comes back to Yoongi at night. Tries to sleep. Starts awake so many times at night that Yoongi sometimes sleeps right through his tears.

But sometimes he wakes. Sometimes he wakes, and they hold each other, and it’s a little better.

They don’t know why Jimin’s trial took the longest. Taehyung had begun to guess at things: maybe it was because his years were murkier; maybe it was because they had to be sure the Scarab had no more influence on him. Maybe, they speculated, it was because Jimin had always investigated the theory and scientific meaning when it came to the Deep Space. Whatever it was, it was taking much longer than it should have.

But now here he is.

The sky is such an incredible deep blue today that the tops of buildings seem simply suspended somewhere underwater. As Yoongi drives towards the Seam, the shape of clouds appears like tides. His memories dance bright and molten. Hullo, Taehyung had said glass-eyed, when he’s met Yoongi at that restaurant. Hullo, hyung, I thought I’d never see you again.
Yoongi saw him and began to struggle through a zeotropic series of emotions. Everything felt raw and jagged. He knows that their past is a tangle of mistakes. He knows that they’ve wrought misery on themselves and on other people. But all his love and fury are bigger than all his logic; stronger, a tidal wave that crashes through the levee.

And all he wanted to do the moment he saw Taehyung again was to breathe. To live.

It’s the same thing that trembles through him now.

When he stumbles through the cafe’s door at last, and towards Jimin, it’s the same thing that sticks in his throat, making it hard to breathe. It’s like there’s a crashing ocean in his mind, spilling over and under the sides, no longer containable. It’s illegible, impossible; it’s pain that breaks right out of the veneers.

He presses his nose to Jimin’s wet cheek, holds his wrist like a prayer. Everything he wants to say threatens to overspill, so he says nothing at all. He doesn’t think Jimin can listen, anyway. He cannot listen. He’s shaking hard enough that Taehyung folds his arms awkwardly around him, trying to maneuver in the small space of the booth. They both end up holding Yoongi, and Yoongi lets himself be held. He hadn’t thought he could have this. He had stopped believing he could ever have this, so now that he does, he doesn’t know what to do expect to hold on to Taehyung’s elbow for dear life.

When Yoongi had woken up at the Flock’s windowless room, so many months back, he’d come back coughing and sputtering, his entire body in some strange pain, his insides feeling like they’ve rearranged and his head full of cotton wool. He’d sat up and convulsed and fell back into the Deep Space for a while, lost in some murky formless place. When he woke up for good, he’d been told that they were detaining him. He’d been told that they’d pulled him from the station, and that they’d been worried because he wasn’t waking up. He’d been told that any information about Jimin and Taehyung were classified, that there was no point asking. Between and within lapses of consciousness, Yoongi lost them both over and over again. His nightmares repeated fragments of thought and memory from the Deep Space. His head was a battlefield of voices. They put Talon in him, and he couldn’t even reach his glimpses of futures, which meant that in his fevered imagination, Taehyung and Jimin died a thousand deaths. And the voices continued.

But when his consciousness settled, when there were no more fever dreams or pain, he’d known that they were alive. They had to be. It hadn’t just been furious belief: Yoongi had known.

Yoongi had known because of what they’d done.
How they’d built the Trap.

Yoongi still has his hand on Taehyung’s elbow, and lets him go a moment to sit opposite him. Jimin looks just as gaunt and underfed as Taehyung had looked when Yoongi had seen him up close after the trials, but his eyes are just as bright.

“I made a mistake,” Jimin says. “I gave them parts of my memory. That’s why my trial took so long.”

“They didn’t find anything too interesting?”

“Just what they already knew,” Jimin grabs the saltshaker, tosses it from hand to hand. “But it took a while. Taehyung told me you’re back with Cold Cases.”

“I am. Did they offer you Extraordinary?”


Yoongi finds this hilarious, in a dark, rattling way. “Are you going to take it?”

Jimin shrugs. “They didn’t shape it like a choice.”

“Guess we get to be watched for the rest of our lives.”

“Better than a prison cell,” Taehyung says, and sounds less desperately sad for once, than simply hopeful. “We said it’s okay. As long as we’re together. We said it, didn’t we?”

Jimin nods. He smiles, lip quirking. “We did say that.”

Taehyung says, to Yoongi: “You said to trust you.”
Yoongi bites his lip. Nods, too. “And you did.”

Taehyung holds himself tenderly, like he’s afraid of what he’s going to ask: “So. What do we do now?”

What they’ll do now:

Most immediately, they’re going to bring Jimin home. They’re going to sit, and talk, and nurse the headache that they’ve all been carrying since the morning began. They’re going to take a quiet moment, or two, and marvel that they’re alive – all of them! – and at least one of them is going to cry. There will be still more tears later, in the dark of a bedroom, on a cramped old bed, because once is not enough in the face of miracles, and there’s nowhere better to remember that than in the gloom, skin to skin.

What’s going to happen later:

They’re going to stumble and walk and learn their way through their histories and their new lives. They’re going to dash against whatever barricades the Flock sets for them, demand sometimes and sacrifice sometimes -- whatever it takes to keep the world safe. They’re going to study in secret and work in the dark, because there are gaps to be filled, fears to be quenched, secrets to be guarded. They’re going to laugh and lie and say things they don’t mean, then turn around and apologize. They’re going to deal with all the ghosts and the wounds, and the scars that the wounds will leave behind.

They’ll tell each other of nightmares in the quiet blue of the dawn. They’ll nurse the lifetime of bruises they carry around -- sometimes with touch, sometimes with words. They’ll grit their teeth and survive through the voices in their heads. They’ll fill the confused spaces in each other and open up new passages.

They will hurt. They will take on more than they can handle. They will go places no one has gone and break apart walls higher than ever built.

And through it all, they will live. They will live and love, as much as they can, as long as possible.

And they will hold.
The door. The wall. The Trap.

Between them three, they will hold. For as long as they can.

***

Dear Namjoon hyung,

Thank you for the cactus. I took him with me when I left the Flock’s holding cell, and he now sits on the sill in Yoongi hyung’s room. He’s very tenacious, even though Jimin says he’s in a gloomy spot, and that he’s going to get yellow and die if he doesn’t get enough sun. Jimin’s the cactus doctor in this household, so we’re moving him to the kitchen soon.

I have obviously, sent you a cactus in return. This is a bit ridiculous. Please confer with Seokjin hyung and Hoseok hyung about the sustainability of this sort of secret messaging - surely, it’s bad for both cacti and for us. How many can we possibly accumulate before our shared obsession for trading succulents becomes suspicious?

But we have a long way to go before then, so I leave you this friend.

We’re alight. We haven’t taken the questions and consequences and put it away, but we have decided to look at them like you said - with gentleness. It’s sometimes frustrating. Sometimes we don’t know how to talk to each other. What do you do, when a lot of what you’ve shared is simply terrible? We built ourselves out of secrets and transgressions and a pile of lies. We made ourselves against the background of a rising body count. It’s not normal, not ideal. But we’re not bad. Everyone says it, so I try to believe it. We’re not bad. We never were.

The court decision to let us go said that we behaved the way hostages would to escape a terrible situation. That the prosecution didn’t meet the burden of proof to prove beyond reasonable doubt that we acted of our own self-interest. There are some big words in that decision, but what it comes down to is this: we acted like scared animals. Scared animals against a predator.

A predator we’ve now locked up, in a Trap of our creation.

You said you don’t know how we destroyed the Scarab. The truth is, we didn’t. We couldn’t. A thing made of thought that takes on its own form isn’t physical, after all. It has no death.
We did contain it. We contained it amongst the three of us. We built a new trap, between us three. We did it so that no one is left behind, so that with our combined effort, we can hold it between us as long as we can.

I don’t know if you can imagine it.

Imagine a massive cage. Now imagine that it has three doors.

That’s how it is.

And we’re the gatekeepers.

Now imagine that the cage rattles sometimes. Tries tricks sometimes. The thing inside wants to get out sometimes, and it’ll do everything in its power to fight what we’ve made around it. It’ll battle us in nightmares and try to torment our waking hours. It’ll scream and shout and throw itself at the bars. It’ll never stop, and that means we can never stop.

There’s no peace. There’s no forgetting. There’s no putting down our weapons and letting the Flock dictate everything.

We’re still studying Extraordinary powers and the Deep Space. Still trying to do what we can to permanently seal it, so there’s no danger if one of us is compromised. First step is to fool the Flock’s implant into believing it still works. Jimin’s already finding a way around it. We’re speaking to Jungkook on what would happen if we use resurrection to reset the implant’s software. We’ll keep you updated, but we believe that we need to keep your Extraordinary abilities if we’re going to hold the Scarab.

We’re trying to be careful. As careful as we can. We know what we’re dealing with now, and we know the stakes. The Agent at the Flock asked me if I really believed an ordinary life is what’s in my cards. I wish I could. We wish we could.

But it’s like sitting on a ticking time-bomb, and it’s still a war.

We’re sorry we kept it from you for so long. You understand why. No one can know, and no one can intervene, no one can compromise. The cost can be too high.
It’s our secret. One last, gigantic secret trapped in our minds.

Once we get the implant out, we’re getting out of here. We don’t know where we’ll go, yet. Somewhere they can’t find us. Maybe we’ll change our faces. Maybe we’ll change our names. We don’t know yet. We just know we aren’t done. This isn’t done.

It’ll take us time, but we’ll win one day. We’ll kill it. Till then, there’s no quiet life. No following anyone’s arbitrary rules. This is all so far beyond the Flock and the Seam.

We’re glad we have people like you on our side.

Thank you for not giving up on me.

We’ll see you very soon. Please take care of your new cactus friend.

Love,

Taehyung.

THE END

Chapter End Notes

(contd from above)

- being in trouble.

This fic was never going to get a quiet ending. How could it, when it hit the ground running? But I wanted to have a happy ending. I really did. This is such a bleak story at so many points, and I wanted them to get a sliver of hope at the end of the rainbow. But they are adventurous characters, who know not how to sit still, so here they go again.
I hope the journey's been good. Please read the detective taegi Joseon Era thingy if you want more investigative thrillers. I've also got a new spreadsheet-heavy project! We'll see.

Thanks for reading murderfic.

Please, PLEASE drop feedback if you've enjoyed it - it means so much to me.

Come say hi on twt

HAVE A SCARY BIRD.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!