Summary

A quiet life was never what Jeongguk had intended, but more so, what he was dealt. So, he isn't surprised as he finds himself swept away in the town's newcomer, Taehyung. Preparing himself to leave his small town was supposed to be Jeongguk's next big step in life, but he never imagined himself being pulled directly into a world that is far from the one he's always known alongside five men proclaiming to be witches. So, it seems that Taehyung has other plans for Jeongguk's future--plans that might be a little hard to swallow.

Notes

Hello there! So, this little number has been simmering away for a good while. (Almost a year.)

So, welcome to the monstrosity that will be known as The Wind and The World. (Trust, the title will make loads of sense one of these days!) This is honestly more of a challenge for me, an attempt at working out a complex storyline with little golden nuggets hidden in between the lines. This is... I don't even know where to honestly begin with this, but I truly and
sincerely hope you all enjoy.

See the end of the work for more notes.
The sound of the wind causing the wheat stalks to bow down, a calming melody of quiet sighs rustling throughout the field. A wordless song, yet somehow it forced everything around it to join in, creating a perfect tune. The wind was demanding, yet careless as she forced the grass within the fields to falter from standing perfect attention, the world belonging to her, and Jeongguk loved her so.

He had spent more days than he could count sitting amidst the wheat, feeling himself become wrapped within the calming blanket of a breeze as his brown locks would dance along with the wind. It was his quiet place, his retreat, the place he would go whenever he needed to ease his mind or simply forget for a moment that maybe he wasn’t living his life to the fullest.

The doe-eyed boy often spent most of his days there alone. It was his little secret as he would fit perfectly in between the stalks that would hide him away where no one in the world could ever find him. As a matter of fact, he was so enraptured within the music around him that he nearly forgot that he wasn’t alone, for the first time, until a hand reached in between the stalks as an exhausted groan mixed within the wind’s melody.

“Guk,” he whined, the breeze drowning him out slightly, demanding her attention back. “I’m hungry.”

Jeongguk shook his head as he watched between the wheat for a moment, his friend shuffling slightly having just awoken from a nap, before he closed his eyes once more, allowing himself to get lost, though only for a moment.

“Jeongguk, are you listening to me?” he whined once more, a bit louder, pulling the younger from within his headspace.

“Told you to eat before we came here,” Jeongguk answered, tilting his head back to soak in the scorching sun, though he was quick to retreat upon hearing another annoyed whine. “Tae,” he said plainly, his lips falling into a straight line, “Do you ever feel like you aren’t living your life to the fullest?”

He caught a glimpse through the stalks of the elder sitting up, hardly making out the way he was carding through his mess of silver waves. “That’s what you come out here to think about?” he asked,
voice low and seemingly full of disbelief.

“I come here to think about a lot of things,” he defended. “It’s just that… Today that’s what I happened to think about.”

The silver-haired boy was quick to part the stalks, his eyes narrowed slightly as he cocked an eyebrow. “Not really,” his words were confident. “Do you feel like you aren’t living your life to the fullest?”

Jeongguk hummed at his words, pulling his knees to his chest. “I just feel like there is so much that I want to do. I mean, I’m leaving for school at the end of the summer, and I’ve hardly completed anything on my bucket list for even this small town,” a small huff escaped his lips. “What if once I get out there, into the real world, what if I still never get around to doing anything that I want to do?”

“A bucket list, huh?” Taehyung chimed, eyes lighting up as if he had just thought of a way to rid the world of every bad thing within it. “What’s on this bucket list of yours?”

Jeongguk raised a brow, his bucket list had always just been for him, but maybe that simple fact alone was the reason that he was having so much trouble completing it. “Why?” he finally asked, slowly understanding where things were headed as Taehyung’s lips curled into a mischievous grin.

“Tell me what’s on your bucket list, Guk!” he chirped, bouncing up and down in his excitement.

Jeongguk had met Taehyung at the beginning of summer. The odd silver-haired boy that would come to the diner every morning, much like he did himself. It wasn’t unusual for the town folk to be intrigued by newcomers as they didn’t often see many come through. Not in their little settlement nestled safely in a low valley between the mountains. Everyone there knew one another’s business, and that’s why Jeongguk found himself being pulled towards the boy who always sat in the corner booth, his messy waves always laying a new way from the previous day as he ate his weight in pancakes.

What piqued Jeongguk’s interest, even more so, was the way that every so often his eyes would meet the elder’s, and he couldn’t help but find himself curious. There were many things that were different about Taehyung, from his perfect skin that looked as if the sun had descended to the earth to pepper kisses across his face to his piercing stare, or maybe piercing wasn’t exactly the right word, but whenever their eyes would meet, Jeongguk could have sworn that Taehyung was looking at him like he had found the answer to all of life’s questions.
The way they finally met was unforgettable. Taehyung had taken his normal spot in the corner by a window, the hustle and bustle of the diner dying down quickly after he stepped over the threshold, but what got Jeongguk wasn’t his beauty, nor his aura. What made Jeongguk stop at his table that morning, finally mustering up the courage to say hello to the newcomer, was the fact that he was reading through some fashion magazine, only the magazine was upside down.

Taehyung looked utterly offended the moment that Jeongguk had pointed it out to him, though his mouth quickly spread into a wide grin, every single one of his teeth on full display. They had been inseparable ever since.

As a matter of fact, Taehyung was still looking at Jeongguk with the same look that he often shot him before they met, never changing, always certain, as if Jeongguk was still the answer to all the world’s problems.

Jeongguk cocked his head slightly, doing his best to not chuckle at the curious eyes he was receiving from the elder. “My bucket list?” he suddenly felt a little embarrassed at his own words, wondering if he sounded childish.

“Guk,” Taehyung groaned, his voice seemingly calming the raging wind around them. “Tell me. You never know. I might be able to help.”

His words were enticing to say the least, and Jeongguk found himself quickly running through his list in his mind. They were simple goals, and he found himself wondering just why he hadn’t gotten around to them. Wondering why he was so bothered by the fact that he had spent his whole life perfectly content, never really getting around to doing any of them until he was about to start a new life somewhere else. Maybe it was because he had finally found someone to share the experiences with.

“They’re not really that great,” he hummed, earning an impatient huff from the silver-haired boy.

“I don’t care,” the tone of his voice had changed, a sort of seriousness was laced within his words. “If it means a lot to you, then I want to do everything I can to make it happen.”

Jeongguk’s eyes fell to meet Taehyung’s, though the gaze of the older was hard to hold due to the sheer intensity of it. “Okay,” he whispered, and Taehyung gestured for him to continue, “I just want to do simple things. Things that, you know, kids like to do, but now that I’m older and really thinking about them, I guess they just seem silly.”
“Why are you downplaying something if it’s important to you?” His words struck a chord within the very depth of Jeongguk’s chest, “You shouldn’t do that.”

He was right. He shouldn’t do that.

“I just would like to climb the water tower before I leave, you know, look at the stars at night like all the kids do in the movies. Before they get caught by the cops of course.”

Taehyung cocked his head slightly, his eyes scanning the area around him before his mouth snapped open for a moment, and then closed before opening once more. “They do that in movies?”

“Yeah, have you never seen it? It’s so fucking cliché,” he chuckled lightly, and then even more so as Taehyung was still thinking deeply about his words.

“I guess,” he paused for a moment, “I guess I don’t watch many movies.”

“Clearly not.”

“Okay, so what’s next then?” Taehyung quickly perked back up, bouncing once more.

“Uh, I’ve always wanted to sneak into a movie that I didn’t pay for.”

“That’s boring,” his lips fell into a thin line. “Next.”

He couldn’t help but roll his eyes, “Get so drunk that I black out.”

Taehyung’s eyes widened slightly, “Why would anyone ever want that?”

“I dunno,” he hummed once more, “All the kids in my class used to talk about—”

“Next.”
“Geez,” the younger sighed. “I think it would be really cool to break into that abandoned house that lies at the edge of the words. I’ve always wondered what was there—”

Taehyung snapped his fingers, a huge smile taking over his entire face as if that was the sort of thing he wanted to hear, “So, let’s do that one then!”

“What?” Jeongguk’s voice came out much more unamused than he had intended, he never expected Taehyung to agree to such a thing, though he wasn’t sure why he ever doubted he would.

“Tomorrow,” he cooed. “Let’s go to the abandoned house after breakfast!”

“Oh, so now we’re getting breakfast?” he chuckled lightly as the wind picked up once more.

“We do every morning, plus we’ll need our strength for the hike there and even more so for whenever you end up pissing yourself and running because something scares you.” He wasn’t wrong, Jeongguk could see himself running out of the house and back to town over the slightest noise, minus pissing himself, of course.

“Shut up,” he started, noticing the way that Taehyung was looking up at the sky, most likely taking note of the sun’s position. He would be leaving soon, Jeongguk was sure of it, he always left around the same time every day and never once told the younger why, and he couldn’t help but find himself curious.

There were many things that Jeongguk didn’t know about Taehyung, mainly important things. All of the silly stuff, like favorite color, book, and food; which of course was pancakes. Not that Jeongguk minded talking about seemingly useless things most of the time with his only friend in town, but he was often curious about odd things that Taehyung did or said.

Like the time whenever they went to the grocery store to pick up junk food before binging all the Harry Potter movies because, for some ridiculous reason that Tae couldn’t quite put into words, he was the only human in the world who hadn’t seen them. Taehyung had frozen, nearly solid right at the threshold of the doorway of the grocery store, eyes wide with what looked like panic as he stared at the automatic doors that had slid open in front of him.

He slowly looked up, locking eyes with the younger after the fact and told him that he was sorry that Jeongguk had to see that, and that it must have scared him. Jeongguk still had no clue what in the
world Taehyung was carrying on about at the grocery store. Not only that, but he also had no clue how to play Rock, Paper, Scissors, and that was something that Jeongguk truly couldn’t fathom. Who in the world didn’t understand how to play Rock, Paper, Scissors?

Nevertheless, it wasn’t like Jeongguk had any other friends in town to hang out with, most had moved on quickly, just after they graduated high school, going on to bigger and better things in life. All the while, Jeongguk stayed back, seemingly caught in a world that wouldn’t stop spinning around him, offering little direction for him to even begin to head in.

It was simply because there was something incredibly comforting about Taehyung’s presence. His words always were wise, kind, and full of thought, his actions on the other hand—not so much. Being with Taehyung was the best part of Jeongguk’s day, however, and he wouldn’t trade it for anything.

“Jeongguk, did you hear me?” his voice pulled Jeongguk back to reality with an abrupt motion. “It’s time for me to go.”

“Oh, where—actually, never mind,” he nodded slightly, deciding that he would spend a little more time in the field before heading home for dinner. “I’ll see you in the morning, Taehyung.”

He watched as Taehyung waved to him before practically skipping out of the field, nearly tripping over the wheat stalks along the way as the younger kept his eyes fixed on his back, eventually watching as his silver hair disappeared into the woods.

He fell back into his hiding place between the stalks, listening as the wind practically howled through the surrounding trees that surrounded the field. He would have to head home himself soon enough, sure his mother was ready to give him an earful like she so often did for spending so much time away from home, something along the lines of being useless and never helping around the house, always living with his head high in the clouds.

Just the thought of the words he knew he would be hearing soon enough sent a shudder down his spine, and he wished with everything within himself to be able to allow time to stop, even if only for an extra moment to be able to spend just a while longer in his favorite place. The place that he felt the safest.
The sun was beginning to dip behind the distant hills, and the air was turning colder as summer was quickly coming to an end. His gray t-shirt clung to him from the heat earlier in the day, the wetness now sending chills down his spine. It would be only a few more weeks and he would be out of the lonely town that he had spent most of his teenage years, and into adulthood having a love-hate relationship with.

A part of him was excited to go, thrilled even, a craving for adventure buzzing throughout his entire being whenever he thought about taking the next big step on his journey in life, even if he wasn’t entirely sure where he was heading. But a part of him dreaded leaving the town, his mind always wandering back to Taehyung. How could he ever leave him? He was easily the best friend he had ever had.

Taehyung had a knack for mischief as if it was what coursed through his very veins, but he was also safe, and Jeongguk couldn’t bear the thought of leaving him. But if he asked Taehyung to go with him, would he?

He could never ask him to do such a thing, not with how deeply Jeongguk could see that Taehyung loved his small town. Or could he?

Those were all questions that could be answered at a different time, but Jeongguk quickly decided that he would definitely ask Taehyung to go with him. He couldn’t imagine being without him, even if it was a little selfish.

Jeongguk slowly turned the doorknob to enter his home, taking care to be quiet, hoping that maybe he could sneak by her, flinching slightly each time the creaky floorboards would groan under his weight as he shut the door behind him.

“About time you came home,” a voice snarled from the living room, and Jeongguk’s heart sank, wondering when the last time was he was welcomed home with open arms.
“I’m sorry,” he answered, quickly gathering the courage to step into the doorway of the living room, where the flashes from the television were the only source of light. “Got caught up, and—”

He was cut off by a quick, condescending scoff, “You were with that oddball again, weren’t you?”

The words hurt him. He knew that the townsfolk weren’t entirely fond of Taehyung, and often shot them odd glances when they were out and about, but for some reason, her words had pierced like a knife. “He isn’t an oddball,” he challenged quietly.

“You should hear what everyone around town thinks about him,” she spat, venom coming out with her words. “They will never accept him and you’re better off on your own.”

“On my own?” Jeongguk froze. “I’ve always been on my own. What kind of life is that?”

“You’ve had friends,” she said simply.

“And they’ve all up and left. I stayed behind because it was what you wanted,” his hands fell to his sides, knuckles turning white as he clenched his fists. “And now, of all times, you want to pretend that you’re a good mother—suddenly being concerned for my wellbeing by being bothered by the fact that I hang around someone that you see as different?”

“Jeongguk,” she snapped, and the room fell dark as she turned off the television. “I’m just trying to protect you.”

“Protect me?” he spat, already taking a step back out of the doorway. “Where was this disposition to protect me all my life? Or was that what you were doing this entire time by hiding everything about me, who I am, who my father is? I don’t even know where I came from and at times, I’m not even sure that you’re my mother.”

She stood quickly, nearly toppling over the chair within the action. “You take that back right now. I have been a damn good mother to you and you know it.”

“Yeah,” Jeongguk scoffed. “A great mother who never let me have or do anything, and yet turned a blind eye when I was out doing stuff I shouldn’t have been, trying to get you to at least act like you
cared. You’ve never given a shit about me, so don’t act like you do now.”

“I just don’t want you to get hurt!” she yelled, voice shrill as it bounced off the creaky walls of their home.

“You don’t want me to get hurt?” he forced out a laugh, hands falling limp by his sides as he took another step back. “Funny. It’s real funny that you’re worried now that I’ve found someone who cares about me as much as I care about them.”

“That is enough,” she spat as she moved forward, her hand already colliding with Jeongguk’s cheek. It was over in an instant, but the echo of the impact rang through his ears as he cupped his cheek, tears welling up in his eyes as he looked up to his mother.

“You’re right,” he forced out. “It is enough. Don’t worry, I’ll be out of your hair by the end of the summer and then you won’t have to pretend so much that you care for something that you so clearly regret.”

“Sweetheart,” she started, the fake remorse in her tone that Jeongguk had come to know all too well as she held her hands out in the darkness, searching for his. “I’m so sorry. I don’t regret having you, I don’t—It’s just, that boy is bad news. He’s real bad news.”

“You make no sense,” he shoved her hands away, shaking his head. “And thank God I don’t have to listen to your ramblings much longer.” He turned on his heels, thankful he hadn’t taken his shoes off by the door as he grabbed his coat and pushed through the screen door of their small farmhouse into the cool evening air.

He and his mother had never seen eye to eye. It wasn’t anything new, but it still stung just as harshly each time. She had always tried to keep him under a close eye and had even begged him to stay in town when he said he was ready to leave for college. She begged him to stay, never wanting to him to go anywhere, and he had been taking care of himself for as long as he could remember now. Still, her words carried weight in a way that he could never place.

He kept running though, never looking back towards their farmhouse that he was somewhat fond of as he breached the outline of the woods. Jeongguk didn’t even have to think about where he was going, it was almost as if his heart knew and simply pulled him into the same direction each and every time he set out of his home. He never stopped, not even as his legs felt as if they were close to giving out, not even as his heart beat violently against the caged walls of his chest and his vision
turned blurry as the harsh words of his own mother rang through his head.

The moment he cut into the line of the wheat stalks, everything was calming. A sudden rush of relief washed through his being like the warmest of ocean tides. His safe space always had a knack for making him feel free of worry, almost like he was floating, and even more so as the light breeze picked up—sending a chill down his spine.

He ardently wished that he could say that this was the first time he was going to be spending the night out in the field, but it was far from that. He had lost count of how many times he had left his house within a fit of rage on the account of his mother. Perhaps he was childish, he thought, sighing as he found his spot in the middle of the field.

Maybe he was overreacting at her words, but he didn’t care. His heart beat for the wind and even more so, it beat for Taehyung. It was something he had never realized, not until his head met the ground as he laid down, and the silver waves were all he could see in his mind, framing bright eyes and an even brighter smile.

His mother’s words held such weight because they were about the one thing he had grown to care about in his twenty-one years of living. The one thing that helped him to feel even a bit of direction, and the thought that he would have to leave him at the end of the summer—it hurt. It hurt so greatly that his heart felt as if it was being pulled apart at the seams within his very chest.

The wind howled, no doubt calling for him to pay attention to her and listen to her song. His eyes closed, instantly melting into the blades of grass and crushed wheat beneath him as he fell victim to her words and drifted off to sleep as a raft lost out at sea.

He awoke to the crash of thunder in the distance as lightning lit up the area around him. The sky above him was still clear, but his heart jumped, beating sporadically as he sat up, hands moving to
pull the sleep from his eyes. The wind was still blowing, no doubt a lullaby to pull him back to sleep as he stretched and yawned, running his fingers through hair askew.

He watched the thunder light up the night sky once again, though the sun was breaching the horizon as he stood—figuring his time within the wheat was up and he would have to return home until his eyes landed on a mess of silver waves, dancing in the breeze as they reflected in the light of the moon with his back towards Jeongguk as he looked up to the sky, his white blouse moving along with the wind.

“Taehyung?” he asked, confused because Taehyung always had a habit of disappearing as the sunset and not returning until the next morning. “What are you doing out here?”

“I’m listening,” he said, voice getting lost in the breeze and Jeongguk took a few steps closer.

“Listening? To what?”

“Whatever it is that’s out here always talking to you. I want to hear it too,” he sighed. “But I don’t hear anything. She won’t speak to me.”

“Who won’t speak to you?” Jeongguk asked, crouching down beside of Taehyung.

“The wind,” he murmured. “But that’s okay. Perhaps something else will speak to me,” he chirped, mouth pulling into the widest of grins.

Jeongguk stared a moment more, unsure of what his friend meant, but it wasn’t unlike Taehyung to be a mystery. In fact, it was something that he quite liked about the elder. “Shouldn’t we get going? There’s a storm moving in.”

“It won’t come here,” he said solemnly, eyes moving up to the cascade of fading stars above them. “Will you miss it here?”

“What?” Jeongguk asked, realizing he was listening to the wind again as it howled through the trees of the nearby woods.
“Will you miss it here?”

“When I go to college? Hardly,” he answered, honest, images of his mother creeping up into his mind. “Tae, can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Where are you going?” Taehyung’s eyes fell down, his gaze moving to fix itself on Jeongguk as his waves danced in the wind again. “Is this your place? Do you feel like this is where you belong?” the younger asked.

“I’ve never really felt like I belong anywhere,” he said, voice soft but beautiful. Like he still somehow had the whole world figured out. “But one day I will.”

“Oh—” Jeongguk said, pulling his knees to his chest as he looked out towards the dark woods.

“What is it?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Tell me!” Taehyung nagged, reaching to shake Jeongguk by his shoulder.

Jeongguk clasped his knees a bit tighter, hands fidgeting as his cheeks warmed up. “You should come with me,” he blurted out, fast, nearly incoherent.

Taehyung’s hand fell to the ground from his shoulder as he stared back at him. Mouth agape and brows knitting together, but his gaze was electric—it always was.

“When I leave town. You should come with me,” Jeongguk swallowed. “If you want to.”

“That would be amazing,” Taehyung sighed, leaning back onto his hands. “It truly would be.”
Jeongguk couldn’t help but smile, tugging his lip between his teeth and he wanted to scream out of excitement. He wanted to shout it out into the mountains that surrounded their small town until everyone within the vicinity could hear him. And even more, he wanted to pull Taehyung tight into his embrace.

“Hey, you wanna go get pancakes?” Taehyung broke the silence, reaching to brush a knuckle lightly over Jeongguk’s cheek. “I’m starving.”

“You’re always starving,” Jeongguk chuckled. “It’s probably not even 6 o’clock yet. Who on earth eats breakfast before the sun is even up?”

“Hey, breakfast is a construct, not a time. It can be had at any time of the day—in fact,” he grinned. “That’s a motto that I live by.”

“I know that,” Jeongguk smiled, finally looking over at Taehyung, falling into the remnants left of the moonlight that danced across his face as the shadow of the wheat stalks painted the most beautiful picture. “Yeah,” he sighed. “Let’s go get you those pancakes.”

“We don’t have to do this,” Jeongguk said quickly as they stood at the edge of the road by the woods. They were almost to their destination and it wasn’t even lunchtime. “This is silly.”

“Hey,” Taehyung reprimanded. “You were the one who wanted to do this.”

“Yeah, but it doesn’t matter,” he said, fists balled down by his sides. “Like I said, it’s silly.”
“It’s your bucket list—” Taehyung smiled. “Nothing about that is silly. It’s your life long dream to go into the old abandoned house, as odd as it is, but you know that I support you wholeheartedly, no matter what kind of weird fantasy you’ve concocted from this whole idea.”

“Rumor has it that anyone who ever goes there has never come back alive,” he whispered, knowing he sounded crazy as he listened to the way that the wind around him was picking up.

“Now you really are being silly.” Taehyung rolled his eyes as he grabbed Jeongguk’s hand and began tugging him towards the woods. “Don’t worry, goofball. I’ll protect you.”

“If I wake up murdered, I’ll kill you.”

“Guk, I don’t think you can wake up murdered,” he said, waves dancing in the breeze as Jeongguk watched his back as he stepped ahead of him. “You would, you know, be dead.”

“Well, either way,” Jeongguk retorted, far from prideful in the way that his voice was shaking. “I’m coming back to haunt your ass.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” he smiled over his shoulder as they finally stepped into the woods. “I would be with you forever that way!”

Jeongguk’s cheeks lit up a bit, no words coming to mind as he listened to the sound of old leaves left from past autumns crunching on the ground beneath his feet with a twig snapping here and there. “I think we’re almost there,” he whispered.

“We are,” Taehyung said as they stopped on the edge of a small clearing, pointing ahead of them. “I can see the rooftop from here!”

“If we die in there,” Jeongguk started, pulling his hand away from Taehyung’s in favor of gripping tightly at the hem of his shirt. “Can I tell you something just in case?”

“Of course,” Taehyung answered, turning to face the younger, eyes intently fixed on him as a newfound silence fell within the woods.
“It’s just that,” Jeongguk stammered, feeling as if his heart was about to jump out of his throat. The wind picked up a little. “It’s just that—”

“Yes?” Taehyung asked, eyes widening a little as Jeongguk’s lips parted and the silence was suddenly disturbed by an eruption of crows overhead as they rustled the treetops, their cries echoing even as they flew off in the distance and Taehyung’s eyes followed them before they moved back to meet Jeongguk’s. “You were saying?”

“Actually, never mind,” Jeongguk forced a smile as he reached out to grab Taehyung’s hand once more, this time leading him towards the old house. “I’ll tell you when we get there.”

“Okay,” Taehyung nodded, gripping Jeongguk’s hand a little tighter as they slid down the side of the small clearing, stumbling ever so slightly until they found their footing once more.

They weren’t far now, and each step, Jeongguk was surprised to feel his chest lighten. Maybe it was the realization that the chances of something bad happening in the old house were slim to none, even though there were legends and ghost stories of people never returning, usually told by the town folk to keep their kids from wandering off into the thick forests that surrounded the small valley in which their town resided. But, Jeongguk thought, that the way his heart fell at ease probably had something more to do with how tightly Taehyung was gripping his hand.

He had always had such a calming aura about him, something that Jeongguk had never experienced before in his life. It was peaceful.

It was moments later that they were standing just in front of the door of the house. The wood was weathered, dark in color and bowing in places. There were vines growing up around the edges, crawling towards the roof in places as if the forest was trying to reclaim the land that once belonged to it.

“Well?” Taehyung asked, taking the liberty of stepping forward and placing his hand against the door where a knob had once been. “You ready to finally mark one thing off that bucket list of yours?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” Jeongguk smiled as he watched Taehyung push the door open with a little force as the wood had swelled up due to the humidity of the surrounding river.

The moment they stepped in, the floor cried out beneath the weight of the two boys, like a warning
that it would give way at any moment. Natural light fell in through a large hole in the roof where the structure had collapsed as the sun washed over the pieces of old and rotting furniture that had been left behind.

Someone had once lived there, it felt odd. The thought had never occurred to Jeongguk that such a place was once someone’s beloved home.

He finally let of Taehyung’s hand as he walked around, though there wasn’t much to look at besides the older furniture. He shuddered each time the floor would creek, nearly jumping out of his skin as Taehyung knocked over an old candlestick by the mantel.

“There’s not much here,” Jeongguk sighed.

“What were you expecting?” Taehyung asked as he bent down to pick up the candlestick. “Were you expecting to find riches and glory?”

Jeongguk rolled his eyes. “No, I guess I was just hoping there would be something worth seeing. I just needed a reason for my actually wanting to come here.”

Taehyung walked towards the kitchen, peering in before shrugging as he ran his hand along the wall towards another door which he pushed open. “There’s a basement,” he looked over his shoulder, grinning. “Perhaps your riches and glory are down here.”

“Shut up,” he hissed, stepping towards the silver-haired boy and pushing past him to descend on the stairs. “I’m not looking for any riches and glory.”

“Sure, sure,” Taehyung chuckled as he followed suit until they ended up on the basement floor where he nearly ran straight into Jeongguk’s back as the younger had frozen in place. “What? What is it?” he asked, peeking over his shoulder.

Jeongguk’s eyes widened as he examined the basement, thoughts of being abducted and killed quickly rushed back to him as he stared mouth agape. There were books and used candles lining the tables, ripped out pages dusting across the floor in a mix of black feathers and tufts of fur. He swallowed hard as his eyes landed once more on the very thing that had stopped him in his tracks. A large circle was drawn on the floor, with words in another language that he couldn’t recognize and what shook him to his very core the most was the fact that they were written in a liquid—now dried—that was the darkest of reds.
“We should go,” he said quickly, already turning but walking straight into Taehyung. “Tae, we should go. I don’t like this.”

Taehyung gripped his shoulders, offering the same calm smile that he always had as he shook him a little bit. “It’s alright, Guk. I promised I wouldn’t let anything hurt you, remember?”

“Yeah,” Jeongguk pulled away from Taehyung’s grasp as he glanced back over his shoulder at the words adorning the floor. “That was back when I thought that my being afraid to come in here was bullshit. But this—this is too much. This is scary, there’s some serious Harry Potter shit going on here and I don’t like it.”

“Why don’t we just take a look around?” Taehyung soothed as he stepped past Jeongguk towards a table of books before he turned around once more. “Wasn’t there something that you wanted to tell me?”

“Not here,” Jeongguk said quickly. “Not now. I can tell you some other time, but I can’t tell you if we’re dead or cursed or whatever the fuck all this shit can do to us. Can we go, please?”

Taehyung nodded, stepping towards Jeongguk after a moment of apprehension and just had he took another step, the door to the basement flew open and the younger was throwing himself underneath one of the tables as fast as he could, heart beating out of his chest and fear gripping his veins as a pair of dark boots and the bottom of a long black overcoat came into view.

His eyes widened as he glanced back and forth, Taehyung wasn’t hidden, and he instantly regretted not telling him everything he had ever wanted to say, and even more so, he wished he wasn’t such a coward and hadn’t thrown himself beneath the table.

“Where the hell have you been, Taehyung?” a low voice drawled, and Jeongguk swore that he could feel it vibrating through his skull.

“Sorry, I had trouble sleeping last night so I went and did a little stargazing!” Taehyung chirped, and Jeongguk froze, confusion now replacing his ardent fear.

The other man clicked his tongue as he pushed past Taehyung, rummaging through the books atop the table behind the silver-haired boy. Jeongguk leaned a bit to where he could see as he watched Taehyung rock on the balls of his feet for a moment before his eyes landed on a man with straight
black hair that was parted down the middle, though nearly in his eyes. He was dressed in black head to toe and he huffed every now and then as he flipped through another book before tossing it on the ground. “There are too many goddamn towns in this world,” he hissed.

“Yoongi,” a voice like velvet called from the door as another pair of brown boots and the bottom of a green cloak stepped in. “Did you find what you were—Oh, Tae! I didn’t know you were back! We were so worried about you!” he exclaimed as he moved to drape himself over Taehyung’s shoulders and the smaller man came into his vision.

His hair was wavy like Taehyung’s, though blond in color as it framed a rather boyish face. His eyes weren’t as sharp as the first man’s—Yoongi, apparently—though much softer. The way he smiled pulled a pair of full lips into one of the brightest things that Jeongguk had ever seen, his aura was radiant and that was saying a lot due to all the time he had spent around Taehyung.

He almost moved out from beneath the table, drawn to the boy but his eyes shifted back to the dark-haired man and the way he was slamming books down on the table before him. Jeongguk curled into himself, figuring there was no way he wanted to be seen, not while he was in the room.

“Yoongi,” Taehyung smiled, pushing the blond-haired boy off him. “I have some exciting news!”

“That’s nice, Taehyung,” Yoongi murmured, tearing a page from the book in his hand and shoving it into the pocket of his long coat, paying no true mind to the silver-haired boy.

“Yoongi,” Taehyung whined once again. “I have something to tell you,” his lips fell into a pout and the blond giggled and ruffled his hair a bit.

“Darling,” the blond said in a sigh, “Look at your brother. He has something to tell you.”

Jeongguk’s eyes widened. Brother? Taehyung had never mentioned having a brother, but come to think of it, he had never mentioned knowing anyone else in town at all. But these people weren’t from his town, he had never seen them before in his life.

“Piss off, Jimin,” Yoongi snarked, still rummaging through another book before tossing it over his shoulder. “We’re running out of time and I don’t have it in me to deal with Taehyung’s games.”

“Excuse me?” the blond, Jimin, hissed as he stepped over towards Yoongi and grabbed him by the
collar of his jacket, pulling him away from the table. “Pay attention to your brother this instant.”

Yoongi huffed, shoving Jimin’s hand off him. “What is it Taehyung? What in God’s name do you have to say that’s so damn important that you couldn’t wait another moment?”

“I found him,” he sing-songed, rolling on the balls of his feet. “Well, I think I found him. I’m not really sure if I’m being honest, but I have a good feeling about him.” His eyes fell to Jeongguk beneath the table, and Yoongi turned cocking an eyebrow as his own eyes followed Taehyung’s gaze to land on the boy beneath the table.

In an instant, the table was flying towards the other side of the room, a storm of books and papers falling to the ground as Jeongguk jumped, confused with eyes wide as he looked back at the three boys, two of which were staring at him with wide eyes before Yoongi’s face morphed into something entirely different.

“You’ve got to be fucking joking,” Yoongi turned back towards Taehyung and Jeongguk could only curl into himself against the cold wall of the basement as he watched the dark-haired man spring towards Taehyung. Jimin quickly threw himself in between them, shoving Yoongi away as he clicked his tongue. “You are so unbelievable, Taehyung,” Yoongi continued. “You expect me to believe that every single stray you to try to drag back here could possibly be the electi? We’ve been over this a dozen times and you still can’t get it through your thick skull!” he yelled, fists clenching down by his sides. “You’re compromising our location as well as the safety of your friends. Do you not think?”

“I told you!” Taehyung interjected. “I have a good feeling about him!”

“That’s what you said the last time and the time before that. Need I go on?!?” he hissed. “Now Seokjin will have to cook up another memory potion and we’re running low on supplies. You’re so dimwitted sometimes, I swear!”

“Yoongi,” Jimin interrupted, holding his hands towards the dark-haired man. “Calm down.”

“No,” he spat, swatting Jimin’s hands away. “He is so irresponsible. How the hell am I supposed to look out for him and everyone else when he’s always doing the same fucking shit every time?!” The moment the words had left his mouth, a crow darted from beneath his coat before another quickly emerged and shot to the other side of the room and the back of Jimin’s hand collided with his cheek, the sound echoing throughout the basement.
“Leave him alone,” he ordered. “And I swear to God if this entire basement becomes covered in bird shit because you can’t keep your hissy fits under control, you’re going to have bigger problems to worry about than who your brother drags into our hideout.”

“What the hell is going on in here?” a man with hair the color of violets appeared in the doorway with another dark-haired man treading close behind, both adorned in long dark coats like Yoongi’s. “Yeah, we could hear you all down by the river,” the dark-haired man said.

“Who’s that?” the purple-haired man asked, eyes wide as he pointed at Jeongguk and he swore that his heart dropped to his stomach.

“H-hi,” Jeongguk forced out, hardly audible as tugged his knees a little closer to his chest.

“Taehyung thinks that he could be the electi,” Yoongi interrupted, waving a hand haphazardly as he moved to take a seat on the table after pushing the rest of the books in the floor.

“Oh?” the other dark-haired man chimed in as he stepped towards Jeongguk, crouching down in front of him. He examined him closely, and Jeongguk’s cheeks turned hot as the man hummed. “What makes you think that?”

“It’s just a feeling,” Taehyung murmured out in a grin, his hand coming up to rub the back of his neck.

“I’m sorry,” Jeongguk said, scooting away from the dark-haired man whose eyes were still intently fixed upon him. “You all have honestly said a lot of shit that I don’t understand since I’ve been here, but what’s an electi?”

“Oh!” Taehyung chirped. “The electi is—”

“Don’t” Yoongi snapped.

“Yoongi,” the purple-haired man reprimanded. “Calm down.”

“I am calm,” he sighed, rolling his eyes as he crossed his legs as well as his arms.

“Not sure,” Seokjin murmured, eyes scanning every inch of Jeongguk’s face. “Difficult to get a read, but I suppose that’s a good sign. I don’t feel anything.”

“Wait,” Jeongguk blurted, quickly standing, though his back was still against the wall. “I’m confused. What the hell do you all want from me, and you—” his eyes landed on Taehyung. “Who the hell are you, and how did that table fly through the air? Nothing makes sense.”

“We’re witches,” the violet-haired man replied quickly and Jeongguk’s jaw dropped, unsure if he had heard him right.

“Namjoon,” Yoongi interjected, but the man held his hand up before he could continue.

“Relax,” he said in a smile. “We can wipe his memory if need be.”

“Oh, yeah,” Jeongguk retorted. “Getting whacked on the head until I forget everything sounds like a great time.”

“It would hardly hurt,” Seokjin corrected as he stood. “I’m quite good at what I do.”

Jeongguk pressed himself against the wall a bit more, though he had no space left. “You all expect me to believe you’re actually witches? And you,” he shot another look at Taehyung. “You tricked me into coming here.”

“Guilty,” Taehyung chuckled, hand meeting the back of his own neck once again. “But we are really witches. Well, they are anyway.”

“You’re a witch too, Tae!” Jimin chirped, draping himself over the silver-haired boy’s shoulders once again. “It’s okay that your vita hasn’t manifested yet! You’re still a witch!”

“Right,” Jeongguk cocked an eyebrow. “Well, this has been fun, but I should get going,” he inched
towards the door before Seokjin placed a hand against the wall in front of him, blocking his path.

“You don’t believe us?” he asked, smirking as he looked over at Namjoon expectantly.

“What’s your name?” Namjoon asked.

“J-Jeongguk.”

“Do you like storms, Jeongguk?” he asked, smirking the same way that Seokjin had.

“They’re alright I guess, why?”

“It’s a nice day out, isn’t it?”

“I guess so, why?”

Namjoon snapped his fingers and a loud crack of thunder shook the walls of the basement, harsh enough that dust filled the air from the ceiling. Jeongguk froze, eyes wide and Namjoon chuckled. “Any questions?”

“Yeah,” Jeongguk said, feeling his knees buckle beneath him. “I have a lot of questions, actually.”

Namjoon smiled as he stepped towards the younger, placing a heavy hand upon his shoulder to pull him away from the wall. “All in good time,” he said simply as he led him towards the center of the room. “Try not to panic.”

Jeongguk took a deep breath, nearly tripping on wobbly legs. “I should—I should really go,” he murmured, eyes flickering to Taehyung, terrified if he left that this might be the last time he ever saw him again.

“I’m sorry,” Namjoon said as he moved to take the spot on the table beside Yoongi. “We can’t let you leave. You know our hideout now, and we can’t chance compromising that.”
“This is—” Jeongguk stammered, “This is too much.”

“So, you believe us?” Jimin asked, cocking an eyebrow.

“I’m not really sure what I believe.”

“Don’t worry,” he smiled. “If Taehyung’s hunch is right, it’ll all make sense soon enough.”

Jeongguk had been sitting on the cool, hard ground of the basement for some time. The sun had clearly hidden away from the day as the light that had been seeping in through the small basement windows had grown dim. The others had all left, and he would have taken the chance to sneak back home if Yoongi hadn’t threatened to maim him should he try anything funny.

It was all too much. His mind replayed time and time again the way that the table above him had flown across the room, as well as the sudden crack of thunder that shook his very core the moment that Namjoon had snapped his fingers. He felt like he was in a dream, one where he had found himself being held hostage by four men and another he had thought was his best friend.

He didn’t hear the door open, barely registered the shadowy movement as Taehyung was suddenly sitting beside him within the dark of the basement. They sat in silence for what felt like an eternity, a quiet that was so thick and heavy it felt suffocating, yet warm.

“Are you mad at me?” Taehyung’s voice suddenly ghosted out into the silence, the sound of him shifting along the floor practically echoing.
“Why didn’t you tell me?” Jeongguk asked, leaning his head back against the cement wall.

Taehyung hummed for a moment as he pulled his knees towards his chest. “You never asked.”

“How was I supposed to ask?” Jeongguk scoffed. “How was I supposed to know to ask that you’re a—well, you know.”

“A witch?” the silver-haired boy chuckled. “I’m not really. My vita hasn’t manifested.”

“I don’t even know what that means,” Jeongguk said. “I don’t know what any of this means.”

“Vitas are the powers that we’re born with, living in our hearts,” he hummed. “They’re supposed to show themselves as we age, but I’m starting to think that I don’t have any. Not any of any significance anyway.”

Jeongguk stilled, brows pinching together. “Is that why that day at the store, you apologized for me having to see something? Did you think you had opened the automatic doors?”

The younger finally looked over, unable to contain the smile tugging at his lips as he watched Taehyung bury his face into his hands as he groaned. “Yeah,” he laughed lowly. “I did.”

“You’re so silly.”

“So, you’re not mad at me?” Taehyung asked into his hands.

Jeongguk shook his head, shifting to turn towards Taehyung. “I could never be mad at you. I just wish you would have been honest, it might have made this all a bit easier to swallow.”

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly. “I should have been honest, I think I was just scared.”

“Scared?”
“Yeah. I didn’t want to lose you.”

Jeongguk stared back at Taehyung for a moment before reaching to tug his hands away from his face. “You think you could get rid of me so easily? I asked you to come away with me for crying out loud.”

Taehyung burst into a fit of laughter as he cradled his stomach, kicking his feet out in such a childlike manner. “You did! You did, and it made me so happy and I’m not even sure why.”

Jeongguk’s brows came together once again. “If it made you so happy then why the hell are you laughing?” he asked with a pout.

“Because,” he spoke through soft giggles, trying to catch his breath. “I don’t even know what college is!”

“Oh, Tae,” Jeongguk sighed, leaning his head against the wall as he fought back the way his heart was swelling as he looked at the silver-haired boy he had so grown to admire over the summer. “You’re really not from here, are you?”

Taehyung fell silent, sighing contentedly as his head met the cold wall. “No, I’m really not. I love it here, I do, but I also love my true home—even in the state, it’s in. It’s just that—” he whispered, fiddling his fingers in his lap.

“What is it?”

“Perhaps it’s my turn to ask you come away with me,” he said quietly, smiling to himself within the moonlight as it crept in through the window and Jeongguk could hardly hear the sound of the wind whistling over his own heart within his ears.
It had been days and Jeongguk had only gotten to leave the basement once—besides the times he was allowed to go down to the river to wash up, but with the accompaniment of Jimin he went to retrieve some belongings from his house in the middle of the night. He had grabbed a handful of clothes, listening to Jimin rummage through his things and ask dozens of questions about the game and movie posters that lined his walls.

Though in all logic, he was, in fact, a hostage to the five of them, he was quite enjoying their company, though things were still as hazy as ever. He had more questions darting through his mind than he could conjure up to ask, and most of the time Namjoon simply responded with a soft, “All in good time.”

It was his fifth night in the abandoned house as they were all sat around the light of a few candles and Jeongguk was teaching the others how to play poker with an old deck of cards one of them had picked up on one of their many outings in search of what they referred to as supplies.

The walls had become lined with maps torn out of books, riddled with x’s and circles as well as trails between the surrounding towns, yet each day they came back empty-handed, save for a small handful of food or oddball things like the deck of cards.

“Guk, does this mean I’ve won?!” Taehyung blurted after drawing another card and shoving his hand into Jeongguk’s line of sight.

“You aren’t supposed to show him, dummy,” Yoongi snorted, before it was his turn and he proudly laid down his cards after placing his final bet and the others followed suit, only to find out that his two pair was nothing when compared to Namjoon’s straight flush and the dark-haired man pouted profusely as he watched Namjoon collect his winnings which were nothing more than a few packs of crackers they had brought back.

“Oh, don’t pout,” Namjoon cooed as he wrapped his arm around Yoongi and pressed his nose against his mess of black hair. “Better luck next time.”

“Swear you cheated,” Yoongi huffed.
“You’ve always been a sore loser, darling,” Jimin said coyly, offering a sweet grin which only earned a sharp glance from Yoongi and before long the three of them were bickering back and forth and Taehyung and Jeongguk could only laugh, their voices filling the entirety of the basement before Seokjin was shushing them.

Suddenly, the air in the basement changed, somehow growing thicker as the waves of the flames from the candles danced sporadically. “Did you all hear that?” Seokjin whispered and they all stopped immediately, listening.

“Hear what?” Jimin asked, and Yoongi was already up on his feet, grabbing his jacket.

“I don’t hear anything, Jin,” Taehyung whispered and Seokjin shushed him once more as his eyes darted around the glum basement.

Not even a moment later, a loud banging came from the area above them and they were all on their feet as the sound of footsteps filled the basement. They all stared up, and Taehyung grabbed hold of Jeongguk’s hand tightly. “It’s probably just a bunch of kids,” Jeongguk whispered, but the others were all moving to grab their things.

“It’s time to go,” Namjoon said lowly and quickly. “If it’s not important, leave it behind. We have to go.”

“Why? What’s happening?” Jeongguk asked, but no one answered as his backpack was being shoved against him to hold tightly with his free arm before he was being pulled out the door of the basement.

They ran into the thickness of the woods, all sticking close together before they reached a clearing and stopped. “What on earth is going on?” Jeongguk asked once again, voice frantic.

“I’m not sure,” Taehyung whispered.

Namjoon and the others had their eyes fixed back towards the house before Yoongi whispered lowly as a crow flew from beneath his coat like before, landing atop his shoulder. “Tell me what you see,” he said hoarsely to the bird. “Go.” The bird quickly flew from his shoulder into the trees back towards the house.
“Should we keep going?” Namjoon asked.

“No, she’ll be back soon, but we should be prepared,” he answered as he reached for Jimin’s hand, turning towards him. “I want you to stay close to me, love,” he said to the blond who nodded, pushing himself closer to the dark-haired boy.

“Prepared for what?” Jeongguk asked, taking a step forward, only to be pulled back by Taehyung who shook his head. “Why isn’t anyone saying anything?”

“We don’t need to worry until there is a reason to worry,” Seokjin whispered, patting Jeongguk on the shoulder.

They stood in silence a moment longer, save for the wind rustling the trees before the crow appeared through the thickness of the leaves, flying to perch herself on Yoongi’s shoulder once again. They all stared at him intently, waiting with a heavy thickness in their throats as he listened to the murmurings of the crow in his ear before he stilled completely. He snapped, and the crow vanished into the air, a few stray feathers left behind in her wake.

“Do not panic,” he said lowly as he turned towards the others and everyone froze as they looked back at him with thousands of questions swimming throughout their gazes. “But we need to run. Now.”

No one questioned his orders as they all took off farther into the woods in haste until the trees stood so thickly overhead that not even the light of the moon could aid in illuminating their path as they ran blindly.

Suddenly, the ground shook with the sound of something that sounded like an explosion that Jeongguk had only ever heard in movies and the path behind them was glowing amber. Jeongguk turned momentarily, doing his best to not lose his footing as Taehyung pulled him through the shroud of woods. “Uh, does someone want to tell me what the actual fuck is going on now?” he asked between bated breaths as he nearly tripped over the roots of a tree.

“Guardians,” Taehyung called back. “They’re called guardians and they’re after us.”

“What?!” Jeongguk yelled as the trees above them illuminated in flame and his eyes grew wide as the heat hit his skin.
“I’ll explain later!” Taehyung yelled back. “Just don’t stop or we’ll be killed!”

“Killed?!” Jeongguk’s heart dropped to his throat, legs feeling like lead as he powered forward. Just last week he was dreaming about heading off to college and now his best friend was screaming to him about the possibility of them dying.

“Seokjin, can you put out the flames?!” Namjoon called from behind them.

“There’s no water in the air!” Seokjin yelled frantically.

“Fuck, okay! Mind your ears!” Namjoon shouted before he clapped his hands and a clamor of thunder nowhere like the one Jeongguk heard before pierced his ears as it shook the ground beneath him in such a way that he almost lost his footing once more. Seconds later, rain began piercing through the branches of the trees and everything slowly fell dark once more as the fire above them began to extinguish. “Jin, can you make a wall now?” Namjoon asked, catching back up to them from where he had fallen behind momentarily.

“Yeah,” he said between coughing due to the smoke that was filling the air. “You all go on ahead, it’ll take me a moment!”

“We aren’t leaving you!” Yoongi stopped in his tracks, letting go of Jimin’s hand. “Darling, you and the kids go on. We can’t leave Seokjin, we can’t cross back over without him.”

Jimin nodded quickly, “You all better not fucking die.”

“But I’ll explain later!” Taehyung yelled back. “Just don’t stop or we’ll be killed!”

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“You all better not fucking die.”

“Me and Joon promise to come and find you, now go!” he shouted before turning around and running back towards Seokjin and Namjoon.

Jimin quickly grabbed hold of Taehyung’s hand and they moved back through the darkness of the woods once more.

“Do you even know where we’re going, Jiminie?” Taehyung asked, voice barely audible through his bated breaths.
“It’s north,” Jimin called over his shoulder. “The clavis, that’s where Seokjin planted it.”

“What’s a clavis?” Jeongguk asked as they finally came into a clearing and slowed down a little.

“It’s kind of like a door,” Jimin said quickly, turning around as his eyes searched behind them, full of worry.

“They’ll be okay,” Taehyung said as he tugged on Jimin’s hand. “They’ve always come back to us. You know Namjoon and Yoongi would never leave you.”

Jimin bit his lip as he reluctantly turned, rubbing at his eyes with his free hand. “What if Seokjin’s wall isn’t strong enough?” he stammered, biting back a quiet sob.

“Joon is with him. They’re unstoppable together, you know that.”

Jimin nodded halfheartedly and Taehyung stopped, letting go of Jeongguk’s hand to cup the blond’s cheeks. “They’ll be fine, you hear me? Jiminie, you gotta be strong.”

“I-I should go back. You all are close enough to the door. I can just go back and—” he sobbed out, eyes swimming in tears.

“And what? Go into a blind fit of rage?” Taehyung chuckled. “Let’s just do as we’re told, okay? Everything will be fine,” he soothed just as another explosion erupted in the distance and their eyes turned towards the sky above the trees as it lit up everything around them in the brightest of reds and oranges.

Jimin quickly turned and Taehyung grabbed his wrist, pulling him back. “Jimin,” he said sternly. “We have to go. You don’t want them arriving at our rendezvous point and we’re not there, right?” The blond quickly shook his head as he bit back another whimper.

“Jimin,” Jeongguk tried, albeit overwhelmed and confused with everything as he stepped towards the two upon shaky legs. “Tae is right. They’ll meet us there, okay?” He reached out hesitantly for the shorter boy’s hand and gripped it tightly. “Let’s go and I’ll tell you more about that one movie you were asking about. Kimi no Na wa, remember?”
Jimin nodded. “Okay,” he breathed out.

“Okay,” Jeongguk repeated. “I’ll tell you all about it when we reach the uh—”

“Clavis,” Jimin forced a weak smile.

“Right,” he said as he nodded at Taehyung. “Let’s go.”

They started running again, out of the clearing and into another thick patch of woods until they reached another clearing out by a lake. The sky was completely clear above them, the color of amber slowly fading out as they looked around the area as thunder roared and lightning lit up the sky just overhead. “I think it’s over there,” Taehyung huffed, still trying to catch his breath as he doubled over with his hands on his knees. “It’s by that big rock.”

Jeongguk nodded as he led Jimin towards the large rock and within the dim light of the moon through the clouds, he could scarcely make out markings upon its surface, much like the ones that were on the floor of the basement back at the house. “This is the clavis?” he asked, turning back towards Taehyung who was slowly catching up with them.

“Yeah, but it’s useless until Seokjin gets here. He’s the only one who knows how to use it,” he said, sitting on the ground in front of them.

“Now what?” Jeongguk asked quietly, though he felt like his voice was much louder than it was as it moved throughout the silence that surrounded the lake.

“Now we wait,” Jimin whispered, tucking himself closer to Jeongguk’s side as he rested his head on his shoulder.

Jeongguk had no clue how long they had waited in the newfound silence as the storm overhead had dissipated, save for the song of crickets that had begun to pipe up at some point as well as the cicadas in the nearby trees. It felt like an eternity, and even more so it felt hopeless with each passing moment that neither of the three others emerged through the line of trees.
“So, Kimi no Na wa,” Jeongguk said quietly. “It’s sort of hard to explain, but to put it simply, it’s about these two teenagers who keep switching bodies until one day, they don’t anymore. The boy goes to find the girl, only to discover that she had died three years before.”

“That’s so awful,” Jimin whimpered. “I don’t think I would like a movie.”

“No, no,” Jeongguk chuckled. “Not all movies are like that! But don’t worry, cause in the end, through a little bit of magic and fate, they’re able to find one another again and the boy is able to finally tell her that he loves her,” he smiled.

“He did?” Jimin smiled. “She finally found out?”

“She did,” he answered. “It was a really beautiful story.”

“Sounds like it,” Taehyung said as the breeze picked up and the smell of the lake surrounded them.

“So,” Jeongguk sighed, hands shaking a little as he tried to calm his nerves. “Anyone wanna tell me what guardians are and why the hell they’re after you and me now, apparently.”

“They’re supposed to be part of the royal guard, protectors—but they hardly are anymore,” Jimin said, eyes moving to look back towards the woods. “They’ve been following us for some time.”

“Why?” Jeongguk asked, brows furrowing. “Why are they trying to kill us. You all aren’t—you guys aren’t criminals, right?”

Taehyung threw his head back with a laugh. “Hardly.”

“So, why are they after you then?”

“Well, you see—” Taehyung choked out between his fit of chuckles.
“Traveling between dimensions and worlds is illegal,” Jimin interrupted. “We’re not supposed to do it without special orders.”

“Oh, well—” Jeongguk tried, still confused, thousands of questions swimming around in his brain, all of which were cut off by the sound of movement in the woods across the way.

The three of them stood, bracing themselves just in case, but relief filled their bodies the moment that Seokjin, Namjoon, and Yoongi appeared in the cool light from above, and three of them were sopping wet.

“Oh, thank God!” Jimin sobbed out as he took off towards the three of them, wrapping his arms around Seokjin’s neck before promptly pulling Namjoon and Yoongi into the hug. “I was so worried.”

“We promised you, didn’t we?” Yoongi smiled as they all pulled Jimin in a little closer before parting. “But we don’t have much time, Jin’s wall can only last so long,” he said, nodding at Seokjin as he grabbed hold of Jimin and Namjoon’s hands, tugging them towards the rock.

“Right,” Seokjin said as they all began to gather around the rock. “Everyone grab your clavis buddy, and Jeongguk, don’t be alarmed if you throw up.”

“I’m sorry, what?” he asked, eyes wide as he watched Seokjin hold out his fingers as the tips lit up with a bright blue light and he stepped forward, placing them against the surface of the rock. Taehyung stepped forward and grabbed his hand, nodding and flashing him a bright grin. “What the fuck is happening?” Jeongguk’s voice turned frantic as Seokjin drew a circle over the inscriptions across the rock.

“We’re going home,” Taehyung whispered.

“Home?” Jeongguk asked. “Wait, I—this is my home—I don’t—”

“Your real home,” Taehyung smiled, squeezing his hand as a bright light poured from the rock as it completely surrounded them and he felt as if his body was beginning to collapse into itself, his heart rising to his throat. He kept his eyes fixed on Taehyung as his hair danced with the breeze, just like it had the last time they were amongst the wheat until Jeongguk could see nothing but the brightest of blues.
Chapter End Notes

I never intended to drop over 11k for the first chapter, this was SUPPOSED to be an introduction, but I don't know what self-control is. This is going to be my first LONG chaptered story. Like I said in the intro notes, it's more of a challenge for myself than anything, but I wanted to invite you all along for the ride! My hope is to update biweekly, but if you're familiar with me as an author, you know that I work full time and go to school full time. BUT I WILL DO MY BEST. ALSO, if you're interested in the continuation of this story/loving this so far, LET ME KNOW. Your all's words will fuel me to get a move on for the next chapter!

I'm serious though, we've got witches, mythical creatures, BACKSTORIES UPON BACKSTORIES about to happen as well as a whole adventure getting ready to unfold!

Some tidbits about this chapter:

I've taken some artistic liberties with the way this particular world of magic/witchcraft and what not works. As the story continues, I promise you all will understand more. Many of the definitions I will be using in reference to abilities and what not are latin. I don't know why it just just fit for me and jived. Some of the words we've seen thus far are: clavis (door), vita (power), and a big and important one is electi (chosen.)

As for the boys... I don't want to give away too much on their abilities and in the wise words of Joon himself, "all in good time," BUT these are the 'types' of witches that the boys are, though some... I'm not ready to discuss yet.

Namjoon: Storm witch.
Seokjin: Water witch.
Yoongi: Draconian witch.
Jimin: ?
Taehyung: ?
Hoseok: ?

Speaking of Hoseok, WHERE IS HE? NO ONE KNOWS. ANYWAY.
If you read the entirety of this chapter, I LOVE YOU. If you've read all my notes, I LOVE YOU EVEN MORE.
If you want to read more, let me know. If you hate the story, still, let me know. FEEDBACK, COMMENTS, AND KUDOS KEEP US GOING SO DON'T BE A GHOSTREADER, we LOVE to hear from you all and perhaps I'll churn out my chapters a little faster. -wiggles eyebrows-

You can find me on twitter as apolloyoongi. Stop on by and talk with me!
Until next time! uwu
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

“You’re not empty,” Jeongguk sighed into the breeze. “You have worlds inside of you.”

Chapter Notes

Hi, hello, yes, it's me again. It's been awhile, and I'm not sure if anyone truly cares BUT I finally finished school for the semester and wanted to celebrate with Chapter 2 of this story. I know it's been a minute since the first chapter, but hopefully now with more free-time, I can be on a better schedule for updating!

I would also like to thank my love, Ang, for helping me in every way. I wouldn't be able to write this story without her.

This chapter is mostly explanations and a bit of plot building, but nevertheless, I hope you enjoy. uwu

See you at the end?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

His body hit the ground with such force that he felt as if some bone in his body should have snapped. His head was spinning, creeping nausea taking over his very core as he did his best to regain the function of his limbs—to simply move.

“Shit, it never gets easier,” a voice choked out in a groan and Jeongguk opened his eyes to nothing but blurs as he tried to focus between the ringing in his ears.

He felt a hand on his shoulder, shaking him slightly, pushing him further into the grass as he tried to collect himself. His hearing was going in and out. He figured if he was to be sucked into the middle of a vortex, this would surely be what it felt like.

His hands braced the ground as he tried to push himself up. “Are you alright?” he could barely make out the words, thinking the voice belonged to Taehyung—but it was Seokjin who was helping him to sit up.

Seokjin gripped the sides of his face, and Jeongguk tried to focus. “Can you hear me?”
“Barely,” he forced out. “It’s getting better, but God, what was that?”

“We traveled between worlds,” he laughed. “I’m impressed though, people usually vomit their first time.”

“Wait,” Jeongguk froze, the sudden feeling of nausea returning in full force. “You’re not serious, right?”

Namjoon appeared in Jeongguk’s still shaky vision as he crouched down, eyes scanning over the younger’s face—brows knit together in worry. “Are you feeling okay? We can make you something if you’re feeling sick.”

“I’m okay—just—he’s not serious, right?” he asked, thinking he had to be trapped within some dream. The longest dream he had ever had, for surely Seokjin’s words weren’t reality.

“Oh, no,” Jimin’s voice came from behind him and Jeongguk turned to have his eyes land on he and Yoongi dusting off their cloaks from the impact. “He’s serious.”

He fought to stand with the help of Seokjin as he dusted off his own jeans. The sight in front of him was magnificent, unlike anything he had ever seen. The color green was the only thing to be seen for miles, with thick mounds of forest sitting in the wake of everything. There were purple-crowned mountains off in the distance that reminded him of home, though they stood much taller. Off to the east, there was a vast ocean that reached as far as his eyes could see, with a color like crystal as it reflected the rays of the sun from up above.

It was breathtaking and he couldn’t believe his eyes.

He had spent so much of his life immersed in video games, movies, and anything of the like. He was well familiar with worlds much like this one, only seeing it with his eyes for real, now there was something entirely different about it. Even the air smelled different, a new freshness that filled his lungs and he was in awe.

“Welcome to Amaranthine,” Namjoon whispered as he stepped up beside him, a hand clasping his shoulder. “Welcome to our home.”
“It’s so—” Jeongguk couldn’t find the words for fear of not choosing one that described the immense beauty before him. “It’s so—”

“I know,” Namjoon chuckled, his dimpled smile in full force.

“Taehyung, this is your home?” he asked, turning to find only Yoongi, Jimin, and Seokjin behind him and his eyes widened. “Where’s Taehyung?”

The others turned to search, but to no avail, Taehyung wasn’t there. “I—” Jeongguk stammered. “He was with me—he was right behind me.”

“You must have let go of his hand,” Jimin giggled, his blond waves dancing in the breeze.

“W-where is he?” Jeongguk stammered. “What does this mean? Did he not cross over with us?”

“Oh, no—” Seokjin snorted. “He’s here. I can sense him.”

“You can—what now?” the younger’s eyebrows furrowed. He had already forgotten about where he was, who he was with, that who they were wasn’t some silly joke.

“Seokjin keeps tabs on all of us,” Namjoon said, raising his arms above his head to stretch out from the ride across worlds. “It’s quite annoying when you’re trying to have some time to yourself.”

Seokjin rolled his eyes, but before he could say anything, Yoongi interjected with a quick. “Well, where is he?” he asked, tone demanding as ever.

“Oh, so now you care about your baby brother?” Jimin shook his head. “Where was this disposition all those days he was nowhere to be found?”

“It’s different now,” Yoongi reprimanded. “We’re back home now and it’s far from safe here and Taehyung—”

“Just a little south of here,” Seokjin interrupted. “I believe he’s with the tree spirits.”
“Tree spirits—?” Jeongguk started, but Yoongi and Jimin were already taking off in the direction that Seokjin had said as Namjoon followed suit. He could only stare wide-eyed for a mere moment before Seokjin was gripping his wrist and tugging him along the way.

“Don’t worry,” he smiled. “You’ll understand soon.”

They walked for what felt like ages, or perhaps it was the simple fact that the never-ending sea of green just kept expanding before his very eyes until they entered a deep thicket of the forest. The sounds of different creatures filled the air, some from birds and some that Jeongguk couldn’t place, though he wasn’t sure he cared to as he kept close to Namjoon. Having seen the elder’s power as they were on the run from the guardians was enough to make him feel safe, even as the different noises of the forest would cause him to nearly jump out of his skin.

“I thought you said he was here,” Yoongi huffed out, and Jimin whispered something in his ear, brushing his knuckles over his cheek, but the elder was quick to push him away.

“Yoongi,” Jimin hissed. “I know you’re worried about your brother, but you need to learn to be nice before you get yourself into trouble.”

“Hold on,” Seokjin sighed, stepping to the top of a large rock as he rummaged through the small bag he was carrying across his body. “I can pinpoint him a little better if you’ll just be patient.”

“I can just send out a few crows,” Yoongi said.
“Yeah, and then give away our whereabouts. Everyone knows your crows because you never think and always act instead of simply using your head,” Jimin sighed, plopping down onto the rock beside Seokjin. “Just let the man do his work.” Yoongi only huffed as he took a space on the rock beside Jimin.

“What’s their deal?” Jeongguk asked, leaning against a nearby tree beside Namjoon. “Actually, what’s all of your all’s deals?”

Namjoon chuckled as he leaned further against the bark of the large tree, his arms crossed as he tugged on his violet locks.

“What is it?” Jeongguk’s brows knit together. “What’s so funny?”

“Jimin and Yoongi are one another’s fatum,” he said. “It means that their souls are bound to one another and—”

“Like soulmates?” Jeongguk asked, feeling a little bit of understanding and confusion all at once.

“Soulmates?” Namjoon asked, confusion taking over his features.

“That’s what we call it back where I’m from. You know, the red string of fate and all that,” Jeongguk said. “I never really believed it and—”

“Oh, you mean like love,” Namjoon chuckled. “I mean, I suppose love can be a factor, but not always. We have no control over who our fatum is—who destiny chooses to entwine us with. Jimin and Yoongi are fortunate because they do love one another, but it doesn’t always work out that way.”

“Are they yours as well?” Jeongguk asked, rubbing a hand over the back of his neck, quickly understanding that this was all more complicated than the simple dictionary definition of soulmates.

“No,” he shook his head. “Yoongi and I have been with each other for a long time, but then fate brought Jimin to him and well, things just happened to work out,” he smiled wide.
“Do you—” Jeongguk started, unsure of what he was even asking, head going in a thousand different directions before he finally landed on a question. “Do you have a soulmate?”

Namjoon chuckled out, even throwing his head back a bit with the sound. “I do,” he nodded, pointing at Seokjin. “We’ve been best friends since we were little. See, as I said, it’s not always about love. It’s a bond that goes much deeper than that, it’s woven into our souls and it awakens things inside us that we never knew were there.”

“Oh—” Jeongguk swallowed, looking back at Yoongi and Jimin atop the rock for a moment.

“I know it’s a lot to take in but intertwining with our fatum sometimes brings forth a new type of magic—something that we never knew we were capable of. Take Seokjin and me for example. He can manipulate water to do many things, but water has to be present and that’s where I come in because I can force the weather around us to do as I need,” he said. “But Yoongi and Jimin have a different type of power that was awakened. What Seokjin and I have, our powers have always been the same, but they were made to play off one another. The two boneheads that you see over there, however, one has a quite the temper.”

Jeongguk chuckled and shook his head. “You don’t say.”

“He has very little control over his crows and they come out with the force of his anger and Jimin can stop his tantrums in their tracks with the sound of his voice,” he continued. “But Jimin, well, you haven’t gotten to see his power yet and I truly hope that you may not ever have to because it puts every single one of us in harm’s way. That’s why Yoongi has to be around, he can stop him with a mere touch.”

Jeongguk swallowed, eyes moving back over to Jimin as he wondered what on earth Namjoon could have meant by his words. “Don’t look so worried,” the elder chuckled. “They keep themselves in check fairly well—”

“Yes, please,” Seokjin hissed, his voice carrying through the forest. “Go somewhere else, Yoongi. You know I can’t do this with all of your negative energy so nearby.”

“I didn’t do anything!” Yoongi bit back, but Jimin was already pushing him off the rock.

“Yoonie, you know that Seokjin can’t do his best work when you’re being a little brat even within in your mind,” he giggled, wrapping his arms around the dark-haired boy’s waist as he tugged him
“What is he doing?” Jeongguk asked as he watched Seokjin take a small purple stone into the palm of his hand before moving it across the surface of the rock as if he was drawing out a map. He leaned up a bit to get a better look, recognizing the circle drawn across the smooth surface—it was just like the one that on the floor of the abandoned house.

“It’s called a vox,” Namjoon said, voice low as Seokjin began to murmur quietly to himself. “It allows us to speak to anyone as long as they’re alive.”

“I saw that circle before,” Jeongguk said, tapping his chin. “It was in—”

“The house, yeah,” Namjoon frowned. “Seokjin has been searching for someone other than the electi within every world we’ve visited.”

“He was searching for someone?” the younger asked, eyes widening at the sight before him as the surface of the rock beneath Seokjin’s hands began to illuminate, matching the light lavender of the stone that had been in his palm.

“It’s not really my place to speak about it,” Namjoon whispered, shifting away from the tree as he noticed that Seokjin was standing and putting his items back into his bag. “Did you find him?” he asked the eldest.

“Yep,” Seokjin smirked. “He’s down by the waterfalls with the tree spirits, just like I said.” He narrowed his eyes at Yoongi who only scoffed, already turning to head down the trail after muttering out a quiet apology which earned a soft pat on his back from Jimin.

They all quickly made their way deeper into the woods until the sound of the waterfalls could be heard in the distance, though Jeongguk couldn’t place just which direction it was coming from. “You have to be careful,” Seokjin said over his shoulder as he watched closely of where he was going, making sure to not trip over the roots of any of the trees. “It’s very easy to get lost in the woods of our world on account of the tree spirits. They’re tricksters and enjoy playing games, though if they see you as a threat, you’re lucky to see the light of the world outside the trees ever again.”

“But—” Jeongguk stammered, nearly losing his footing on a rather large root. “You do know where we’re going, right?”
“I always know where we’re going,” Seokjin laughed. “See?” he said as he stopped, pointing to where Jeongguk could see rushing water through a patch of trees and he couldn’t help but smile as he rushed forward, moving as fast as he could until he broke into a clearing where the land kissed the bank of a river.

There were twin waterfalls in front of him, and the mist rose from them, capturing the colors of everything nearby as it created a rainbow gradient throughout. As beautiful as it was, Jeongguk was searching for one thing and his heart leaped the moment that his eyes landed on his friend.

Taehyung was perched atop a rock on the far side of the river, his shoulders back as his hands braced the rock. His head was thrown back, silver hair dancing in the breeze that quickly picked up as he soaked up the rays of the sun.

On the rock beside him were three creatures. They were unlike anything that Jeongguk had ever seen, though at this rate, he was willing to believe anything that was in front of him. They were no bigger than foxes, even somewhat resembling them as well with their long, pointed ears with fur that resembled feathers just at the tip with long tails curled around their body. They each had three tails nestled just against their bodies with what looked like the softness of a pillow. Their fur was golden in color, and Jeongguk could have sworn that the creatures had a small light emitting from them.

The moment he took a step closer, almost losing his footing on a slick rock by the river bank, the creatures were gone, and Taehyung was squinting at him, smiling as wide as ever.

“ Took you long enough,” he mused, pulling himself up from the rock. “I thought you all were certainly about to leave me for dead, and the silvas kept getting me turned around!” he chuckled. “I don’t think they wanted me to leave.”

It was only a moment later that the other four were standing alongside Jeongguk on the riverbank. “Tae!” Jimin waved at him, making it seem as if he hadn’t seen his friend in years. “We missed you!”

“Debatable,” Yoongi said, but he smiled. “Get over here, idiot. We mustn’t get too caught up in the forest.”

Taehyung smiled wide as he carelessly jumped down from the rock, only to jump across a few more at a particularly calm part of the river. “What do you think about your new home?” he called out to Jeongguk as his feet landed on the same riverbank as his friends.
“My new home?” Jeongguk scoffed. “You mean the one that I was forced to come to?” he chuckled as Taehyung shied away at his words. “It’s beautiful, Tae. It’s really something else.”

It was with his words that Jeongguk realized that since he had found himself in Amaranthine, he had hardly missed anything about his old home. The realization of him being pulled there against his will was the last thing in his mind, and if anything, he was more than content. He felt free to not have to worry about coming home to the harsh words or actions of his mother, to have to think about where he was heading in his life for a moment. He wasn’t sure how long all this would last, but he was going to enjoy it while he could.

“Knew you’d like it,” Taehyung said, proud of himself as he moved to pull him into a quick hug before moving to hug the others.

“So, what next?” Jimin asked, finally breaking the silence aside from the rushing water.

“We find out if Taehyung was right about the kid,” Namjoon said and Jeongguk whipped around to look at him, confusion etching itself across his face.

He had also forgotten that his best friend was under the assumption that he was some sort of chosen being that would help to save their world.

“Oh, here we go again,” Yoongi sighed. “We shouldn’t be going on some wild goose chase on Taehyung’s hunch that Jeongguk is the electi. It’s simply not plausible.”

“But what if he’s right?” Jimin asked, earning a scoff from Yoongi.

“Why would we waste precious time when half of our world has practically dwindled away to nothing?” he bit back. “We’re losing time by just standing here now when we could be out searching for the actual chosen one.”

“I know you don’t believe me,” Taehyung interjected, a frown tugging at his lips. “But I mean it when I say that I have a good feeling about Guk.”

“Oh, please,” Yoongi scoffed. “You really expect me to just go by your gut feeling? When has that ever worked out for us, hm? How on earth would we even go about finding out if he’s the electi? It’s complete nonsense and I won’t stand for it, not when we have so much at stake and—”
“Can you all please stop bickering for one moment,” Namjoon rolled his eyes, moving up to wrap his arms taught around Yoongi’s waist. “Calm down, love. Let’s just figure this out before we make any rash decisions.”

“He’s right, Yoongi,” Jimin nodded. “Namjoon and Seokjin will figure out what to do. We have to explore all of our options, leave no rock unturned. We have little to no direction as it is, so it won’t hurt to just make sure, okay?”

“I think we should look for Hoseok,” Seokjin said, and the rest of them turned back to look at him with eyes wide and Yoongi only sighed. “He would know what to do.”

“What did I say about wasting—” he yelped quietly as Jimin pinched his arm.

“Guys—” Jeongguk started.

“I know he’s out there,” Seokjin said, a newfound seriousness in his tone that was unlike any way that Jeongguk had heard him speak thus far. “I know he’s there, I just—”

“Seokjin,” Namjoon whispered, pulling away from Yoongi to place a hand atop his best friend’s shoulder. “I know this is difficult, but—”

Seokjin was quick to push his hand away as he shook his head. “I can’t feel his presence,” he stammered. “I just—I can’t sense him at all, but deep down in my heart I know he’s still out there somewhere.”

“Guys,” Jeongguk started again, feeling awkward within the change of air and even more so as Seokjin’s features morphed, his face turning pale. “Who is Hoseok?”

It took a few moments of silence before Jimin stepped forward. “He’s Seokjin’s.” he said quietly, eyes looking back and forth in between each of them. “He disappeared about a year ago, and amidst searching for the electi, we’ve also been looking for him too.”

Seokjin sat down on the ground, hugging his knees to his chest and Namjoon knelt in front of him. “We don’t have to talk about this now. Seokjin can’t—”
“No—” Seokjin bit back. “That filthy man who calls himself king took the only thing that’s ever truly mattered away from me—” his words fell broken from his lips, eyes swimming with tears as they snapped to the ground. “But I know he’s out there. He’s far too valuable to just be thrown away—”

“Seokjin,” Yoongi spoke, a bite in his own voice. “We’ve been over this time and time again—” he sighed, hesitant in his words like he was treading on thin ice. “He’s gone. We need to accept it, Seokjin. We need to accept that Hoseok is gone…”

“Yoongi, that’s enough,” Namjoon said, eyes never once leaving his best friend and Jeongguk regretted ever asking as he watched Seokjin silently fall apart before his eyes, but only for a moment before he was wiping his face off and standing.

“No,” he sighed. “Yoongi could be right, but for now, until I see some evidence—I’m going to keep searching for him. I know he would do the same for me.”

Jeongguk was so immersed in listening to the conversation between the other boys that he almost didn’t notice the brushing against his leg, and he nearly jumped the moment that he looked down as his eyes landed on the foxlike creature at his feet.

“It’s alright,” Taehyung whispered, grinning wide. “I think she likes you.” He crouched down to hold out his hand, but the creature backed away, returning to brush against Jeongguk’s legs once again. “They’re called silvas,” he said simply.

“They look a lot like foxes in our world, minus the otherworldly glow, of course,” Jeongguk chuckled, though a little hesitant as another one seemingly appeared out of thin air to rub against his other leg, a low purring noise emitting from it. They were beautiful creatures, he thought, though odd. Catlike in their movements, as well as the sounds they made. From afar, it was hard to tell, but up close, he could see just how intense their amber eyes were as they sat at his feet, cocking their heads to the side as they looked him over.

The other four boys were still bickering off to the side, trying to get a plan together on where they should head next until Jimin pointed towards Jeongguk, and their conversation fell silent. “The silvas,” he smiled. “They like him. The tree spirits don’t like just anyone,” he nearly bounced where he stood, an odd excitement in his tone and Yoongi rolled his eyes.

“They like Taehyung as well,” he said, plainly. “It doesn’t mean anything.”
The sound of sighs at Yoongi’s typical comment filled the air, though they were drowned out by the nearby waterfalls. “So, what’s next?” Taehyung asked, bouncing where he had sat in the grass by the riverbank next to the silvas. “Where are we going?”

Namjoon looked to Seokjin for a moment, though the elder only shrugged as he raised his eyebrows at the plum-haired witch. “I suppose we should go to the hideaway,” he said. “I know it’s not the safest place, but I think it might be our best bet for an answer on just where to go next—to see about finding out if Jeongguk could possibly be the electi.”

“You know,” Jeongguk said, taking a spot beside Taehyung as his fingers hesitantly dusted over the fur of one of the creatures, only able to equate the feeling of it to silk. “You all still haven’t told me much about this whole electi thing,” he raised his brow at the others, hoping to finally have some answers.

“All in good time,” Namjoon said after blinking back at him for a moment, his dimples showing. “For now, we should get going before the silvas decide to kidnap you.”

“I wouldn’t mind staying here,” Jeongguk said, though Seokjin was already reaching a hand out to him that he took reluctantly as he watched the silvas disappear before his very eyes.

Jeongguk stared at the small cottage all nestled in vines in its only little section of wood. It had taken them nearly half the day to arrive, and as he looked at the small house and the rotting window panels as well as the way it was masked by the shadows of the nearby trees—he couldn’t understand what all the fuss was about.

“This is your hideaway?” he asked, a little disappointed. He had expected something a little more
spectacular, though he wasn’t sure why. “It’s not exactly hidden,” he added, plainly.

“It’s hidden to those who aren’t welcome,” Seokjin winked before stepping toward the door.

“Seokjinnie is amazing with protective magic!” Taehyung chirped. “He spent a lot of time mastering many different forms of small magic before his vita awakened. It makes me wish I would have spent my time a bit more wisely given my circumstances,” he slid his hand over the back of his neck in a shy manner, his silver waves falling into his eyes.

“Oh, Tae,” Jimin cooed, grabbing the silver-haired witch by the wrist as he tugged him toward the house. “You can do small magic! You make great potions!”

“Yeah,” Yoongi interjected, rolling his neck and wincing when it popped loudly as he stretched from their long trek to the cottage. “When they don’t nearly kill you,” he said, directing his attention towards Jeongguk. “If he offers you anything, don’t take it. His potions work about 4 times out of 10, and I’ve been poisoned more times than I can count.”

“He’ll never learn if he doesn’t get to practice,” Seokjin called over his shoulder. “And besides, who made you a remedy for the poison every damn time?”

“You,” the black-haired witch rolled his eyes.

“Exactly,” the eldest smiled over his shoulder. “A little water and a snap of my fingers and you’ve always been fine. He’s trying and that’s all that matters. You mustn’t be so hard on your brother.”

The inside of the cottage was musty, the fine dust littering throughout the air as it reflected in the sunlight that crept in through the windows. It was hardly extravagant, though Jeongguk wasn’t sure what he was expecting from a group of witches that had set up shop in the saddest abandoned house in his hometown.

“What are we here for, Joon?” Seokjin asked, taking a look around.

“I’ve got some books I would like to take a peek at,” he said, already moving towards one of the shelves in the far corner. It was lined floor to ceiling with a variety of books of all different sizes, though most were discolored due to the amount of dust that had settled down their spines. “I think one of them may have the answers.”
It was quiet in the cottage as everyone settled in their own space, and Jeongguk reluctantly made his way throughout to explore, not even paying mind as Taehyung zipped past him into another room. It was only a few moments later that the silver-haired boy yelled something out that Jeongguk didn’t quite catch excitedly before he darted back out into the room where the others were and the younger followed suit to see what all the commotion was.

“Yoongi!” Taehyung bellowed, bouncing excitedly where he stood. “Look who I found!”

“Of course you found him, we left him here to protect the place,” Yoongi said as he stepped toward Taehyung, already holding his hand out.

Much to Jeongguk’s surprise, something darted quickly out of the sleeve of Taehyung’s white shirt towards the black-haired boy, and he was pretty sure it was the first time he had ever seen Yoongi really smile in the short amount of time that he had known him. He peered up over Taehyung’s shoulder to get a better look as his eyes widened at what they saw.

Curling up in the palm of Yoongi’s hand was something long and black with yellow eyes that rivaled the sun, and Jeongguk’s mouth fell open, unsure of just what he was seeing before Taehyung glanced over his shoulder to meet the youngest’s gaze. He smiled wide, all teeth on display as he chuckled out.

“His name is Riven,” he said excitedly like it was all the answer that Jeongguk needed before he caught onto the younger’s dilemma. “He’s a dragon,” he added like it was the most normal thing in the world before he reached to pick up the small creature from Yoongi’s palm. “Yoongi gave him to me when we were little, and he’ll never get any bigger than this, but he keeps this place safe when we aren’t here. Yoongi can speak to him, can even feel when Riven senses danger—” He held the tiny dragon a little closer to Jeongguk, and he was scared to reach out and touch, eyes taking in the dark scales lining his back.

He looked nothing like any dragon that Jeongguk had ever seen. His head was long and narrow, almost like the head of an arrow with a snout that had a small point at the tip above his nose. His scales were nearly black, though somehow pearlescent as they caught colors from the rays of the sun seeping in through the window. His wings were a little larger than the rest of his body, though not too much so that he still fits comfortably in the palm of Taehyung’s hand with his long tail coiled around his body.

“He’s really—I don’t even—” Jeongguk stammered, awestruck, still amazed that he had found himself in such an incredible place. “Wait, he’s a dragon? Yoongi, I thought your thing was crows?”
“He’s a sharp one,” Namjoon said, not even looking over his shoulder from the book he was flipping through.

Yoongi’s gaze hardened for a moment, but Jimin was already standing to make his way towards them before it immediately softened. “Draconian by blood, crows by a twisted fate,” he said through a taut jaw before backing away, grabbing Jimin’s wrist in the process to tug him towards a small table sat on the other side of the room.

“What does that even mean?” Jeongguk asked, voice barely above a whisper as his eyes moved back to the small dragon as he crawled up Taehyung’s arm to perch himself atop his shoulder.

“I’ll tell you some other time,” Taehyung said, running the pad of his finger under Riven’s chin. “Can I take him with me, Yoongs?”

It took a moment for Yoongi to glance up as his fingers were dancing up Jimin’s forearm along the table top. It was as if his mind was elsewhere as his eyes lazily moved towards Taehyung. “Oh, yeah. Could come in handy,” he said, simply. Jimin leaned in a little closer to the elder, whispering something in his ear as he smiled wide, and it took a moment before Yoongi returned a smile.

It was hard not to stare. Jeongguk was curious about the two, baffled by their quiet affections toward one another as Yoongi leaned in to press a kiss against Jimin’s cheek who smiled ever wider than before, and then his eyes shot back to Taehyung and the tiny dragon. But more so, his eyes were on the mess of silver waves as they seemingly tickled his brow, some bits falling over his dark eyes.

Thinking about the way Yoongi had delicately touched Jimin, seemingly dropping his guard right before the blond boy, it had Jeongguk wondering and for some unknown reason, he wanted to reach out and touch Taehyung, almost doing so as his fingertips came just centimeters away from his white blouse before a soft chuckle from just across the room filled the air.

His eyes, though almost unwilling, moved back towards the table and his brows furrowed in the realization that only one remained there. His gaze darted around the room, quickly searching for Jimin, only to come up empty-handed before he mustered up the courage to ask Yoongi.

“Erm,” he finally said. “Where did Jimin go?” His eyes moved back to Yoongi who offered no explanation as he simply pointed at the cat that Jeongguk hadn’t noticed lounging in his lap.
“He’s here,” he said, in a manner that insinuated the Jeongguk’s question was one of ignorance.

“Oh!” Taehyung sing-songed practically bouncing towards his brother. “It’s been a while since we’ve seen Jimin in his true form!”

“T-true form?” Jeongguk asked, still watching wide-eyed as Taehyung reached out to brush his knuckles over the fur of the sand-colored cat.

“He has no control over it,” Seokjin answered, opening his eyes from where he had been resting against the wall in the corner closest to Namjoon. “When he’s happy, that’s just what happens.”

“I know it’s a lot to take in,” Namjoon said, turning toward the rest of them as he tore a page from the book in his hand, quickly shoving it into the pocket of his cloak. “We don’t know why it happens, just be thankful you’ve not seen him angry.”

“A-angry?” Jeongguk asked, unable to comprehend the fact that he was having a conversation about his friend turning into a cat like it was the most normal thing in the whole world. “What happens then —”

“Be quiet,” Yoongi snapped, and everyone stilled as the dark-haired boy’s eyes shot frantically around the room. His hands were already bracing Jimin before he stood, nodding at Namjoon who seemingly knew just what he was saying without words.

The cottage was silent for a moment, but the air was changing. It changed in the way that was—it was the way it had changed back at the abandoned house as they all sat along the basement floor and Jeongguk’s heart nearly stopped as he heard the door of the cottage open, and the others were already moving as he caught Yoongi throwing his cloak over Jimin’s head out of the corner of his eyes.

Taehyung was quick to grab his wrist, trying to tug him away, but it was almost as if he was frozen in place before the footsteps across the rotting floor of the cottage grew louder and into the room stepped four men adorned with masks of various animals.

Mask resembling a lion, fox, sphynx, and a dragon were staring back at him, seemingly towering over him and his whole body felt as if it was turning cold. Fear shot through his veins, the warmth of Taehyung’s hand clasp his wrist felt as if it was miles away. A ringing in his ears was drowning out every sound around him, mostly muffled out besides a small voice that was speaking quietly,
with words that nearly caused him to cringe.

“Do I have to fucking do everything myself?” he barely heard and then Yoongi was in front of him, pushing Jeongguk out of the way, flipping a switch in his brain that had him following Taehyung in suit toward the back of the cottage and the last thing he saw was the room filling violently with dozens of crows.

They were on the move again, and he couldn’t help but look frantically over his shoulder as they ran through the thick woods. Yoongi was still nowhere in sight, his heart sinking the moment that he noticed that Namjoon had Jimin clutched tightly in his arms.

“How did they find us?!” Seokjin was panting frantically, nearly tripping over the roots of a tree. “They’re fast—”

“Someone must have seen us,” Namjoon said, never looking back once, his hand coming to clasp the top of Jimin’s head to keep him from being shaken too much as he moved just behind Seokjin. “Jeongguk’s clothes. Someone must have noticed that he doesn’t belong here.”

“I can fix that easily,” Seokjin said, finally stopping to make sure the younger two were behind him. “I just—” he struggled to speak between bated breaths. “—didn’t think we’d need to worry about it so soon. We’ve only been back a handful of hours and they broke through my protection enchantment so easily—”

“Shouldn’t we wait?” Taehyung skidded to a halt, nearly causing Jeongguk to slam into his back. “What about Yoongi? We can’t—” he swallowed hard, doubling over as his chest heaved. “We can’t leave my brother.”

Seokjin shook his head, reaching to grab Taehyung’s wrist as he pulled him over a thick patch of roots and weeds. “We can’t stop, not when we have such possibly precious cargo. Yoongi will know where to find us, he always does.”

“But—” Taehyung stammered, planting his feet firmly on the ground as he let go of Jeongguk’s wrist to pull Riven from the pocket of his slacks. “I should have left Riven with him—I should have tried to help.”

“Taehyung,” Seokjin said sternly, stopping to cup the boy’s cheeks. “Yoongi will be fine. There’s nothing you could have done. Yoongi will always be fine.”
“I know I’m useless,” he whispered as Riven climbed up his arm once more. “I know I’m useless, but I didn’t even try.”

“You’re not useless,” Namjoon had stopped just ahead. “He wouldn’t have let you stay. He would have sent his crows after you, and you know that.”

“He’s so stupid,” he said frantically as if he had come to some dismal realization. “He’s an idiot—”

“Tae—” Namjoon spoke quickly, clutching Jimin tightly to his chest. “That’s enough. Yoongi will meet us,” his hand was still covering Jimin’s ears like he didn’t want the younger to hear. “So, let’s go.”

It was a reluctant start as they began moving again, and they didn’t stop until nightfall. They made a small fire in a crowded area of the forest, and they all sat in silence as they watched the silvas curiously stare at them through the trees.

It had been what felt like hours, and they all stared at the flame in the midst of them as it danced around violently, though it was small. They had hardly spoken at all, aside from Seokjin pulling a set of clothes from his bag and telling Jeongguk that they could no longer risk anyone seeing him in his attire from his other world.

He couldn’t argue, not after seeing the danger that Yoongi had put himself in and he quickly shed himself of the last things he had left from his own world as he was now adorned with all black attire—a loose fitting shirt much like Taehyung’s, and boots that he was having a hard time adjusting to, though he knew with how much they’d be on the run, he didn’t have much of a choice.

“Did you find anything while we were there at least?” Seokjin spoke over the quiet crackling of the fire.

Namjoon had taken a spot beneath a tree, his head tipped back against the bark with Jimin still tight in his clutches, and the only noise the small cat would make every now and then would be a squeak of protest as it was getting late and the black-haired boy was still nowhere to be seen. He would only shush him and soothe him, making little jokes about how he may just be a cat forever to try and lighten the mood.

“I found something, yes,” he said simply, swallowing thickly, exhaustion apparent in his tone. “I
“Whether it’s a myth or not, I think we could all use a little light in this situation right now,” he said, pulling a cup from his bag as he waved his hand over it before gulping down its contents quickly. He repeated the process, handing it towards Jeongguk who was amazed that it was full of water once again.

“There are rumors of an oracle on the highest point of the western mountains,” Namjoon spoke quietly, his fingertips rubbing circles atop Jimin’s head just between his ears.

“The western mountains?” Seokjin scoffed. “I said we needed some good news, Joon.”

“I know, I know—”

“What’s wrong with the western mountains?” Jeongguk asked, looking back and forth between the two.

“It’s shrouded by a dark cloud,” Seokjin answered. “Most of the west is. Everything has been plagued by the malum.”

“The what?” Jeongguk looked towards Taehyung, though he was fixed beneath a tree that was farther away from them, paying no mind to their conversation.

“It’s evil,” Namjoon said. “There’s no other way to put it. But if the rumors are true, it’s our best bet for guidance. They say that the Oracle knows everything, can see everything—they’d be able to tell us about Hoseok as well—”

“Do not,” Seokjin snapped. “Don’t think that you can get me on board for such a dangerous idea by using Hoseok against me. What happens if we get there and everything is false, hm? What do we do then when we’re in the midst of the malum and end up getting caught for good?”

“And what if we get there and everything is true?” Namjoon sighed. “We don’t know unless we try, but we have to band together to do this. We have to all be on the same page for it to happen. The legend says that many trials await anyone brave enough to trek on such a path.”
“It’s pure idiocy,” the water witch scoffed once again.

“Everything we’ve done thus far has been idiotic,” Namjoon hummed as his gaze moved towards Taehyung. “You alright over there?”

Taehyung silently nodded, his eyes staying fixed on the darkness surrounding them before they were all jumping to their feet the moment they heard twigs snapping in the vicinity. They all searched between one another and around them, preparing for the worst, preparing to run again—though Jeongguk wasn’t sure how much more he could take.

Jimin leapt from Namjoon’s arms, and the purple-haired witch reached quickly to try and catch him before the little cat was darting off into the darkness of the woods. It was only a handful of moments later that Yoongi was stumbling into the dimly lit vicinity that surrounded the fire with the sand-colored cat tight in his arms.

His hair was askew, falling all different directions. His cloak was ripped along the bottom as his knees nearly gave way beneath him and Namjoon was already running to catch him.

Everything was silent for a bit as Taehyung stared wide-eyed before running to brace his brother, nearly knocking Namjoon out of the way as he pulled him tight against his chest. “What the hell took you so long?” he babbled, voice shaking as he held Yoongi close. “Why the hell did you take your dear time like that?”

“They gave me a run for my money,” he smirked as he pulled away from his brother’s embrace. “Those weren’t guardians—” he said through his weak smile. “I don’t know who they were, but they almost got my eye,” he pointed at the long-running cut across his cheek before he stumbled toward the fire to take a seat.

He placed Jimin on the ground in front of him, his mood changing quickly. “Darling, do you think you can fix this?” he said, pointing at the cut again before he tapped the top of Jimin’s head, his fingertips glowing white for a quick moment before the blond-haired witch appeared right before him, his own green cloak askew.

Jimin’s brows were furrowed as he scowled at the elder, arms crossed over his chest. “You had us scared, you idiot. I think I’ll leave that cut and it can be a reminder of how ardently stupid you are.”

The two stared back at one another for a moment before the blond gave in, tugging Yoongi close
against his chest as he whispered out a string of incoherencies, his eyes illuminating with tears as he pulled back to stare at the elder. “Don’t ever do anything like that again, please,” he whispered as he reached out to touch Yoongi’s cheek and the elder hissed at the contact against the wound before it disappeared right before Jeongguk’s eyes.

“I think we should stay here for the night,” Namjoon said, moving to take a seat between Jimin and Yoongi. “Taehyung, you wanna work on your barrier?”

Taehyung bounced where he was standing excitedly, as the rest of them groaned quietly about finally being able to get some sleep as Jeongguk watched in amazement as the air surrounding them became painting with a faint light blue that reflected off everything around it, almost resembling the reflection of water.

Much of the night was spent with Jeongguk asking more questions than he ever had in his life as they sat around the fire, the eldest of the three all arguing on what the next step of their journey was. After many disagreements, they decided to call it a night, but Jeongguk was still lost—still wondering as he found himself perched on a large branch above where the others were sleeping next to Taehyung. The lights of the barrier continued to illuminate as its blue hues danced off every surface that it touched.

“I thought you couldn’t—” Jeongguk cleared his throat, staring up at the ripples of blue above, unsure of how to even ask the question.

“It’s just a type of enchantment,” Taehyung sighed, clearly able to tell what the younger so ardently wanted to ask. “It’s my vita that hasn’t awakened, my pure magic. This is just synthetic, something that we can learn and many of us do when waiting for what’s inside of us to awaken.”

“Does it bother you?” Jeongguk asked, unsure of whether or not he was crossing a line.
“What?” he asked, but his eyes were downcast now, watching his own fingers fidget in his lap. “That my magic hasn’t awakened?”

Jeongguk slowly nodded, his heart sinking with Taehyung’s somber tone. “Sometimes,” the silver-haired boy sighed. “Sometimes I wonder if I’m the black sheep of my family. I come from a long line of green witches. My mother’s powers manifested when she was only ten, and my father’s even earlier, yet here I am—twenty-three and starting to wonder if I’m empty.”

The wind picked up slightly and Jeongguk couldn’t take his eyes off the way that Taehyung’s hair jostled with the invisible force as the reflection like water from above illuminated his cheeks. “You’re not empty,” Jeongguk sighed into the breeze. “You have worlds inside of you.”

The corners of Taehyung’s lips quirked up a bit before he shook his head. “My father always told me that it was okay to be different—that there was more out there than magic but seeing everyone else—watching Yoongi manipulate birds and dragons, even speaking to them—and then Namjoon creating storms out of nothing, and Seokjin turning mere water into so many things—” he sighed. “Being ordinary next to my friends, it’d be a curse.”

“What about Yoongi?” Jeongguk asked, unsure of how to truly navigate through this conversation without telling Taehyung his every thought on the matter.

“He was three,” Taehyung chuckled in something akin to disbelief. “And it’s no wonder that his father never accepted me, not when his son is so extraordinary, defying all odds.”

“His father?” the younger’s eyes widened, wind picking up a little more.

“Yoongi and I are step-brothers, though we’re bound in different ways now,” he shrugged, words caught within a yawn and Jeongguk took that as a sign to not ask any more questions about Taehyung’s family.

“Will the light not draw anyone?”

Taehyung shook his head. “The light can only be seen from the inside. From the outside, it’s like we’re not even here. Someone could walk right through our camp and not see a thing.”
“That’s—” Jeongguk said, eyes widening as he examined the waves of blue one more. “That’s really amazing.”

“It’s not much,” he shrugged, nonchalant and everything fell silent once more save for the sound of the animals off in the distance and the occasional silva appearing in the branches up above to peer down at the two.

“Tae,” Jeongguk said reluctantly, feeling like a burden with his thousands of questions. “What exactly is the electi? I mean—I know the whole ‘saving the world’ bit, but why do you think that it’s me?”

Taehyung hummed, his head tipping back against the trunk of the tree. “The wind,” he said simply, and it was only then that Jeongguk noticed the light breeze that had been kissing his cheeks, realizing he had grown more than accustomed to it. “You speak to the wind and she speaks to you.”

“I’m not even sure what that means,” Jeongguk said shyly.

Taehyung leaned forward a little, tugging his knees to his chest as he cocked his head towards the younger. “Have you ever done anything that you couldn’t possibly explain? Something beyond your wildest imagination?”

“No.”

“Me either,” he chuckled, his hair jostling as the wind picked up. “I don’t know how to explain it, Guk. It’s just—I was drawn to you for a reason, that much I believe is certain.”


Taehyung burst into bright laughter, cradling his knees closer to his chest as the wind picked up ever so slightly. “I wasn’t drawn to you from the start because I thought you were the electi, I mean, I suppose it doesn’t matter—wanna know why?” Jeongguk nodded quickly. “Because you are the electi. I just know it.”

Jeongguk stared back at Taehyung a moment, finding nothing but seriousness within his dark eyes. “You think I can save your world?” The fear in saying those words laced itself through his veins, the
realization of how big such a task was taking over. “I don’t—what if I can’t?”

“Hey, hey,” Taehyung moved forward, his hands cupping Jeongguk’s cheeks as he smiled wide, looking at the younger as if he had found every answer in the world like he always had. “You can do this—we can do this. I promise you that I’ll never let anything bad happen to you, no matter what.”

Jeongguk stared back at the silver-haired boy with eyes wide, heart hammering in his throat as the warmth of Taehyung’s hands flooded his cheeks and he was wrapped up in the wind as she continued to sing her song.

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The sound of iron clinking was ringing throughout his ears. It had begun in the distance, slowly zeroing in until it was all he could hear. He was surrounded by darkness, a low amber light flashing every now and again as it barely lit up the vicinity.

The ground beneath him was cold, a hard surface against his back that sent a chill down his spine. His heart sped up and the sound of the iron grew louder, only echoing more violently.

The amber flooded again, and he searched frantically, trying to see where he was with zero recollection of how he got there before the dull shape of a figure was before him, seemingly close, yet so far away.

“Who’s there?” he called out, voice weak with lungs tight as if they were weighed down by the iron itself. “What do you want?”

Panic was rising in his veins, his eyes searched more frantically through the low lights for silver waves, but to no avail and he wanted to scream out once the figure became a little more apparent,
though he was still unable to make out much more than a frail silhouette.

The figure came closer, than farther away with each flash of light as sweat began to bead upon his brow. “Who the hell are you?!” he screamed out, voice shaking even more.

“You can hear me?”

His eyes shot open, wincing at the brightness of the sun where it was hanging in the sky directly overhead. He found himself surrounded by his five friends, lost in the silver waves pressed against his chest as Taehyung breathed out peacefully, still enraptured by sleep.

Chapter End Notes

If you made it to the end, I love you! If you're still enjoying this story, I LOVE YOU! If you drop kudos and comments, I LOVE YOU EVEN MORE. I'm serious though, let me know what you think so far. Speculations, thoughts, ideas, theories.

This chapter was pretty lightweight, but some things in mind to hold onto for future chapters. I've already started on chapter three and it'll be much deeper and the adventure will truly begin.

Find me on twitter as @apolloyoongi! Come see my moodboards, come talk to me, come drop by my curiouscat with a prompt. Whatever you want, I am HERE for it.

See you all next time and hopefully sooner than later. uwu
Chapter Summary

From the vast darkness he had been staring into, a white light was emerging and moving slowly from within the cave nestled in the hill. He could only make out a large shadow as it moved across the visible wall of the cave. His heart stammered as he waited, blindly searching for Taehyung’s hand, riddled with regret. There was nothing he could do as he watched the creature from the cave come out fully into the open, the light emitting from its body nearly blinding, but he couldn’t look away.

Chapter Notes

‚alright witches, here we go

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sun had made its home high in the sky as it beat relentlessly down on their bodies. They trekked through the woods for as long as they could until they found themselves in an open field that seemingly expanded for an eternity with no end in sight. Jeongguk was missing the shade of the trees as the harsh heat from above knew no bounds, his black clothing doing little to allow any form of relief as it soaked up every ray of the sun.

The only thought that kept crossing through his mind, besides the thousands of questions he still wanted to ask, was the urge to run back into the forest and throw himself in the midst of the river they had followed until they met the wood’s edge.

“How much longer?” Taehyung groaned from the back of the group, much like a petulant child growing tired on a trip with their parents. “You never even said where we were going. Why don’t you ever tell us anything?”

“It’s for the best,” Namjoon reassured over his shoulder, his hand clutched tightly with Jimin’s. “If I told you where we were going, you would only complain more.” He offered a smile over his shoulder.

Yoongi was some yards ahead with Seokjin as they led the group with a single crow darting ahead previously as it moved from branch to branch on their walk journey through the woods. Now, in the open field, the blackbird was flying just ahead of them high in the sky, keeping her sharp eyes peeled in case any danger was to approach.
In the back was Jeongguk, and just behind him was a trudging Taehyung, who groaned quietly with each passing moment, muttering a few incoherencies here and there along the lines of being upset that they didn’t take the time to eat a proper breakfast before embarking on the mysterious journey that they were now on.

“Did they say anything to you?” he huffed out, eyes squinting due to the harsh light from above.

Jeongguk simply shook his head, doing his best to keep his own exhaustion hidden. His mind kept wandering back to the dream he had, curious as to what it meant, but then again, he had always had strange dreams—only now, they were more frequent.

“I’m serious, Joon,” said Taehyung, stopping amidst the grass for a moment as the others continued ahead. “You can tell me, I can handle it.”

Namjoon slowed down his pace, tugging Jimin back with him as he did so. Taehyung sped up to meet him, a huge grin tugging at his face—sure he had won. “You won’t like it, Taehyung, and we needn’t find any extra stress for any of us.”

“Joonie,” Jimin finally interrupted, his own brows coming together. “You seem stressed out yourself. Tell us, won’t you?”

Namjoon fully stopped, letting go of Jimin’s hand as a slight frown tugged at his lips. He looked ahead at Seokjin and Yoongi before turning back towards the other three. Jeongguk didn’t know Namjoon all that well, but even he knew something was going on based off the way he was hesitant in speaking. He was always careful with his words, there was no mystery there, but something in his eyes had Jeongguk dreading what was about to come for reasons he couldn’t quite explain.

“As you all know,” he began finally, his voice slightly getting drowned out by the breeze as it caused the tall green grass to bow beneath her voice. “We’re going to the western mountains in search of the oracle.”

“Right,” Taehyung nodded, stepping closer. “But what is that you’re not telling us? I know you, Namjoon. You don’t keep secrets, and you’re horrible at hiding things.”

“There’s a village at the bottom of the mountains, and we need to pass through it to follow the path. But the problem is, for us to be able to make it to the oracle, we need to get the elders of the village’s
blessing."

“Blessing?” Jimin hissed, eyes snapping back from where he had been looking ahead. “We’re witches. No one is going to give us their blessing. Isn’t there some way we can bypass the village all together?”

“I’m afraid not. But it’s not the blessing that I’m worried about—”

“Wait,” Jeongguk interrupted, stepping forward slightly. “What does being witches have to do with whether or not they’ll give you their blessing? Aren’t you all trying to save this entire world after all?”

“Witches aren’t exactly well-liked here, I’m afraid,” he frowned. “They see our powers as taking the easy way out of things—making something out of nothing—they think we don’t work for anything. But it’s not the blessing that I’m worried about,” Namjoon fixed his eyes on Taehyung. “What I’m worried about most is the fact that the village we have to go through is Spiorus.”

“You’ve got be joking,” Taehyung spoke quickly and quietly, his eyes darting ahead at the two elder’s who still hadn’t noticed that the rest of them had stopped. “You know we can’t go through there, Namjoon. It’s not safe for all of us.”

“You think I don’t know that?” Namjoon’s brows furrowed. “I’ve been up all night thinking of some other way we could make it to the top of those mountains, but you and I both know that the trees alone would give us away. If we’re going to do this, I’m afraid that we have to do it right, no shortcuts.”

“And what are we to do when they won’t grant us passage or better yet call the guardians on us?” Taehyung shook his head, taking a step back. “I want to save this world just as much as anyone, but not at the expense of anyone that I care for.”

Namjoon sighed, tugging his cloak tight around himself as the breeze nearly stole it from his shoulders. “If they call the guardians, then it just means that we’ll have no one on our side. We need to win them over. We have to do this right and I need you to trust me, Taehyung.”

“I don’t want anyone else to get hurt. I don’t want to lose anyone else like we’ve lost Hoseok,” Taehyung’s eyes fell down to the ground. “I can’t handle losing anyone else.”
“Taehyung,” Namjoon stepped forward, grabbing Taehyung’s shoulders tightly before he could move back. “I know that, but we’re going to see the oracle because you believe that Jeongguk is the one that’s going to save us all. Don’t you want to find out if you’re right?” he tilted his head down, trying to catch the younger’s eyes, offering a reassuring smile.

Taehyung solemnly nodded, his eyes pinching shut for a moment before snapping up to meet Namjoon’s kind gaze. Even off from the side, Jeongguk could sense a change in his best friend, something he had never seen before. “I do, but I don’t want anyone else to get hurt because of a mistake that I’ve made.”

Even with the harsh quip of his words, the fire in his eyes and sternness of his words, Namjoon’s smile never faltered as he patted Taehyung’s shoulders. “No one will get hurt. I promise you. I won’t allow anything bad to happen to any of you ever again.”

It’s not been uncommon for things to leave Jeongguk confused, in wonder, or in awe—but something about the words and tone before him, he was wondering what he had missed before happening across Taehyung only months ago when summer had just begun.

“You always do that,” Jimin spoke up, his small hands gripping Namjoon’s cheeks to finally force him to look away from the silver-haired witch. “You always take the entirety of our burdens. You mustn’t do that. Everything that we do, we do it together or not at all. We don’t allow anyone to take more weight than another—we can’t do that anymore. We can’t afford to be careless.”

Namjoon chuckled, pulling Jimin’s hands down from his face to press a soft kiss to his knuckles. “I’m not Yoongi, darling. Your honeyed words don’t hold power over me as they do him, though, they somehow calm my heart. But don’t think for a moment that I will ever allow anything to happen to you. That’s what I promised when you all agreed to let me lead this wild goose chase, and I’m going to see it through—but I’ll be the first to go if need be.”

“Is that something we really need to worry about, though?” Jeongguk swallowed, his eyes wide as he looked back and forth between the three of them before him. With each moment spent in Amaranthine, he learned something new, only this time it was darker and grimmer.

“Like I said before, Jeongguk,” Namjoon spoke softly, much like he always did. “Witches are looked down upon in this world and it would be no surprise to us if everyone at this rate were against us, hoping to see our kind vanish from the face of Amaranthine and every world thereafter. But for now, let’s try not to worry too much over it. As we need to, we’ll explain more, but—”

“All in good time,” Jeongguk forced a smile, trying to mask the nervous and off-tempo beating of his
A crow flew above their heads just moments later, forcing their attention to the sky before they looked ahead. Seokjin and Yoongi had finally turned, though they were too far ahead to be able to call out to them, from the sight of the crow above and the way she circled above their heads, the elders were ready to get a move on.

The sun was beginning to set. The sky was slowly turning golden with peaches and violets nestled within, creating the most ominous red over the horizon that was hidden behind the mountains in the far-off distance.

Jimin and Taehyung had joined Seokjin and Yoongi not long before as they breached the entrance of the new circle of woods that they were to set up camp in for the night. Just as they stepped into the line of trees, the wind had picked up slightly and Namjoon stopped beside Jeongguk as he smiled.

“Does this happen with you often?” he asked, his eyes moving over to Jeongguk who looked back in confusion, taking a moment to realize what he meant.

“I’ve always loved the sound of the wind,” he said, smiling. He could still hear the way the breeze sounded as she manipulated the stalks of wheat to bow in her wake. The way she would kiss his cheeks carefully as he basked in the hot afternoon sun, or the nights she lulled him to sleep amidst the field.

“Has she ever spoken to you directly?”

Jeongguk chuckled quietly, his hand rubbing over the back of his neck. “Taehyung is always talking
about that—something speaking to me, and I suppose he means the wind. I’m not quite sure just what he means, though. It’s just the wind, after all, right?"

Namjoon hummed, looking ahead as the cloaks of the others disappeared farther into the quickly dimming woods. “Perhaps you should try listening a little more intently,” he chuckled, eyes flickering back and Jeongguk before moving forward to catch up with the others.

Jeongguk’s brows pinched together as he watched Namjoon step farther into the woods ahead of him in close pursuit of the others. He shook his head, fists clenching down by his sides. “Namjoon,” he said sternly, immediately feeling a sense of ease the moment that the elder stopped in his tracks to look back at him over his shoulder. “You can’t keep doing that. You can’t keep being vague and expect me to know what you mean.”

The sound of the birds in the trees filled the void of silence between them as the wind picked up, rustling the branches, disturbing the creatures throughout them as they became louder. They only looked back at one another and Jeongguk kept his fists down at his sides, trying to stand his ground. He needed answers.

Namjoon turned back toward him fully, eyes scanning over his face. There was something about the curve of his smile, somehow reassuring but at the same time, Jeongguk knew just what was coming.

“All in good time,” said Namjoon, and though his look was gentle, Jeongguk did not dare challenge him as he watched the violet-haired witch turn to follow the others once again, his fingers out to his right side as he cast the protection enchantment and the younger knew this was where they would be for the night as the sun had almost disappeared entirely.
He awoke gasping for breath, somehow feeling like he was drowning though, in his dream, water was nowhere to be found. He breathed out shakily, clutching his chest as he tried to recall everything he had just seen amidst his sleep, yet he wanted to forget it all at once.

Jeongguk had always had an overreactive imagination. He had always had vivid dreams where he would fall into worlds that he wished were real until he came to Amaranthine. He supposed it was mother nature’s cruel joke, turning the tables on him like that.

He used to see colors upon colors. He used to fall in love with where his dreams would take him. He used to wake up feeling happy and alive, or sad that he had to leave the world in his mind—now he only sees amber glows and hears shallow breaths.

He sat up carefully, eyes staring at the fire that was slowly dimming as he looked around at other boys who were all sleeping soundly in the grass of the forest below. They had found the perfect spot to set up camp. The river that ran through it somehow shaped itself perfectly around them except on one side. It was a means for protection, even with the cool violets of Namjoon’s protection enchantment above—if someone were to nullify it, the river would not allow them to sneak up on the sleeping witches.

It was alright, however, even if someone were to breach their camp that night. Jeongguk figured that the last thing he would be getting would be any sleep at all. Rest was slowly becoming harder for him to come by, though they had only been in Amaranthine for two nights now—they had stopped several times for short rests, and still, the unsteady rhythm of his heart wouldn’t allow it.

After staring at the dwindling flames for a while, he finally gathered the energy to move higher up. It took him a few times of circling the nearby trees before finding one with a low enough branch the suited him and still allowed him to see the moon through the violet haze above. The one thing he most definitely missed about home, he thought as he climbed up the tree, was the wheat field.

The moment he gripped the branch to pull himself up, he froze as his eyes widened upon hearing the scoff just against the trunk of the tree. It was one that he had already heard enough times that he could pick it out of a crowd as his eyes snapped up to meet none other than Yoongi’s in the dim light.

“Our sorry,” Jeongguk instantly stammered, already beginning to climb back down. “Didn’t know you were up. I can go elsewhere.”

The last thing he ever expected was for Yoongi to scoff once more and tell him that he could stay.
The black-haired witch was leaning against the trunk of the large tree, one of his knees pulled towards his chest as Riven sat atop it, his yellow eyes illuminating from the purple above. Yoongi’s head was tipped back against the bark, eyes falling shut as he seemingly listened to the sound of the breeze as it rustled the leaves throughout the forest. Just in the branch above sat the crow that had kept her watch from the sky as they traveled through the open fields, and this was the first time Jeongguk had ever seen Yoongi be seemingly content in the presence of one of the crows, often being aggravated by them any time they would appear unless there was danger.

Jeongguk sat towards the middle of the branch, struggling to keep his balance even though it was quite wide and accommodated him well, he still gripped at the bark with his weak hands. His exhaustion was catching up to him.

“Couldn’t sleep?” asked Jeongguk hesitantly as he broke the silence and felt like his voice was practically booming for all else was silent.

It was a few moments before Yoongi even acknowledged that he was speaking, in fact, Jeongguk had just accepted the idea that the elder was simply going to ignore him. “I rest for a little while, but I wanted to keep watch over the camp,” he murmured, voice dry and even Jeongguk could pinpoint the exhaustion that was creeping itself up the boy’s throat.

“Isn’t that what the protection enchantment is for?” he asked, staring back until Yoongi’s eyes snapped open to meet his.

“Anything can happen,” Yoongi answered dryly.

“What could happen though? Just what are we on the run from?” Jeongguk wanted to beg him to tell him something, anything at all. He was growing tired of being told that he would find out at the right time.

“You ask too many questions,” said Yoongi quickly with a tone of impatience as if he wanted nothing at all to do with Jeongguk.

Jeongguk stared back at Yoongi, his brows furrowing. It wasn’t like he had any particularly good moments with the black-haired witch as of yet, but for some reason, Yoongi’s snarky comment made his blood boil. “If you would stop being stubborn long enough to help me understand then maybe I would ask about so much,” he hissed quietly over the crack of the fire, trying to shoot a challenge toward Yoongi with his eyes. “You’ve done little to help me since I’ve been here besides push me
out of the way back at the cottage. Thank you for that, by the way.”

Yoongi shook his head, slightly rolling his eyes. “I’m not quite sure just what you want from me,” he murmured. “I’m not the leader, so if you want answers, you need to speak to Namjoon.”

The pads of Jeongguk’s fingers gripped tight against the bark by his sides. He had half a mind to simply hop down from the tree branch, but he wouldn’t. He refused to be overlooked any longer, it was becoming too much. “Namjoon only tells me it’s not time yet, Yoongi. Please, I need something, anything at all. A little give would be nice, I just—”

“Jeongguk,” Yoongi’s voice came out stern, full of warning. “It’s not my place—”

The words caused a sudden shift in Jeongguk. His emotions all at once began turning like the tide. Anything akin to anger was gone and replaced by the numbness of fear that weighed down every bone in his body and he wasn’t sure why. He had never been one to feel in such a way, but with the grim undertone of Yoongi’s words, like there was some horrid secret being kept from him, he couldn’t help it.

He tried to fight back the tears that began springing up in his eyes and for the first time since he had arrived in Amaranthine, he found himself missing the warmth of his own bed. A place that was truly safe.

“My heart has felt so uneasy since we’ve arrived here,” he spoke brokenly, pinching his eyes shut in an attempt to keep his tears in their place. He was wondering why he was going to tell all these things to someone who had hardly treated him with even an ounce of kindness, but he needed to get the words out. Jeongguk needed someone to listen, even if that someone was Yoongi. “I have so many questions and most of the things that you all say go right over my head, but I don’t want to be a burden by asking. I don’t know just what I’ve gotten myself into by coming to this place even though I didn’t have much choice, but to tell you the truth, I’m a little terrified.”

He finally found the courage to open his eyes, searching for any sort of reaction from Yoongi within the violet lights from above, and the elder was only staring back at him.

“I know,” he said.

Jeongguk’s eyes widened a little more, the tears no longer held in place as his eyes illuminated with the dwindling fire from below, heart clenched tight within his chest. “You do?”
Yoongi nodded, bringing his knee where Riven sat a little closer to his chest. He ran his finger just beneath the dragon’s chin like he was memorizing the texture of each tiny scale before he spoke. “I do. We all do. It’s not that we want to keep you in the dark. It’s because we don’t want to overwhelm or terrify you, but it seems we aren’t doing a very good job since you’re already scared.”

Jeongguk screwed his eyes shut, trying to collect himself, hating how he felt himself falling apart. Since he had arrived in Amaranthine, and even before then, he tried so desperately to take everything in stride, to be open and accepting—he wanted to trust the others, and not have to worry. It was becoming more difficult, however, as things began to spiral. Each time something new came to light, something a little darker, he had no way to ease his mind if no one would explain anything to him. “It’s not that I’m scared,” he breathed out shakily. “It’s more that I’m so in the dark, I don’t know what to expect. I don’t know anything about this world and you all are so far ahead of me, I feel like I’m being left behind. I don’t know what’s to be expected of me either. I’ve never had to run for my life, I’ve never been on the brink of having to fight a war, and I don’t know what the hell it means when people keep telling me to listen to the wind.”

Yoongi’s eyes fell shut again as the edges of his lips quirked up into a small smile. “Alright, if you want to know so bad then ask all your questions and I’ll do my best to answer them.”

The younger paused, feeling like he was caught in a dream of some sort for Yoongi to be willing to comply so easily. “Are you serious?” he asked, bereft.

“Don’t make me change my mind,” he murmured as he ran the pad of his finger carefully down Riven’s spine.

Jeongguk had so many questions, in fact, he wished that he had some sort of journal to keep them all written down. He wasn’t quite sure where to begin.

“Why do you call yourselves witches instead of wizards?” he asked, quickly realizing it was the least important question.

Yoongi cracked his eye open, a slight scowl taking over his delicate features that contradicted everything that he exuded. “Really?” he scoffed. “That’s what you settled on asking first?”
Jeongguk nodded eagerly, giving the elder his full attention.

“I’m not sure what a wizard is,” he sighed. “Must be a term from your world. We’re witches because we can manipulate, create, and manifest something out of nothing with little effort. Some people call us warlocks, though I don’t much like that term. It sounds bloodthirsty, and we are a peaceful people—well, most of us. Next.”

“Why are witches looked down upon in the village that we’re going to?”

“It’s not just in that village. People see us at cheaters, and it’s even more difficult that it’s us. People have been tricked into thinking that we’re criminals by the king and his followers, because we left the world without permission, in search of something that was taken away. Next question.”

Jeongguk stared back at Yoongi for a moment more, trying to process everything he had said. It was simple enough, yet there was so much more that he wanted to know. “W-what do the others mean when they tell me to listen to the wind?”

Yoongi hummed quietly, his eyes darting all around like he himself was listening to it. “She’s trying to tell you something, but anything past that, it’s between you and her. It’s not for me nor the others to know.”

Far from having the answer he so desperately wanted, Jeongguk frowned, but he figured it was best to not push it further—he prayed that he would be able to find out just what they meant soon. “Back at the cottage,” his words were hesitant. “What did you mean when you said you had a twisted fate?”

Now Yoongi was mirroring Jeongguk’s frown and he was quick to sit up, shoving his cloak behind him. “I think that’s enough for now,” he said sternly as he began to descend the trunk of the tree. “Goodnight, Jeongguk.”

“W-wait!” Jeongguk nearly fell off the tree branch as he reached toward Yoongi to try and stop him from leaving. He knew he had clearly stepped into forbidden territory with his last question, and he realized it was something he would have to learn on his own time.

Yoongi looked back at him, irritation written all over his features as he sighed.
“I–I’ve been having these strange dreams,” he said, eyes shying away from the elder.

Yoongi stopped in his movements, frozen as he stared at Jeongguk in a way that the younger could feel his eyes all over him. “What kind of dreams?”

“I see this amber glow and hear the sound of iron clinking. I—I’ve always had strange dreams,” he whispered.

Yoongi sighed. “So, I suppose it’s not worth it to get yourself worked up over it then, hm?” he turned to begin climbing down once more.

“There’s someone there who talks to me.”

Yoongi froze once again, but his eyes didn’t find Jeongguk’s, he only stared off into the distant darkness of the forest.

The younger watched the elder’s black hair dance in the breeze before he turned back to him for a single moment. “Goodnight Jeongguk.”

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Jeongguk raised his brow as he watched the way Seokjin was eyeing the small river, nearly scowling at it. “Why are you the only one doing this?” he asked, looking back over his shoulder at the other whose were still sitting around where the fire had gone out as remnants of smoke dangled in the air.

“You want to eat, don’t you?” Seokjin asked without skipping a beat. He raised his hands slightly, bringing his palms closer to one another before cupping his hands together. “Shit,” his hissed shaking
“This is a lot harder than I remember, I’m not sure how I’ve caught three so far.”

“You all can’t just—I dunno—make food out of nothing?” the younger scooted forward, eyes trying to follow Seokjin’s line of vision as the eldest spotted a fish nearing the bank.

Seokjin scoffed, his eyes fixed down on the water as he moved his hands together once again. “The gift of creation is rare, Jeongguk. In fact, no one has had it since the previous electi.” His shoulders slumped upon missing his mark again as he nearly slipped off the rock they were sat upon.

Jeongguk’s eyes shot up from where they were fixed on the water. “The previous electi?” he asked, mouth agape. “They had the gift of creation?”

Seokjin nodded casually, cupping his hands once more only to fail again. He finally looked back at Jeongguk, staring for a moment before his lips parted in realization. “Every electi is different—” he smiled wide. “They’ve all had unique abilities. Some have had multiple vita, while others have had one and nothing more, but it was strong and a force to be reckoned with.” He cocked his head, smile never wavering. “You needn’t worry about anything. It’s not like you have shoes to fill because every single electi has been different. Your shoes are your own.”

Jeongguk swallowed hard, trying his best to process everything that the elder has said as he went back to fishing, pinching his brows together as he tried to force the water to cage their breakfast. He wasn’t sure why he was even worried. There was no factual proof that he was the electi. He had no powers—no vita that had awakened, and why would he? He was from another world. He wasn’t sure what to expect of this expedition at all, but something in Seokjin’s words weighed heavily in his chest.

“Seokjin,” he whispered, tugging his knees to his chest as he watched the surface of the water ripple endlessly with the current. “What if I’m not the electi? Then what will you do? I don’t even have—I’m not sure what I could—”

Seokjin hummed, his eyes still downcast as he processed Jeongguk’s words. He was the eldest of the group, and it showed. He was careful in everything he said, always taking things in stride—thinking deeply before speaking. “If you’re not the electi, then you’re not the electi. It’s simple. It’d be a disappointment because we’ve been searching for so long, but who is to say that you don’t have something inside you, the key to all this—to find the true electi? I know it’s so much to take in, and I can sense the uneasiness of your heart. Please don’t think that we overlook it, but I can also sense something else.”

“You can?” asked Jeongguk, watching the way Seokjin’s lips quirked up into another smile just at
The eldest nodded confidently. “Whether it’s a vita or simply your innocent heart, I’m not sure. The guardians didn’t come after us when we got here so soon because someone noticed your clothing. They came after us because your energy upset the equilibrium of this world. It’s like a lighthouse off in the distance within the darkness—hard to ignore.”

“Does that not make being with me dangerous?” Jeongguk’s throat had quickly become dry.

“Us being witches makes things dangerous. The nameless king’s reign makes everything dangerous,” Seokjin shrugged. “If a little light in this dark world makes it a little more dangerous, then so be it. If anything, it’s worth—oh! Finally!” he smiled wide, lifting his hands up as a fish emerged from the river wrapped in a cocoon of water.

His brows pinched together as he moved his hands slightly, causing the fish to move in midair and Jeongguk could only watch in astonishment as it slowly moved to land into the basket with the other three fish they had caught. “It’s not much, but I think this is enough to keep us going for a while—” he picked up the basket, turning around excitedly.

“Seokjin,” Jeongguk murmured, stopping the eldest in his tracks where he was about to jump down from the rock they were sat upon. Seokjin turned back to him, eyes questioning, giving the youngest his full attention. “I know it isn’t my place, and you may not want to hear it, but I’m really sorry about Hoseok. I know I didn’t know him, but no one deserves to lose someone so precious to them, especially not you.”

The water witch blinked back at Jeongguk for a moment as he stared a little wide-eyed and the youngest instantly felt he had stepped out of bounds. The sound of the river seemed to roar louder, and the wind whistled through the trees, clouding the atmosphere before Seokjin offered a kind smile. “Thank you,” he whispered before turning away once more and then stopping again. “For what it’s worth, Jeongguk, I’m happy that you were able to come here with us, electi or not.” He stepped down from the rock, basket clutched tightly to his chest with his words and Jeongguk could only stare back a moment before he smiled, already pulling himself up to follow suit.
“I’m stuffed!” Taehyung sing-songed as they found an unmarked path through the woods. He smiled wide, arms stretched above his head as he basked in what little sun was filtering through the trees above.

“You’re stuffed because you ate one of the fishes all by yourself while the rest of us had to share two,” Jeongguk retorted, flicking the back of Taehyung’s head, earning a pout which was painted with guilt in return.

“There was some fruit for everyone,” he defended. “Seokjin said it was okay!”

“Because you would have whined otherwise,” the youngest rolled his eyes, squinting them from the bright lights of above as he picked up his pace to keep up with the others. “I can’t wait until we can have a real meal.”

“A real meal?” Seokjin scoffed, throwing a raised brow over his shoulder at Taehyung and Jeongguk. “I’ll let you all forage for food next time. How does that sound?”

His question quickly shut up the younger two. Jeongguk had never had to live off the land and catching fish from a river with his bare hands didn’t seem like a task he would be able to accomplish easily—especially with the lack of magical ability between him and Taehyung.

They all soon stopped, and Namjoon was in the front, rubbing the back of his neck as he murmured to himself. “I’m not entirely sure of where we are,” he said glumly, offering an apologetic look to the others. “I’ve been trying to follow the trails, but there are far too many of them.”

“Oh, so we’re lost?” Yoongi groaned. “Should I send a crow up to see if it can find the correct path?”

“You know that won’t work,” Namjoon shook his head. “The paths will only change. The whole point of making it through the forest is to follow your heart—it’s supposed to lead you to where you need to go, but it’s not working.”
“It’s probably because your heart is uneasy,” Jimin chimed in, snaking his arm around Namjoon’s. “I can literally smell the stress coming from you and I have to admit, it’s not pleasant,” he chuckled, scrunching his nose.

“You can smell it?” Jeongguk couldn’t help but chuckle back, but he knew what Jimin meant. The blond witch’s senses were heightened due to his true form, even as a human.

“So, what should we do?” Seokjin stepped ahead of the rest of them, looking around at the various paths that led in different directions. “We mustn’t waste too much time here, lest we get lost.”

“The silvas!” Taehyung pointed ahead of them toward a tree where several of the creatures were sitting on one of the lower branches. “They can help us.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Namjoon whispered in a way like he didn’t want the spirits of the forest to hear him. “We will definitely get lost if we follow them. We’ve already spent far too much time in these woods, it’s starting to become dangerous.”

“More dangerous than being out in the open?” Yoongi smirked, cocking an eyebrow that had Namjoon rolling his eyes.

“Taehyung has a point,” Jimin murmured. “You of all people know that he has a way with the tree spirits, and if Yoongi isn’t arguing against it, that’s saying something.”

Namjoon turned back to the others, looking between them all for what seemed like an eternity before sighing. “Fine,” he said. “But we have to get going before the sun begins to go down. If we don’t make it out of the woods before sunset, we may as well forget seeing the oracle. In fact, we may as well forget saving our world.”

Taehyung jumped excitedly, his silver waves dancing in the breeze as he grabbed Jeongguk’s wrist. He moved forward, pulling the youngest with him, a smile on his face that was spread ear to ear. “So, let’s go! We’ll be out of here in no time!”

A few groans could be heard from behind as Taehyung tugged Jeongguk forward towards the path where the silvas were waiting. Taehyung paid no mind to the reluctance of the others as he trudged forward, practically bouncing on the balls of his feet.
The moment they reached just below the branch where the silvas were sitting, he looked up at them expectantly, nodding as if he was speaking to them with his hand still tight around Jeongguk’s wrist. Taehyung turned to look over his shoulder, momentarily at Jeongguk with a sparkle in his eyes before he looked back toward the others to make sure they were ready—once they started, they wouldn’t be able to stop.

“They’ll take us to where we need to go,” he grinned, all teeth on display, eyes turning to crescents —his grip never once faltered on Jeongguk’s wrist.

The sounds of the river grew distant as they began moving deeper into the woods, straying on and off different paths. It was hardly noticeable however as Taehyung kept murmuring to the youngest to never take his eyes off the foxes that were seemingly made of gold. He had said that if they lost sight of them, the forest would be able to do with them what it wanted.

The silvas were not only tree spirits but also enchanters of the forest. Taehyung would tell Jeongguk a few facts about them every now and then, though he never looked back. He said the forest would bend to every whim of the silvas, allowing those that followed them—as long as the creatures were willing—would be kept on a straight path that would surely lead them to where they needed to go.

Jeongguk was unsure of whether time moved differently in the forest, or if it had moved at all. It was growing dark already but as the thickness of the trees above only intensified, he figured that it was still quite early in the day.

“Are you sure we’re going the right way?” a voice asked from behind, and Jeongguk noticed that it sounded far away—and he was unable to identify to whom it belonged.

“Yeah,” Jeongguk said, watching Taehyung’s silver waves in front of him. “Are you sure this is the right way?” His question only earned a quiet hiss from Taehyung who shook his head in disbelief.

“You can’t question them,” he huffed, grip still tight on Jeongguk’s wrist.

The sound of the river was gone now. The trees above created a dark canopy of green with no light seeping through—their only guide was the glow from the creatures in front of them as some hopped along the lower branches with such grace—one that foxes of Jeongguk’s world would never have.

Down on the ground in front of them were three more, each turning their heads to blink back at the
boys expectantly, and Taehyung would nod encouragingly as if to say that they were having no trouble in keeping up.

The air between the trees was turning cool, much as it did at night as they would seek refuge around their small fire. The forest had fallen oddly silent. There were no sounds of birds or the other creatures that Jeongguk had yet to be able to identify, only the sound of footsteps over twigs and roots as the light continued to dwindle away.

“This is the wrong way,” Jeongguk heard, but he was still unable to identify the voice as he braced himself for Taehyung to turn around, surely upset that they were still doubting his method of making it through the forest.

“Don’t go any farther, you’ll only get lost.”

The voice was odd, higher pitched, distorted. It sounded familiar, yet brand new all at one time. Jeongguk couldn’t place it, yet it reminded him of home and that thought alone had him snapping around and freezing in his tracks.

He stared wide-eyed, feeling Taehyung tug at his wrist due to the abrupt motion. His mouth felt dry, no words would come—a feeling in his heart that made him feel sick.

“What on earth are you doing?” Taehyung asked, but his grip instantly loosened on Jeongguk’s wrist the moment he turned around to find that no one was behind them.

The chill of the air was seeping into his bones, his heart beginning to pound a little harder, causing his ribcage to feel as if it was about to snap as he blindly searched behind him for Taehyung’s hand.

“Where is everyone?” he asked, voice frantic and high-pitched.

He turned back to Taehyung who was frozen in place, face pale as if he had seen a ghost. His lips snapped open and closed over and over as he shook his head. “I don’t—” he stammered, his voice matching the desperation of Jeongguk’s own tone. “I don’t know, fuck—Jeongguk, I don’t know what to do.”

He gripped Jeongguk’s hand tight like he was terrified of losing his best friend amidst the dark forest. “Why don’t we just go back?” Jeongguk tried to force himself to be calm, he could hear the
shakiness of Taehyung’s breathing as it ghosted into the night air.

“We can’t go back,” Taehyung snapped, voice beginning to match his breaths. “The forest—we can’t do anything—the paths change, and they won’t be there.”

“Taehyung,” Jeongguk spoke as sternly as he could muster. “I need you to think, please. You know I don’t know much about how anything works here and now it’s only us. You want to find your brother and the others, right?” He could barely speak over the way his heart was pounding in his throat.

Taehyung nodded frantically, “I do—I just—I don’t ever make the decisions and now I did, and everyone has disappeared. I can’t—they were right when they said I can’t do anything right.”

Jeongguk scoffed, tugging his hand from Taehyung’s tight grasp to grip his face, forcing him to look at him. “Listen to me—” he ordered, gripping at the silver-haired witch’s cheeks more fervently. “I’m sure they’re not too far and you can help us to get out of these woods, okay? We don’t need the silvas because you’re here.”

He didn’t answer, only chewed on his quivering lip. “Let’s go, okay? You know you can do this, right?” He waited a moment for Taehyung to nod, though it was barely there, it was enough as Jeongguk reached to grip his hand once more. “And whoever said that about you, they don’t know what the fuck they’re talking about.”

The moment they turned and began to backtrack, Jeongguk noticed that the paths were, in fact, different. The sound of the river could be heard once more, but he knew that should be impossible as he hadn’t been able to hear it for some time.

The two paths before him were twisted and unlike the one that had brought them to where they were. The trees had somehow grown darker from above and the wind gusting in between them was nothing like the wind that he so knew, it had a bite to it that struck him like thorns each time it would pass through once more.

The only thing that remained constant as they trekked on was the way that Jeongguk held tightly to Taehyung’s hand.

“I’m sure they’re around here.” Jeongguk didn’t feel much hope in his own words. They were more for Taehyung than anything. “I’m sure—”
“Jeongguk,” Taehyung nearly whimpered from behind him, his hand squeezing the younger’s tightly. “It’s no use. The silvas—it’s all my fault—they tricked us.”

Jeongguk turned back, eyes wide in the darkness of the forest. “I thought you trusted them, Tae. I’m sure they’re going to meet us just outside the woods. Maybe the silvas took them on a different path than us?”

Taehyung only stared back at Jeongguk, and even amidst the darkness with no light peeking through the leaves at all, he could still see how distraught he was. “They’re tricksters. I was stupid to trust them. Namjoon was right. I should have listened to him—”

“Don’t,” Jeongguk snapped. “Don’t talk down on yourself like that. You’re brave and there are fucking worlds inside of you. I told you that, didn’t I? They’re going to meet us just outside—”

Taehyung’s breathing was growing to match the sporadic beating of Jeongguk’s heart, fear manifested in the action. The younger had to be honest, he wasn’t quite sure what to do, but he’d be damned if he didn’t try. “Come on,” he finally said after rummaging through every possible way to get them out of this mess. “Let’s go find the others. I promise we’ll find them.”

The promise alone had his stomach churning. Uncertainty was eating away at him.

He pulled Taehyung back in the direction they had come from, eyes searching for the glowing creatures, but they were nowhere to be found. The forest was dark and there was no light ahead at all.

“You know how the forest works better than anyone else, right?” He shook Taehyung’s hand in reassure. “We just have to believe.”

“I don’t know if I can,” Taehyung whispered, nearly breathless with hopelessness in his voice that practically tore Jeongguk’s heart to shreds.

“Sure you can,” he managed, trying to keep the shakiness of his own voice from giving his true feelings away. “You’re capable of anything.”
The words only earned a scoff as they moved back through the forest and the silvas were still nowhere to be found.

They walked blindly, tripping over branches and roots as they did their best to follow the sound of the river. Jeongguk figured that so long as they could hear it, they would be safe.

The sound of the river grew closer, and he tried to ignore the fact that it simply wasn’t natural as the path they were now traveling was the same one that the silvas had led them one—where the river had disappeared.

“Keep going.”

He nearly shuddered as he heard the voice again. The same one that didn’t belong to any of his friends, the familiarity somehow calming yet striking anxiety into his bones with ease.

“You’re on the right path. You will come face to face with something vast, but you must travel onward to make it out. Do not be afraid, no harm will come to you.”

“Please be quiet,” Jeongguk hissed, his mind swimming with the words that surrounded him.

“I didn’t say anything,” Taehyung defended quickly.

“Not you—you—wait, you don’t hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“The voice,” he whispered, moving forward a little faster.

“I don’t hear anything, Jeongguk. Are you okay? Is the forest getting to you?” Taehyung sped up, no longer slowing Jeongguk down.

“Must be—” he shuddered once more as the wind picked up, gusting violently through the trees.
They came upon a clearing, and even amidst the nearly nonexistent light, it reminded him of the one that sat just above the abandoned house back home. It overlooked the remainder of the woods, but there was something dark and vast just below nestled into the side of a hill across from the clearing.

It was strange to Jeongguk, for there to be such a tall hill in the middle of the forest when much of the land was practically flat with few inclines. What bothered him, even more, were the words of the voice he kept hearing.

“You will come face to face with something vast.”

Looking down at the hill, he squinted, trying to make out just what was before him. It had to be what the voice was speaking of.

He didn’t like the way that staring into the darkness was making him feel, even more so as the wind began to pick up—somehow feeling like it always had, and it began to calm him. But his mind kept wandering back to that voice. It was too familiar to him.

Perhaps it was the same voice he had been hearing in his dreams, but it sounded different every time it spoke to him.

“Jeongguk,” Taehyung stammered, an urgency in his voice as he attempted to pull Jeongguk away from the edge of the plateau. “I don’t like this. I don’t have a good feeling about—”

“Be quiet,” he snapped, quickly regretting taking such a tone with his friend who was so laced within fear. He would have to apologize to him later, but for now, they had to figure out how to move forward. His mind swam through every possibility, wondering if they should trek down the side of the clearing or not.

Suddenly, the tree branches behind them lit up and he turned quickly, eyes widening as he took in the dozens of silvas that lined the branches—all chirping and speaking to one another in a language that he did not know.

He looked to Taehyung expectantly within the newfound golden glow, but the elder’s eyes were only widened in fear as he listened to the incessant chattering of the creatures. More and more continued to appear along the branches and the ground before them, but Jeongguk couldn’t take his eyes off Taehyung.
“We’ll never make it out of here,” Taehyung whispered, his hand letting go Jeongguk’s to fall limply by his side. “They said we belong to them now.”

“W-what?” Jeongguk turned, completely disregarding the silvas. His hands were shaking, mouth running dry as he took in the grim look across the silver-haired boy’s face. “Y-you can understand them?”

Taehyung nodded slowly, his Adam's apple bobbing harshly as he swallowed. “I’m so sorry, Jeongguk.”

There was a loud crack that came from behind them. The entirety of the area lit up even more so in bright white light and Jeongguk turned around, only to become completely frozen where he stood.

From the dark vastness he had been staring into, a white light was emerging and moving slowly from within the cave nestled in the hill. He could only make out a large shadow as it moved across the visible wall of the cave. His heart stammered as he waited, blindly searching for Taehyung’s hand, riddled with regret. There was nothing he could as he watched the creature from the cave come out fully into the open, the light emitting from its body nearly blinding, but he could not look away.

“Taehyung—” he stammered, whole body shaking as he stared on toward the light trying to make out the details of what was before him. There were more points of the long antlers that were wrapped within vines than he could count. A majestic face adorned with dark eyes that matched the escaping darkness of the forest as well as a long snout. But what took him even more by surprise was that what was apparently a stag that stood nearly ten feet tall due to its antlers was adorned with wings that folded against its back with long white feathers that matched the ivory of its fur.

Jeongguk swallowed thickly, unable to tear his eyes away from the terrifying yet blindly beautiful creature. “Taehyung,” he whispered, hardly able to hear his own voice over the deep breathing of the creature before him. “Tae—what is that thing—”

Taehyung gripped his hand again, holding tightly as if in a warning. “I’ve only heard myths, I’ve never seen him—that’s Ethalus, the father of the forests—”

“Silence!” the creature spoke in a voice that echoed through the trees and Jeongguk unknowingly leaped backward out of fear, dragging Taehyung along with him. He was unsure if he was more startled by the loud voice or the fact that the creature had actually spoken.
“Who is this that you’ve brought with you, child of the forest?” the peryton spoke, taking another step forward as he neared the short cliff they were standing upon, his chest lifted high as well as his head in a prideful manner.

Jeongguk licked his dry lips, looking to Taehyung, feeling that the creature was speaking to his friend. Taehyung looked back at him, shaking his head.

“Have the silvas caught your tongue?” the creature mused. “My name is Ethalus, father of the twelve forests of Amaranthine, and I’ve asked you a question, little one. It is in your best interest to speak when spoken to.”

“He’s speaking to you,” Taehyung whispered, his voice nearly getting lost in the wind.

Jeongguk stepped forward, searching through every fiber of his being for a sliver of courage before he finally forced out any type of words. “My name is Jeongguk. I don’t come from this land, and I’m unsure of whom this child of the forest is that you speak.”

“I know all of that, Jeongguk,” Ethalus said. “But you have yet to answer my question. Who is this that you’ve brought with you?”

“This is my best friend, Taehyung. Please, we mean no harm, we are only trying to find our friends and make it out of this forest alive—”

The peryton suddenly erupted in a peal of laughter that practically shook the ground on which they were standing. “My dear child,” he spoke more fondly this time. “You are in no danger here. The moment you entered the forest, you’ve been under the protection of the spirits that reside here. Your heart called out once you came here, you’ve found where you belong. We just were not expecting you to have someone with you.”

“My heart?” Jeongguk could hear the way it was beating in his ears. “I’m not sure what you mean, we’re just trying to make it to the village at the bottom of the western mountains—”

“Yes, your heart,” Ethalus interrupted. “My dear child, does the wind not speak to you?”
There was that question again, the one that Jeongguk had yet to find the answer to. Clearly, his face
was showing his confusion as the peryton chuckled softly.

“Have you not yet learned to listen to her words? She is the one who has led you here.”

Jeongguk froze once more. The voice he had been hearing in the forest, the familiarity of it that
caused a shiver to run through his spine. The words which had followed him through the darkness
and led him here, they belonged to the wind.

“Jeongguk, what business is it that you seek at the base of the western mountains when you’ve
stumbled so easily into this home that was created for you?” Ethalus asked. “You are indeed the
child of the forest, I could sense you had returned home the moment that you arrived in
Amaranthine.”

Home? Taehyung had told him they were going to his real home the moment before they traveled
between words. The words of the peryton were nothing but riddles upon his ears. He had only ever
known one home, and that was back in the other world in the town nestled within the valley.

“If I may,” Taehyung finally spoke hesitantly since he had not been the one to be spoken to. He
bowed his head before continuing. “Jeongguk has come with me and my friends from a land far
away from here. We believe him to be the electi.”

“The electi?” Ethalus blinked back at them, seemingly amazed by some sort of moment of
realization. “The child that was sent away all those years ago?”

“That’s right,” Taehyung nodded, his words more confident this time. “He fits well with the
prophecy. From his age to his stature, and the wind speaks to him. He has a heart that has not been
seen by this world for centuries.”

The creature hummed quietly, his eyes darting back to Jeongguk. “My dear child, has your vita
awoken?”

“My v-vita?” Jeongguk shook his head in disbelief. “No, I’m just—I’ve never—I’m perfectly
ordinary.”

“My dear child,” Ethalus stepped forward once more. “You are far from ordinary. You have a
courageous and pure heart. And while you belong to the forest as she belongs to you, you still have much to learn. Again, I will ask, what business do you seek in the western mountains?"

“We are seeking the oracle that lives within the tallest peak,” Taehyung answered. “We hope that they will be able to tell us whether Jeongguk is the electi or not.”

The forest fell silent for a moment before Ethalus spoke again. “Very well,” he said. “We had hoped that would have returned home for once and all, Jeongguk. But given the circumstances that our world has found itself within, it may not be long before our precious forests cease to exist. Whether or not you are the true electi, that goes beyond my own powers for I am simply a servant of these woods and have been for thousands of years. Should you return to us once the war has been fought, we will be grateful—and even if not, you still have this divine land’s blessing. Use the forest as you will, allow the silvas to guide you—they may be sly, but they mean no harm. Go forth now and please help to save this land.”

The peryton bowed his head, and Jeongguk was in awe as Taehyung smiled wide at him. “Ethalus,” the younger spoke softly, though desperately. “The wind—how do I—I’m so unfamiliar with all this and I don’t know if I can—”

“My dear child,” Ethalus’ voice was that of a lullaby as he stretched out his wings, standing tall. “Accept her into your heart. You needn’t do anything else. You are a child of these woods. She will be your guide and guardian. Open yourself to the endless possibilities of this world and something unimaginable will be at your fingertips.”

Though the words of the father of the forest were far from plain and simple to Jeongguk, he still somewhat felt that he understood just what Ethalus meant as he nodded absentmindedly, swallowing heavily. “And our friends—do you know where they are?”

“Do not fear. They wait for you in the outskirts of the woods. There you will find the path to Spiorus. There are many trials that await you should you venture to the highest peak of the mountains. It will be your greatest task in your time here. Do not lose yourself,” Ethalus answered. “Allow the silvas to guide you and pay no heed to their weightless murmurings. They are on your side just as much as I. But promise me this, that you won’t tell a soul of what you’ve seen within these sacred woods. As your dear friend has said, we are of myth and nothing more. But we do hope that one day you will return to us, but for now, you must go.”

Before Jeongguk could utter another word, the light from Ethalus’ body radiated like that of the sun before disappearing all at once, leaving nothing behind in the wake of the peryton other than feathers and the faint echo of his voice.
“I’m still—” Jeongguk whispered, eyes squinting as frail light of the sun was beginning to finally shine through the leaves of the trees. “I’m still so lost, Taehyung.”

Taehyung turned to him, a soft smile tugging at the edges of his mouth as he grasped Jeongguk’s shoulders tightly, forcing him to look at him. “You have worlds inside of you.”

The words he had said to Taehyung were now being directed at him, and how light he felt—believing for the first time since he had arrived in Amaranthine, that they might be true.

The silvas led them with ease out of the forest and the sun was dipping below the horizon. The breeze that rustled through the trees now behind them was the most calming song Jeongguk ever heard as they emerged from the woods.

Just ahead sitting on several rocks that sat out in the open were their friends whose heads were snapping up at the movement from the forest, faces washing over with relief as they each jumped down from the rocks to run across the fields toward them.

“What took you all so long?” Jimin nearly cried as he threw himself into Taehyung’s arms. “We thought for sure we had lost you forever. Yoongi was about to come back in there after you all but the silvas don’t much like him,” he giggled. “They wouldn’t stop nipping at his ankles.”

Seokjin, Yoongi, and Namjoon watched with fond eyes as the two hugged it out and Taehyung assured each of them that everything was okay until their eyes landed on Jeongguk, and he could see that their eyes were full of thousands of questions.

“You look different,” Seokjin said, wide-eyed. “What on earth happened to you in there?”
“I heard her,” he smiled wide, heart jumping in his chest at the first step forward of him understanding just who he truly was.

“Heard what?” they all asked in unison, confused.

“The wind.”

“Told you just to listen,” Yoongi snarked, a smirk curling at the edges of his lips.

“We should get going,” Namjoon interrupted. “It’s getting late and the village is just on up ahead. We can make it there before morning, and we need to find a place to rest, to prepare ourselves for what’s to come.”

They all nodded, exchanging anxious glances between one another before setting off on their way.

They set up camp in the open field with only a small fire in the middle of them, the protection enchantment glowing blue above them as they explained to Jeongguk a little more about the prophecy, and all steadiness he had found within his heart was quickly gone.

Chapter End Notes
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

“The wind speaks to him.”

“The wind?” he asked quietly. “The wind speaks to the world.”

Chapter Notes

it's been a hundred years, but this chapter is long af so i hope that makes up for it.

possible TW's:
  some mentions of blood
  and we revisit Jeongguk's less than savory relationship with his mother.

see you on the other side. uwu

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They arrived at the gates of Spiorus just as the sun reached its highest point in the sky. The journey had taken three days, just as they figured, but the time did not allow for the anxiousness of their hearts to dwindle.

Jeongguk felt they had been staring at the bronze gates of the village for some time and understandably so. The air that hung around the other witches was dense with worry and hesitation like they were hoping some alternate path would open before them, though it never did.

The breeze had picked up considerably, surely trying to calm Jeongguk’s nerves as he kept close in mind the words of the peryton he had met within the woods. Ethalus had told him to open his heart to the wind, but how could he open his heart to something so mysterious and invisible to the eye?

He hadn’t heard the voice of the wind since he had left the forest and was beginning to wonder if he would ever hear her chilling, yet calming voice again.

Namjoon was standing in front of the others and they all looked at him expectantly, waiting for him to make the first move, to say something—to do anything at all. He only stood just as the others were, fists clenched by his sides as he watched the rays of the sun from above reflect off the gates.
“No magic,” he said, turning to look at the other five. “They’ll know what we are the moment we step beyond those gates. We mustn’t give them any reason to be fearful. Please stay close to one another in case things go awry.” He turned towards Seokjin. “Have a clavis ready in case we need to leave.”

“I need time to prepare one,” Seokjin’s brows furrowed. “We—”

“We don’t have time,” Namjoon interrupted. “I’m sure they already know we’re here. The trees that surround the village are their eyes. I know you can do it, we’re counting on you.”

“I’ll do my best, but let’s go in there with the hope that there won’t be a need for an escape plan,” the eldest said, trying to lighten the mood.

Namjoon nodded, adjusting his cloak in a way as if he was making sure he was presentable. “Jeongguk, Taehyung, I want you two to stay close to Jimin.” His eyes turned towards Yoongi. “I need you to—”

“Stay at the back and be quiet,” he muttered. “Trust me, I know.”

The violet-haired witch nodded, the hardness of his face never once softening as he swallowed thickly. “Let me do the talking.”

They all nodded in agreement as they gathered in their aforementioned groups, none of them saying anything as they pushed in through the gates of the village.

Stepping into Spiorus was much like stepping into a whole new world for Jeongguk. The base of the mountains was lined with trees and a vast forest the ascended towards the peaks, but right in the middle was a small settlement, completely enclosed. The trees seemingly stood much taller than the other two forests they had trekked through on their way to their destination as they loomed overhead enough the hurt Jeongguk’s neck to look.

There was something different about these trees. His mind wandered back to when it was mentioned that even if they bypassed the village, the trees would give them away. There was an odd, omniscient power about them, causing an uneasiness within the youngest’s very core.

Spiorus was not exactly what Jeongguk would have referred to as a village. In his mind, a village
would be a more rundown and smaller—but that’s not what his eyes beheld. There were buildings made of fine wood, some standing nearly as tall as the trees. Many of them had gold or blue trim around the windows and doors.

The village was set up in a large circle and in the middle stood a tall wooden statue of a peryton and something about seeing such homage paid to the creature relieved Jeongguk’s heart, but only slightly.

Everything was relatively quiet, and even more so as the few onlookers who were outside stopped entirely what they were doing the moment the witches stepped farther into the village. There was a quiet murmuring amongst them, several would point before quickly averting their eyes as if they had surely come across some omen.

Off to the side were a line of shops, and even with the constant staring of the residents, Jeongguk’s eyes widened at the large array of food at each stand—his stomach-churning since he hadn’t eaten a real meal in all his time in Amaranthine.

“Everyone, stay close,” Namjoon murmured over his shoulder as they pressed farther into the village.

Each time they would pass a new group of villagers, more words would spill into the dense air and Jeongguk could only catch a few here and there.

‘Storm witch.’

‘Water.’

‘Evil.’

The words far from settled well with him, and even more so as he looked toward the head of the group where the two boys that each insult was about were. He couldn’t understand how evil could be associated with them when he had only seen nothing but beauty by their hands.

Suddenly, the murmurings came to an abrupt halt, making Jeongguk feel somewhat at ease, but that feeling soon dissipated the moment he noticed the group of people standing on the steps of the largest building in the middle of the village.
Everyone around the circle of the village was looking to them and back between the witches, the glances sending shivers up Jeongguk’s spine. The people that his eyes beheld were nothing short of beautiful, yet daunting. Their pale hair and even paler complexions were like nothing he had ever seen before in his life. Each person was adorned with long hair that descended their backs, creating cascading waves of ivory and pale gold. They were all dressed in greens that rivaled the trees of the forests, their cloaks much nicer than those that the witches were adorned with.

“Tae,” he whispered, trying not to draw attention to himself the moment he took in the features of the people before him. “What are—”

Taehyung practically hissed, an order to keep him quiet like the question that he was trying to ask was some sort of taboo. His eyes snapped towards his friends, wide with questions but Taehyung only shook his head. “They don’t have a name, but they’re a sacred people, feared— they demand respect.”

“They look like elves,” Jeongguk whispered, earning a wide-eyed look from Taehyung. “You know, from that one movie we—never mind.”

“That’s—” Taehyung sputtered, “We just call them the unknown—”

Their words were stopped in their tracks by Seokjin waving his hand behind him, shooting a look like daggers over his shoulder at the younger two.

Namjoon was still at the head of the group, his head bowed slightly and the rest of them quickly followed suit, though Jeongguk wasn’t sure why he did so as well. The air that hung around them was eerie, an odd sort of silence that was suffocating and made him feel as if his nerves were on fire. He had to fight the urge for his head to snap up the moment a deep voice like that of sandpaper filled the air.

“Why is it that you all have come here?” the man asked, though his tone made it seem like he knew just why they were there, searching to hear it from the lips of the witches themselves.

“We have come to seek permission to travel to the peak of these mountains. We are in search of the elders of this sacred village in hopes that they might see the potential within our humble group. Our journey is not one for simply our own good, but the entire world of Amaranthine’s as well,” Namjoon spoke confidently, his head still bowed.
“The elders are before you, boy—” the voice spoke once more. “Do you dare not meet our eyes out
of respect or for the simple fact that you are witches and cannot bear to look upon us due to the
inhumane nature of your own race?”

“Sir,” Namjoon still kept his head bowed. “We are not in alliance with the traitorous witches that you
speak of. We only ask for passage to the mountain top to speak with the oracle.”

The man scoffed. “I am Nivan, the elder of this village, and you will address me as such, or have you
forgotten your manners? I should expect no less of a witch.”

“We promise that we mean no harm,” Seokjin spoke, his voice calm and confident as he stepped
forward, daring to look into the eyes of the man at the front of the group. Following the lead of the
eldest, Jeongguk chanced to look up, his eyes widening at the face he was met with, unable to
comprehend how the elder of the village could look as if he was no older than himself. “We simply
want to seek advice from the oracle on the prophecy regarding the electi, we believe that he is here
with us.”

“The electi?” Nivan scoffed as he took a step forward with narrowed eyes. He looked between the
boys as if he was sizing them up, trying to find the truth of Seokjin’s words, but really, it was only a
hunch on their part. “Witches have tried to deceive us for many years,” he shook his head. “They
don’t care what it costs to obtain what they want. Why should we expect you to be no different?”

“Please,” Namjoon pled, taking a step forward and the townspeople all responded by taking a step
back. “We come with pure hearts and intentions. We know of the history that this village has faced
against witches, but we are not like the others. I speak on behalf of this group when I say these
words. You will find no ill will here.”

Nivan was silent, glancing between the boys once more before turning toward the group of elders
behind him. They murmured amongst themselves, shooting odd glances over their shoulders every so
often before the leader finally turned back towards the witches, his brows furrowed, face serious.
“Very well. We have agreed to allow you into our home for further questioning, but if anyone makes
any sort of odd move against us—well, we will see to it that you will not see another day.”

The words alone had Jeongguk nearly choking on the lump that had risen in his throat. From the
looks of it, the ones before him seemed that they could do away with them at the drop of a hat, but it
had him wondering—if they had faced a band of witches before that were a threat to the village, why
they just hadn’t done away with them? Perhaps they had. Once again, Jeongguk’s head was reeling
with endless questions.
Nivan stepped aside, earning cautious looks from those that stood around him as well as from those that surrounded the witches. He held his hand out, face never changing from that like stone as he beckoned for the six boys to make way into the large wooden building he was standing in front of.

Jeongguk kept close to the others, mainly Taehyung as he often found a feeling of security from his best friend, but the silver-haired boy quickly looked back toward Yoongi and offered a hesitant smile—like he was trying to speak to his brother without uttering a word.

The moment they were inside the building, it was like they had entered another realm. The inside did not at all match the outside, the room looked like it belonged in a castle. There was a long rug with an intricate design woven into it that took up more than half the space on the pristine wooden floors. The ceilings stood tall, with beams that held up its weight, completely covered in breathtaking carvings. Each beam seemingly told a different story, from the settlement of the village, and there was even one with a creature that Jeongguk recognized—the peryton. He wondered if it was Ethalus, or if perytons were not uncommon within Amaranthine.

Nivan took a seat on a large chair with a back that nearly reached the ceiling, somewhat resembling a throne but one that had more craftsmanship put into it. He crossed his legs as he looked between the witches, and up close, Jeongguk found that the man was more intimidating than he appeared out beneath the bright rays of sunlight. Even within the darker lighting of the hall, there was seemingly a glow radiated from the waves that adorned his head. His eyes were sharp, features set into a seemingly proud scowl.

“Very well,” he finally said, voice booming, but it was more so due to the fact the hall was so quiet that even the drop of a pin would have been heard. “Tell me once more why you all are here.”

“Nivan,” Namjoon bowed his head once more before promptly turning to find Jeongguk’s wrist and pull him toward the front of the group. The younger’s heart stuttered, he felt sick to be front and center in the presence of such an intimidating being. “We believe that Jeongguk is the electi. We have no hard evidence and are merely going off the hunch of one of the others. We are simply seeking the advice of the oracle on this matter and—”

Nivan held his hand up and Namjoon fell silent instantly.

“The electi? You believe that this,” he looked Jeongguk up and down, his skin felt as if it was on fire. “boy is the child of prophecy? On who’s beliefs?”
“Mine, sir—I mean, Nivan,” Taehyung stepped forward, his breathing unsteady as he took place beside Jeongguk.

“And who are you to make such assumptions?” Nivan asked, his attention entirely fixed on the silver-haired witch.

“My name is Taehyung,” he bowed his head. “I come from a line of green witches. I am the son of Moonsik and Hana.”

Nivan scoffed. “That doesn’t answer my question. I want to know how you believe that you can make such assumptions about an incredibly delicate prophecy when I don’t even sense a shred of magic from within you.”

Jeongguk watched the way that Taehyung’s brows furrowed at the remark, surely hitting him deeply within. “I understand your concern on such a matter,” he finally looked back up to meet Nivan’s gaze. “Whether I have any magic within me or not is a mystery, but something drew me to Jeongguk and I can confidently say that he is special, unlike anything this world has seen for years.”

“And what makes you say such a thing?” Nivan’s gaze rolled back to Jeongguk, eyes entirely fixed upon him as he waited for Taehyung to reply.

“The wind speaks to him.”

Jeongguk’s heart nearly stopped as he watched Nivan’s brows raise at Taehyung’s words. “The wind?” he asked quietly. “The wind speaks to the world.”

“It’s true,” Jeongguk stammered, feeling like Nivan was waiting for him to speak. “I don’t understand much, in fact, I didn’t come from this world, but just recently, the wind spoke to me. She spoke beautifully, and I think she may have been trying to persuade me to listen to her all my life.”

Nivan sat forward, his elbows resting on his knees as he casually cupped his chin in his palm. His long waves fell closer to either side of his face. “Very well,” he murmured. “You have my blessing, but don’t think that they won’t call to us should you try anything funny on your way up the mountain—that is if you can even make it that far.”

It was like a wave of relief flooded through the entirety of the group at the words of the elder. They
all began exchanging glances between one another, but Jeongguk’s eyes never left Nivan. He watched as a man stepped up beside of where he was sat, leaning down to whisper something in his ear and it was almost as if the air in the room shifted, and the younger’s heart dropped as Nivan’s gaze seemingly burned right through Namjoon and Seokjin. His eyes were looking past all those in front of Jeongguk and he felt that he was surely staring at him.

He swallowed heavily, feeling like sand was dragging down his throat. His heart sped up, fearful to meet Nivan’s gaze, feeling as if it would strike him down right where he stood.

After too long of an awkward silence, Jeongguk searched within his soul to find courage, even if it was only a small amount. His eyes flickered up to meet Nivan’s, heart instantly stopping in his chest to learn that the elder’s eyes were not fixed upon him. He too was seemingly being looked right through.

“You,” a change in the elder’s tone was apparent, like ice. His tone had dropped from one of forced understanding to pure disgust. “Step forward,” his voice rose to nearly a bellow, practically echoing off the wooden beams of the building above.

Jeongguk did not dare move from where he stood once again, nor did he dare to look behind him, having a feeling of who Nivan was speaking to.

The sound of shuffling could be heard behind him, low and quiet before a hand braced his shoulder in a silent question to ask the youngest to move aside.

The raven waves of Yoongi’s all too unkempt hair was what came into Jeongguk’s line of sight first. Though he couldn’t see the look on Yoongi’s face, he could tell that his jaw was ticked in apprehension as he moved forward, nearly disappearing in front of Namjoon and Seokjin due to their difference in stature.

Jeongguk wanted to see. He wanted to know how Yoongi was able to carry himself with such ease as he stood as the foreman of the group. It had become such a difficult position to hold with confidence up to this point.

“How dare you,” Nivan spoke swiftly, voice like thunder and Jeongguk wondered if he were of magic descent for he had seemingly become an entirely different entity right before his very eyes. His whole appearance exuded rage. “How dare you hide at the back of the group like the coward that you are. How dare you believe that you can step foot into this village and ask for a blessing—” his words had Jeongguk’s eyes widening with each one, confusion creeping into his core. “And how dare you step foot into this place that your clan has terrorized for centuries when we could recognize
you from miles away.”

Namjoon stepped forward and Seokjin grabbed for his shoulder to hold him back. The room was silent once again and something heavy and ominous dangled within the air.

“The nerve of you all,” Nivan scoffed, and with his words, Namjoon shrugged Seokjin’s hand from his shoulder and placed himself between the elder and Yoongi.

“Please,” he said hesitantly, his hands showing as a sign of surrender—that they meant no harm. “Yoongi is no longer associated with the group of which you speak. He left them long ago—”

“You will only speak when spoken to,” Nivan snapped and Namjoon instantly stepped back. “Do you really expect me to believe such nonsense? You’ve brought a draconian witch into our midst and have dared to ask for a blessing to travel to the peaks of these mountains—to visit the oracle which the draconians have fought for centuries to try to get to. If this was all part of some ruse to get that wretched group what they’ve wanted for years now, then consider the blessing revoked.”

“We are not associated with such witches, as a matter of fact, no witch throughout Amaranthine has claimed them for many centuries—” Yoongi raised his hand and Namjoon’s words instantly stopped in their tracks. Even from behind, Jeongguk knew the look that Namjoon was receiving from the raven-haired witch, knew that the violet-haired boy’s eyes were wide.

“I am no longer apart of the group that has plagued your village. I have been cast out on my own accord because I do not agree with their ways,” he spoke carefully, each word thought through meticulously before it left Yoongi’s lips. “It’s true that I once ran with them and followed their way of life, but that part of my life is behind me, and it’s something I regret with every part of me. I would rather have Amaranthine swallow me whole before I would ever go back to them.”

Nivan’s eyes narrowed as he listened to Yoongi’s words. He pulled himself up from his seat before stepping toward the band of witches. “I’ve seen you here,” he spoke sharply like ice filling the air. “Do not think that you can deceive me for I know the blood that stains your hands. I’m not sure just what you’re after but know this, I would have no problem leaving you to rot in one of our cells. As a matter of fact, it would probably be best if we were to take you in now, hold you for ransom—”

“What is going on here?” a frail voice asked, and the entirety of the room turned toward where the group of elders was standing to fall upon a small woman with long hair of white that nearly came to her knees. Even from afar, Jeongguk could see the fine wrinkles that painted her every feature, looking nothing like the others that stood around her, for she had so clearly aged.
“Aesara,” Nivan said with a bow of his head as he stepped aside. “I’m sorry if we have disturbed you—”

“You did not answer my question, my son,” she interrupted, holding her hand up.

“These *witches* have come to ask for our blessing to travel up the mountains, but they had the nerve to come into a midst with one of draconian descent by their side,” he spoke like each word was poison within his mouth, full of disgust.

Aesara stepped forward slightly, and the others around her reached out their hands to help guide her, though she shooed away their touches. “Did you not hear his words?” she asked. “They were so very difficult for him to say and yet they seem to have gone in one of your ears and out the other.”

“Dear Aesara,” Nivan spoke, head still bowed. “I do not mean any disrespect, but I’ve seen him here before. We cannot simply go off his words.”

“Then bring me to him,” she said, and the one who had whispered to Nivan and alerted him of Yoongi’s presence earlier was reaching out for her wrist. He carefully led her toward the witches, and as she came closer, Jeongguk could see that her eyes were clouded, a murky blue that rivaled dark lakes where the bottom could not be seen.

Yoongi stepped back as Aesara grew closer, but Namjoon gripped his shoulder to stop him, nodding toward him in reassurance.

The entirety of the room stared wide-eyed as Aesara reached a frail hand out in the air as her fingertips came close to Yoongi’s cheek, and the moment they made contact, a gasp left her lips and her brows furrowed, a sorrowful look spreading over her features.

“Things beyond your control hold a great burden on your soul, blind to what’s before you, only looking at what’s behind you. Grudges bind heavy lies wrought against you, a shapeless frame surrounds you by blood-covered hands that point fingers. Met with a choice that is not your own, one amongst you may cause you to fall,” she spoke in a shaky voice, like fear had taken over her entire body before her hand fell away from Yoongi’s face.

Her clouded eyes seemingly searched for the raven-haired witch and she frowned, eyes glistening as she shook her head. “My dear child,” she said. “Amaranthine has not been kind to you.”
Yoongi’s hands were shaking by his sides as he stepped away, nearly backing into Seokjin. Jimin reached for the raven-haired boy’s hand, yet Yoongi only continued to stare ahead of him like he had seen a ghost.

“This boy,” Aesara spoke, turning back toward Nivan, “he has one of the purest hearts I have ever seen. These witches mean no harm, as a matter of fact, they may very well be our only chance at taking back this world.”

“Do you believe what she said?” Jeongguk asked as he tore another piece of bread from the loaf Taehyung was holding. The elders had provided them with food for their journey, though told them that anything that happened to them once they left Spiorus was beyond their control.

“Who?” Taehyung asked with a mouthful of bread as he looked over at the youngest, his eyes squinting due to the harsh light peaking through the trees.

“That lady—Aesara—do you believe anything she said?” his mind kept replaying over the words she had spoken, the look on her face as she touched Yoongi’s cheek was fresh in his mind. He didn’t know why it bothered him, especially when he hardly understood a word.

Taehyung hummed, tugging off another piece of bread. “That woman is one of the great prophetesses of Amaranthine. I’ve heard of her, it wouldn’t surprise me if she was at least a thousand years old,” he chuckled as Jeongguk’s eyes widened. “People travel from all over to see her. It’s much easier to get to her than to the oracle. But yes, I believed what she said—” he sighed. “I can’t help but believe it because I know it’s true. There are portions of Yoongi’s past that I’ve lived through with him.”
“Is there—” Jeongguk stammered, brows knitting together. He already knew that the question he wanted to ask was out of bounds, but Yoongi was at the back of the group, so he felt a little at ease when speaking to his best friend, hopeful for some answers. “Did Yoongi do something bad? I mean—I don’t think he’s capable of hurting someone—just the look on the elder’s faces—”

Taehyung frowned. “It’s not my story to tell, even if I did live through portions of it.”

“But what did she mean with what she said?” Jeongguk knew he was pressing too far into the matter, and his heart sank as Taehyung’s expression faltered further. “I just want to know if Yoongi is in danger. I need to know if we should be trying to protect him.”

“Jeongguk,” Taehyung cut him off before he could say anything else. “We’re all wanted witches here, we’re all in danger. Don’t overthink it. Hopefully, we will have all the answers to our questions soon enough.” He finally smiled, and Jeongguk felt a rush of relief, having been afraid he had stepped too far out of bounds. Though Taehyung was his best friend, he never wanted to hurt him, and clearly, it was a subject that he would learn more about if the time were to come—if it were right.

“Speaking of answers,” Jeongguk forced himself to perk up, trying to raise the spirits of the rest of the group. Even though the air had changed significantly, and for the first time, it didn’t feel as if they were walking with a boulder on their shoulders, he could tell they were still anxious about what might be to come as they moved farther up the mountain. “Is anyone else going to ask the oracle anything?”

He turned, hoping someone would entertain him for a moment. He hoped to learn more about the group he was traveling with, the friends he was growing to care for so much.

Jimin was the first to respond with a shake of his head and a smile that stretched ear to ear as he reached to grip Namjoon’s and Yoongi’s wrists. “Have everything I need!” he chirped.

“What about you?” he turned toward Taehyung who only shrugged as he shoved another piece of bread into his mouth. Jeongguk frowned before looking up to the front of the group where Seokjin was walking, paying no mind to the other witches.

Jeongguk looked toward the front of the group. His eyes found Seokjin’s dark hair as it moved back and forth with every step he took. The elder was not quiet often, and for him to be so far ahead of the group was unsettling.
Jeongguk moved forward, leaving the others to carry on about different questions they could ask of the oracle, but if there was anyone that he was most curious about—he wanted to know what Seokjin might ask.

Seokjin had his hand wrapped tightly around the strap of the bag he was carrying, the bag that was a paradox of all things—one that was never-ending. It gave him the clothes on his own back, seemingly bottomless and it made no sense because it was hardly bigger than the two palms of his hands.

“What about you?” Jeongguk asked the moment he was walking in stride with the eldest.

Seokjin’s eyes were fixed forward, eyes nearly glazed over. It seemed the youngest wasn’t the only one struggling with sleep. Jeongguk wonder if he too had strange dreams, if the fear of them was what kept him up at night.

He was still quiet as they continued to walk. It was almost as if they were miles ahead of the rest of the group, the sound of the grass of the forest bed and twigs snapping beneath their boots was all that could be heard. The eldest’s brows furrowed as he hummed. “I’m not sure,” he answered after some time.

Jeongguk licked his lips, dancing around the words. The constant realization always dawning on him that the boys he was growing close to kept many secrets, though it was clear to him that the others knew much about one another, seeing as they had spent most of their time together for a while. “You could,” he began, glancing back over his shoulder to ensure that no one was eavesdropping. “Ask them about Hoseok.” It was such a delicate subject.

Seokjin’s mouth straightened into a flat line, and Jeongguk instantly felt like he had overstepped bounds. He always felt like he was overstepping bounds. “I’m not sure if I’m ready,” he finally whispered, but a smile tugged at the edges of his lips as if he had come to some odd realization.

“But wouldn’t it be nice to know the truth?” Jeongguk tugged at the neckline of his shirt in a haphazard attempt to close it, suddenly noticing how cool the air was turning as they moved higher up the mountainside.

“Truth is rarely pure and never simple. Perhaps I’m merely a coward,” he sighed.

Jeongguk took a moment to mull over the eldest witch’s words. “That may be true,” he offered, “but
wouldn’t it be better than to spend your whole life wondering ‘what if’ than just facing the truth?”

Seokjin’s brows furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“I know I’m in no place to say much,” Jeongguk shied away. “But I think it would be more cowardly to spend your life not knowing and constantly wondering than to face the truth head-on.”

“You may be right,” the same reassuring smile that the elder so often wore had returned for but a moment. “But what if I’m more afraid that I already know the truth?”

“Closure,” Jeongguk smiled. “You would have closure and freedom. You wouldn’t feel the need to make those circles anymore. It wouldn’t be easy, as you said, it wouldn’t be pure nor simple, but you would have closure.”

Seokjin stopped in his tracks. The elder who was always strong, and on his toes, looked at Jeongguk for the first time with something so dark in his gaze that the younger felt as if it was piercing his limbs, and even his heart. “What if I’m not quite ready for closure? The idea that—” his voice quivered as he glanced back like he was making sure that the others were far enough behind them, like he didn’t want to show an ounce of weakness before them. “What if the idea that Hoseok is still somewhere in some world, whether it’s here or dimensions away, what if that’s the only thing that keeps me going on this wretched mission? I don’t know that I would have any will to go on, and want to save this world if he weren’t here—if I knew for certain that he was gone.”

Jeongguk only smiled. “You’re strong. You may think that you wouldn’t have the strength to go on, but I know that you would. You would never allow your friends to suffer.”

Seokjin’s eyes widened in a way like Jeongguk had uncovered some secret treasure before he nodded. “You’re exactly right.”

“And if I were you,” Jeongguk nodded, beginning to walk again as the others drew closer. “I wouldn’t miss out on this one chance to ask the question that’s so clearly been haunting you.”

“Perhaps I will ask,” he smiled.

“You all need to keep your wits about you,” Namjoon called from behind as he tugged Jimin along by the hand. “Yoongi says that the trials change every time, so no one will ever be able to give away
the secrets of the path that we’re one. There might be one right before us without us even knowing until it’s too late.”

“So, we don’t know what to expect?” Seokjin’s face finally softened as he rolled his eyes.

“Exactly,” Namjoon’s brows furrowed. “So, keep your eyes ahead, and Seokjin—”

“I know, I know,” Seokjin shook his head. “No worries, I’ve prepared everything in case something bad were to happen. I won’t let us become stuck here. I won’t allow us to fall into harm’s way.”

“Er, everyone—” Taehyung had stopped in his tracks, voice barely audible over the conversation between the others. “I think we’ve passed this tree before.”

Everyone was quick to stop, nearly skidding to a halt as they turned back to look at the silver-haired witch. “What do you mean?” Yoongi asked in a hiss as he stepped toward the tree that Taehyung was pointing at.

Taehyung stepped forward as he carefully held his hand out toward the grayish bark of the tree. His slender fingers pressed against it in a way as if he thought it would crumble beneath his touch as they traced along the ridges of the trunk. “This knot,” he said. “I noticed it before, I thought it was peculiar because of the way it was shaped. It caught my eye the first time we came through here, and then the second, and then—” he huffed. “The third.”

“We’ve walked the same path three times over and you didn’t have the decency to say anything?” Yoongi groaned, his brows furrowing and nose scrunching like he had a bad taste in his mouth as Taehyung nodded glumly. “Well, isn’t that just great?” he asked, turning toward the other witches. “How the hell are we supposed to figure out where we’re going if this damned path only twists and turns, forcing us to go in a circle?”

“Maybe it’s a trial,” Jimin chimed in as he took a step toward Yoongi, his hands reaching for the material of his cloak. “It would make sense, right?”

Namjoon only shook his head. “I don’t think so. The trials are ever-present from what I’ve read. Yes, as Yoongi said, they change their form each time someone treks on this path, but they’re obvious once you reach them. They’re meant to test wit and skill. This is no different than every set of woods we’ve roamed through until now.”
Taehyung glanced around with a loud sigh. “And there are no silvas to guide us.”

“These woods are different,” Namjoon shook his head. “These woods belong to—”

“The unknown race,” Yoongi finished his sentence, but his features were still hardened.

“The trees,” Jeongguk said, stepping back toward the circle that the other witches had formed amidst their discussion. “They mentioned the trees—you—the trees. They might—”

“If the trees had anything to do with it, we wouldn’t have gone in a complete circle,” Yoongi shook his head. “We were following the trees, to begin with, following the narrow path that weaves in and out of them.”

“Then it’s not the trees?” Jeongguk questioned, feeling like he had no place within their conversation since he held such little understanding of Amaranthine.

Yoongi shook his head. “If it was meant to be easy, dozens before us would have made it here—the others, my—if it was easy, the oracle wouldn’t be so sought after. Nothing worth obtaining comes to those seeking without effort.”

What had seemed to be getting closer to them only felt further away. It was as if with each step they took, they were shoved back ten. If the paths themselves were tricksters if there was nothing to guide them, how would they ever reach the top of the mountain, Jeongguk wondered. How he wished that he could hear the song of the wind, to have her voice fall upon his ears in his time of need, but since he had last heard her—she had yet to show herself again.

He was on the verge of cracking. Afraid that everything before had been some kind of fluke, though Ethalus had spoken to him in a way that rendered him confused, yet hopeful. But since he hadn’t heard the voice of the wind since that night, he couldn’t help but doubt himself.

“You’re thinking too hard,” Taehyung’s voice interrupted Jeongguk’s thoughts as a hand gripped his shoulder.

“I just wish that I could help,” Jeongguk answered, and Taehyung only smiled.
He smiled the same smile that he always did. It was one of reassurance and carelessness all wrapped in one like he believed that everything would always fall into place no matter what. But all Jeongguk could think, was how could he be so selfish to worry about himself when he knew the way that Taehyung was tormented by words often spoken to him.

His friend’s vita had yet to awaken, yet he was always sure that they would find a way through anything, even if there was nothing that he could do to help.

“Just relax,” Taehyung whispered, and even with such a hushed tone, it drowned out the bickering of the other witches as they fought to look for a path. “She will speak to you. They say that the tongue is the most stubborn part of our body, always speaking and unable to hold back thoughts that flicker through our minds. But I don’t believe that. You need to open your heart,” his fingers dipped further into Jeongguk’s shoulder. “Give your heart to her.”

“I don’t—” Jeongguk stammered, heart sinking. “I’m not sure how Tae.”

“How did you do it back in the woods?” Taehyung asked and Jeongguk nearly froze. It was almost as if the others had disappeared and only he and Taehyung were left on the narrow path of the woods. The world felt as if it was closing in as he thought over the question that had come from lips that had yet to release a smile that Jeongguk had grown to find refuge within.

“I was scared. You were—we were lost, and you were scared. I wanted you to be able to see your brother again, to see our friends—” he licked his dry lips and Taehyung nodded, harshly pressing his index finger to Jeongguk’s chest.

“Worlds,” he whispered, tapping against Jeongguk’s sternum. “There are worlds here. She’ll come to you just as she always does, but you must allow it. My best friend, see,” he smiled wide. “He’s amazing. The wind—this invisible entity that we can only feel and not see, yet we know she’s there, all-knowing and can see anything, my best friend can speak to her.”

“What if—”

Taehyung shushed Jeongguk as his hands cupped his cheeks. His eyes were dark, piercing, and full of every answer that Jeongguk ever felt that he needed. Vast darkness with millions of stars glistening within them, and even more so, as he dared to look back into Taehyung’s gaze, he saw the fields of wheat.
“Close your eyes,” Taehyung whispered, and Jeongguk did.

It was as if he was now the only one there, and the doubt that had laced itself within his heart was long gone. He was completely alone, and usually, that would scare him, but this time it didn’t. He felt calm with the picture of Taehyung’s gaze painting itself within every cavern of his mind as he breathed deeply and—

“The knotted tree,” she spoke like a lullaby. “You cannot simply follow the path. The knotted tree will be your starting point.”

“But—” Jeongguk gasped, feeling confused and overwhelmed all at once as his eyes opened. He was still alone. The area around him was drenched in the warmest of orange hues from the sun above as they seeped in through the leaves, almost as if they melted right through them. He glanced around, finding the very tree that Taehyung had pointed out once he was sure they had been moving in circles.

“The path before you is not always the best one to take. Sometimes we must go on an unmarked path and rewrite our fate.”

“But where will I go once I’ve passed the tree?” Jeongguk looked around, feeling as if he should be able to see to whom the voice belonged, but still, there was no one around him.

“Just follow my voice.”

Jeongguk gasped, feeling every ounce of breath leave his lungs as his eyes snapped open. The others were there once more, surrounding him with looks of worry and concern, all except for Taehyung who nodded his approval.

“Well?” he asked.

“That was strange,” Jeongguk wasn’t sure just why he chuckled with his own words. “I could see everything, all the trees, the paths, the sun, but—” he breathed deeply, feeling as if he sounded mad with each word he spoke. “You all weren’t here. It was just me and—”

Jeongguk watched as Seokjin looked over to Namjoon, a slight smirk tugging at his lips as he nodded. Taehyung stepped aside as he extended his arm, inviting Jeongguk to take the lead of the
group for the very first time. “It’s all yours.”

It was a brand new, yet strange feeling all wound into one as Jeongguk swallowed, taking his place at the front of the group—eyes set toward the tree before him. Suddenly, the path that was seemingly lost was as visible as ever as he stepped past the knotted tree. Somewhere they had passed by multiple times now was being shown to them, and he couldn’t help but smile as he listened to the wind rustle the branches above.

“Everyone, stop,” Namjoon’s hand was in front of Jeongguk within an instant, stopping him from taking another step. The rest of the group stopped without question, but Jeongguk tried to figure out what was happening as he glanced around.

The woods around them had since turned darker, but he assumed that it was just from the sun finally deciding to hide away for the day. It was in that moment, however, between the look on Namjoon’s face and the coolness that had suddenly taken over the air, that Jeongguk noticed just how ominous everything had become.

He licked his dry lips, daring not to question as his eyes hesitantly followed to find just what Namjoon was looking at. His heart fell to his gut at the sight as it sent shivers straight down his spine. In his short-lived time in Amaranthine, he had seen many creatures. Most had been beautiful up to this point, and the one before him was no different—only there was something so incredibly haunting about the yellow eyes that were staring directly at him, no, through him.

Because of the darkness, it was difficult to make out just what he was looking at. He felt frozen in place, a lump rising in his throat for within the dark he could barely make out a sly smile that made him want to turn around, never to look back.

“Play with me,” the being or creature, just what it was, Jeongguk couldn’t tell, but its voice was like
that of velvet, sultry and sweet—intoxicating in a way that had him feeling the need to get closer, to reach out. He shifted forward slightly, but Namjoon’s grip against his chest only tightened.

It was then that he realized, between the hardness of Namjoon’s face and the chill of the air that he knew just what this was. After countless hours of walking through the woods, they had finally come across their first trial.

“We only want to pass,” Namjoon spoke slowly, a low timbre in his voice as he tip-toed between his words. “We seek the oracle.”

“That is all good and well,” the voice spoke, “but to pass, you must first win my game.”

A quiet scoff spilled into the air from behind Jeongguk, one that he had heard enough times now to know to whom it belonged. It was Yoongi, and he stepped forward but Namjoon only shot him a silent look of warning over his shoulder. “And if we’re to lose?” Yoongi asked, voice thick.

It was then, that even within the darkness, Jeongguk could see a sly smile practically glowing within the dark. It made him feel sick, realizing just how immense the danger and implication behind this being’s words were.

A soft laugh, sinister and dark echoed through the lower branches of the trees as they rustled beneath the weight of the creature. As it stepped out into the small bits of light, whether they were from the moon or the sun at this rate, Jeongguk had truly lost track of time—the sight of the creature caused him to forget the exhaustion that plagued his bones.

Slinking along the lower branches before gracefully jumping to the ground—Jeongguk was sure that this creature was the somehow the most terrifying of them all simply from the presence that it exuded. Atop its head were long ears like that of a cat, though this creature was like no cat that Jeongguk had ever seen before. Its face, somehow human, yet beastlike all at once as it flickered back and forth, almost as if it was wearing a mask—appearance changing slightly with each passing moment.

It sat tall on the ground, nearly taller than any of the witches with a long tail that whipped wildly back and forth. Even more so than its long claws that protruded from large paws, its eyes were what was most damning of the creature’s entire appearance.

“Should you lose,” it spoke once again, voice like a song. “You will simply stay here with me
Jeongguk wondered if something like that could be true, and even more so as Namjoon nodded. “Deal,” he said, voice low and eyes focused on the creature. “What’s the game?”

The youngest looked at the leader, wide-eyed and concerned. He didn’t even know what the trial would be, yet he was diving headfirst without abandon, without concern. He wondered for a moment if he held no concern for the others, but the Namjoon he knew would never put his friends in danger. That thought alone was easing Jeongguk’s spirit as the cat-like creature grinned once again, face morphing slightly as its eyes shifted to a darker gold.

“A cloud is my mother, the wind is my father, my son a cool stream, and my daughter is the fruit of the land. A rainbow is my bed, and earth is my final resting place,” the smile that was overtaking the creature’s face with each word it spoke had Jeongguk’s skin crawling. “What am I?”

Jeongguk did his best to sift back through every word that the creature had spoken. Riddles were never his strong suit, never something that he had much interest in and he could only hope that one of the others had an answer.


They each looked back at the creature, holding their breath as they waited to learn whether the answer that Namjoon had given was right. The being tilted its head, looking between the witches as if it was sizing them up before nodded, albeit a little reluctantly. “That is correct.”

There was a collective sigh throughout the group, and the way that the air had eased significantly could only last for a moment because surely there was more. Jeongguk wasn’t even from this world, and still, he knew there had to be more.

“The foolish man wastes me, and the average man spends me. A wise man invests me, yet all men succumb to me. What am I?”

“Time,” Namjoon said quickly and confidently before any of the others even had a chance to hold a second thought. Jeongguk knew that Namjoon indulged in books, especially with how knowledgeable he was about the journey to the oracle. But the man before him was quickly showing Jeongguk just how quick-witted he was, making him thankful to be by his side. He knew he could never make it so far without him, perhaps none of them could.
“That is correct,” the creature spoke with another tilt of its head, voice dropping low. There was an odd frustration to its tone as if it was seemingly upset that its game was being won so easily. “This is the final question.”

Namjoon nodded, and Jeongguk felt confident.

“There are four siblings in this world who have all been born together. The first runs,” the creature’s eyes flickered to Seokjin for a moment between its words, “and never wearies. The second eats,” its eyes moved elsewhere, somewhere behind Jeongguk, “and is never full. The third drinks yet is always thirsty.” Golden eyes suddenly found the youngest before continuing to speak, and he felt dizzy beneath such a stare. “And the fourth sings a song forever.”

Suddenly, the sounds of the forest were all they could hear as the silence of the group and the creature fell between them. Namjoon was tense, even from where Jeongguk stood beside him, he could feel it. The other two questions had been answered flawlessly, yet he hesitated on this one and Jeongguk felt as if he was choking from the possibility of losing the creature’s game.

He watched its face flickered once more with a cock of its head, seemingly taking on more humanistic features, he was terrified to know just what this thing before him was.

“Four siblings?” Namjoon asked quietly, his hand moving to grip Jeongguk’s wrist as he pulled him until he was standing behind him. He swallowed heavily enough that Jeongguk could practically hear it as Namjoon’s brows furrowed. He was hesitating, and the creature only smiled wider, figuring their game had finally been lost.

The words made no sense to Jeongguk, and his heart sank as he watched the long tail that had been coiled around the creature’s body become unfurled, whipping wildly back and forth. The tail far from matched the rest of the creature, it was rough and ridged, clashing with the rest of the fur that adorned its body. At the end was something that he was sure he didn’t want anything to do with, resembling the stinger of a scorpion.

He was holding his breath, afraid that the game had finally been lost before a voice broke the silence from behind.

“Water, fire, earth, and wind.”
As quickly as the tail had become unfurled from the creature’s body, it was recoiling back around it like protective armor, piercing eyes shifting between the witches before the creature simply disappeared—becoming nothing but a vapor and the air felt light immediately.

The darkness still lurked, and Jeongguk was sure that it was night now before they each turned back to find Taehyung smiling wide, proud of himself for giving the correct answer and they all sighed loudly.

“How on earth did you know?” Namjoon asked after pulling Taehyung into a tight hug to show his thanks. “I was sure we were goners. I was terrified that I had failed you.”

“It’s nothing,” Taehyung chuckled with a cocky roll of his eyes. “That thing looked at Seokjin as it spoke of water and that was nearly enough to know, but then it spoke of the wind and looked at Jeongguk and I knew.”

“It knew what elements reside within us,” Namjoon shook his head. “This place is far more than I ever thought it would be. It’s clearly something that all those books could have never prepared me for.”

“But how did you guess that’s for sure what it was talking about?” Jimin asked, ruffling Taehyung’s hair. “We’ve no fire or earth witches in our group.”

“I just guessed. I knew that’s what it had to be, mostly because of how Jeongguk is slowly harnessing a grasp on the wind,” he shrugged nonchalantly.

“That’s right,” Seokjin chimed in, wrapping an arm around Jeongguk’s shoulders and smiling wide. “I wouldn’t doubt it if his vita were to awaken soon.”

Jeongguk’s eyes widened. It was something he hadn’t fully thought about, always living his life as ordinary. Something was terrifying, yet exhilarating wound within the words of the eldest. Was there truly a chance he was actually one of them?

The confusion was something he was growing accustomed to, but to stand face to face against possible evidence that he truly had powers residing within him was different. The feeling it gave him was something, unlike anything he had ever felt before. Like the looming darkness, he had felt over the last few years had finally begun to slowly fade away.
“I’m proud of you,” Taehyung grinned wide. “I knew there was something special about you.”

Two trees stood tall with dark leafless branches before them. Each branch intertwined with one another, creating a devilish pattern as one Jeongguk had only seen from trees through his love for films. Hanging from the branches, seemingly extending to the very top were keys and each one held a different shape and color. There were more than he could count, and possibly even more than he could see.

In between the wide trunks of the trees stood a door that glowed blue, it’s light rippling like water over the nearby vicinity. The two large trees on either side were not the only ones, for beside each one was another tree and then one more until they continued onward to make a wall.

The path they had been following led them right to the door, and they each just stared up at the keys in astonishment as they looked over the daunting task before them.

The creature they had come face to face with before was far more dangerous, but within this task resided a sense of hopelessness because they had no idea how to reach the keys or if any of them could even open the golden lock.

They were beginning to feel restless, not knowing what time it was and feeling like many days had passed.

“I can use my crows to get the keys,” said Yoongi, but there was something irksome in his voice, knowing that this task would take longer than they wanted.

“Or Riven could do it,” Taehyung chimed in. “Though I doubt he would enjoy if we woke him from his nap.” The words earned a forced chuckle from the rest of the group. The small dragon that had set up camp within the pocket of Taehyung’s slacks was practically forgotten for much of their
journey due to the hibernation-like sleep the creature would fall into.

“I feel like it’s just too simple,” Namjoon frowned.

“We won’t know until we try, and I’m not planning to wait here much longer. We need to find a good place to set up camp for the night,” Yoongi shook his head as he stepped forward already extending an arm. Suddenly, a crow shot out from the sleeve of his cloak and was quick to land on his shoulder.

The others simply watched and held their breath as Yoongi whispered to the feathered creature and it was not even a moment later that the bird took off for one of the top branches, perching itself upon it as it looked between the wide array of keys.

The bird barely had time to ground itself upon the branch before they place it had found to rest began to move. The branches beneath and above practically changed shape right before the eyes of the witches as they slithered like vines and moved to curl themselves around the crow. Yoongi was fast to snap his fingers, saving the creature before it met its demise, but everyone simply sighed—they knew there was a different way.

“Just as I figured,” Namjoon raised a brow at Yoongi. “It’s not that simple. We’ll have to figure out something else.”

“Well, it isn’t like we’re on a time crunch,” Jimin shrugged before yawning. “Though, the sooner we make it through, the better.”

“Does anyone else have any bright ideas?” the purple-haired witch turned toward the others, and even he looked as exhausted as Jeongguk felt. The younger could practically feel the aching of the other witch’s bones in his being.

“Not a damn one,” Jeongguk murmured, wishing there was more that he could do, but the simple act of following the wind to where they were had taken nearly all his energy—still struggling to harness his power.

“I have an idea,” Seokjin spoke up in a slightly hesitant voice. His eyes shifted to Namjoon. “I know I can’t always get it to work, but I can do my best. Can you make a cold storm?”
Namjoon scoffed, shaking his head. “It’s too warm out here—”

“Our souls know when we need one another,” Seokjin interrupted. His tired eyes were fixed upon Namjoon with such vast intensity that even Jeongguk could feel it. “Please,” the eldest pled quietly, “please. Making it through these trials, making it to the oracle—it could very well be my only hope for ever finding out what happened to Hoseok. I refuse to get stuck here. I refuse to waste another goddamn moment feeling like I’m useless—I just—”

Namjoon held his hand up to stop Seokjin’s words within their tracks. He only stepped forward without a word, placing a hand upon his friend’s shoulder. He nodded, eyes searching over the exhausted witch’s features.

“I’ll do my best,” he whispered. “But that is all I can do.”

“And that is all that I ask,” Seokjin replied, taking a step back before breathing in deeply as if he was trying to collect himself.

“I need everyone to step away,” Namjoon spoke with a thunderous voice, such a tone contradicted the shaking of his hands as the other witches only did as he asked. “This could get messy.”

“What does he mean?” Jeongguk whispered to Yoongi who had pulled Jimin close to his side.

“Manipulating the weather is one thing—to create storms, that is his vita, but to shift it completely, forcing nature to practically become an entirely different season, it could lead to chaos before any of us ever blink,” Yoongi swallowed thickly, his brows furrowed as his eyes never left Namjoon.

Jeongguk watched in astonishment with the way Namjoon gracefully raised his hands from his sides until his arms were stretched above his head. The sky, hardly visible through the thick branches, was clear as far as Jeongguk could tell—though he was still unsure whether it was night or day. Namjoon’s eyes were fixed above them like he was searching through what little of the heavens he could see—as if he was tracing out a map or attempting to memorize everything above them.

“Caelum superius, exaudi me,” he whispered under his breath. They were words without any meaning to Jeongguk, yet they sent shivers down his spine as a violent gust of wind shot through the branches above. Bits of the bark above began to crack, threatening to rain down onto the witches below before a sharp crack of thunder broke through the quiet atmosphere of the forest. The chills that had etched themselves over Jeongguk’s skin had yet to leave, only tingling more violently over
his limbs as the air suddenly shifted and dropped to a near-freezing temperature.

From between the branches above, Jeongguk could see purples painting the sky as lightning struck a nearby tree and the thunder that ensued once more shook the ground. Yet, through it all, even with the wind nearly knocking him from where he stood, Jeongguk was in awe of the storm witch.

“That’s it!” Seokjin called over the wind. “Keep it up!”

With the water witch’s words, Jeongguk’s eyes finally left the mess of violet waves that danced wildly in front of him to find Seokjin speaking softly with words that were drowned out by the unsettled atmosphere that raged above.

Countless times now, he had seen Seokjin perform many tricks with his hands. He had seen the way water would bend to his every whim, but as the rain began to pierce through the branches of the trees, he only held out his hands, collecting the water within his outstretched palms as he stepped toward the door.

Nearly as fast as the lightning above, Seokjin placed his hands over the lock and suddenly, the storm ceased, and everything fell quiet—almost deafeningly so.

“Please work,” he whispered out, “please work.” He chanted the words like a mantra or some sacred prayer, but at that moment, Jeongguk couldn’t be sure just who Seokjin might be praying to, for the only gods he saw were right in front of him as they bent the world to their very needs and whim. With a loud click, the lock fell to the ground and the door was opened, and Jeongguk was sure he had never seen anything more brilliant in his life as he watched the way the key Seokjin had forged out of ice was already melting to the ground as the atmosphere shifted back to nothing but suffocating warmth.
They set up camp only moments after passing through the door. Their bodies practically collapsed to the ground after Yoongi threw up a quick barrier to protect them. They rested amongst the dirt of the forest floor beneath a glowing red from the enchantment.

The trees in the area were much sparser, and they realized they were growing closer to the top of the mountain. They had no idea just how many more trials awaited them, only that their time of seeing the oracle was growing closer.

For the first time since Jeongguk had arrived in Amaranthine, there was hardly any conversation before sleep for each witch was too tired to speak any more than necessary—knowing they would need to gather their strength for the remaining journey.

The forest around them was quiet in such an odd way that it was almost haunting, but what was even more odd to Jeongguk was the fact that he was met for the first time in a while with a deep sleep full of nothing but silence and darkness.

“It’s difficult to maneuver when there is no set path,” Jeongguk pouted. “I’m sorry, everyone, I just don’t have a hold on this whole ‘speaking to the wind’ thing.”

“It’s alright,” Seokjin chuckled, stepping up to grip at Jeongguk’s shoulder. “Your vita hasn’t fully awoken yet. None of us had a proper grip on our magic once it began to manifest. Namjoon used to set fire to the tops of trees.”

“He what?” Jeongguk practically choked as he smiled wide.
“Don’t act as if you didn’t flood a few places when you were still trying to harness your powers,” Namjoon rolled his eyes but he couldn’t help but return a cocky grin toward the two at the front of the group.

“I had a good excuse!” Seokjin exclaimed. “Had I known that I could pull the water from your storms before we realized we were one another’s connected then I wouldn’t have been messing with glasses of water and multiplying them!”

“Sounds like you’re trying to somehow make it my fault,” Namjoon shook his head. “I kept telling you time and time again to just try, yet you simply were too stubborn and caused us to be banned from a place or two.”

“I understand now!” Jeongguk pointed his finger toward the two.

“About time that you understand something,” Yoongi joked from the back of the group with a purring Jimin lounging over one of his shoulders. The younger had awoken in such a state that morning curled up between Yoongi and Namjoon, refusing to allow the dark-haired witch to return him to his human form.

“What is it that you understand?” Seokjin asked, eyes wide.

“Why witches are hated,” Jeongguk joked. “Especially if you all are going around and flooding places and catching treetops on fire.”

“That isn’t why we’re hated,” Seokjin huffed with a slight pout.

“He isn’t entirely wrong,” Yoongi chuckled glumly. “As I said, at least he understands something.”

Jeongguk couldn’t help but roll his eyes, though he knew that Yoongi meant no ill will by his words. He was growing accustomed to the nitpicking of the elder, and he felt that he was falling into line with the others. He finally felt like he had found somewhere he belonged without having to fear anything that was in front of or behind him for the very first time.

It wasn’t even a moment later that the youngest noticed that one particular witch was missing from their conversation. He turned to find Taehyung alone toward the back, head slightly down and Jeongguk slowed his footing until he was at the back of the group with his best friend.
Taehyung’s eyes stayed downcast as his silver waves moved with each step he took, his feet practically scootching across the rough ground of the forest. Riven had finally awoken from his slumber, having perched himself atop Taehyung’s shoulder as he watched the movements of the younger.

“Glad to see he’s finally awake,” Jeongguk mused, tilting his head slightly to try and catch Taehyung’s eyes.

Taehyung only smirked slightly, eyes never leaving the ground.

“Is everything alright?” the youngest asked, not exactly wanting to take pride in the way that he could read Taehyung like a book, having noticed he was only becoming quieter with each step they moved up the mountainside.

It was then that Taehyung’s head finally shifted up, a huge smile taking over his face—but even then, Jeongguk knew it was fake and he couldn’t help but frown. “Everything is wonderful,” he whispered, eyes squinting in the light from above where the trees were becoming sparse. “We’re almost there.”

“Yes,” Jeongguk shrugged, “the journey is going well, but that’s not what I was asking. Are you alright?”

Taehyung’s eyes shifted down again. His eyes searched over every bit of ground that his feet made contact with like he was searching for anything at all to say—something that would please Jeongguk.

“Tae,” the youngest sighed, “please be honest with me.”

The silver-haired witch’s shoulders slumped slightly, but his eyes moved to meet Jeongguk’s knowing gaze once more as he shook his head. “It’s just difficult,” he said. “It’s hard to watch your friends be amazing witches, but it’s even harder to see your best friend who didn’t even grow up in our world hone his magic so easily. I’m happy for you, I just can’t help but feel a little jealous.”

*Jealous?* The word sounded odd to Jeongguk. When they were still back in his world, he had spent of his time being nothing but quietly jealous, yet in awe of Taehyung all at once. He always envied the way that his best friend could live so freely and without a care, but to learn that such things were eating at him—he almost felt guilty. He never wanted to hurt Taehyung in such a way.
“Jealous?” Jeongguk scoffed. “Of me? Please, I have no earthly clue what I’m doing. This magic, it’s may as well have been given to an infant. You are worlds above me.”

The words didn’t pull a smile from Taehyung like Jeongguk had hoped, only a halfhearted tug at the corner of his mouth that was quick to fall into a frown. “What if what the elder said is really true?” he shook his head. “What if there is no magic inside of me? When I met you, I knew you were going to be amazing—I can’t explain just what pulled me to you, but I knew from the moment I laid my eyes on you that you were going to be able to do wonderful things. Seeing you prove me completely right has me questioning if I’m even a witch or not.”

“You are,” Jeongguk gripped Taehyung’s arm to stop them in their footing. His eyes searched over every feature of Taehyung’s face. He wished more than anything that he could take the worry that was so clearly plaguing his best friend. “You are as much of a witch as anyone, if not more. Who cares if you can’t do showy and elaborate magic? You showed me nothing but magic when I met you and you brought me here. You saved me from a life where I had no idea where I was heading—it’s because of you that I found somewhere I belong.”

Taehyung’s eyes widened slightly, lips parting like they were molding themselves around thousands of different words, but Jeongguk only pulled him into a tight hug before he could speak. He prayed silently that he could at least relieve Taehyung of a little of the doubt he was bearing.

“I’m forever grateful to you,” Jeongguk whispered.

An oddly placed cave along the mountainside and they had found themselves in front of it. It was almost as if there was nowhere else to go, no other path that went around it—only eerie darkness stared back at them.
The six boys were reluctant. They were unsure of what was within the cave, figuring that surely another trial awaited them. But something about the vast abyss in front of them was more unsettling than the last trials they had come face to face with.

“I don’t like the look of it,” Seokjin murmured as his eyes skimmed over the jagged rocks just across the mouth of the cave.

“What do you all think could be in there?” Jeongguk asked, nearly choking on the question.

“Could be anything,” Namjoon spoke calmly. “A creature would be my guess.”

“What if it’s a dragon?” Taehyung asked, turning towards his brother.

“Now that would be just lovely,” Yoongi rolled his eyes as he finally tugged Jimin from his shoulders and placed him down on the ground. He held his hand out to Seokjin who tugged Jimin’s cloak from his bag before draping it over the cat and tapping with his fingers, and with a small burst of light, the tiny creature was replaced by the blond-haired witch who rubbed at his eyes sleepily all while tugging his cloak tight around himself.

“I was enjoying my nap,” Jimin whined as he reached for Namjoon’s hand to help him from the ground.

“If it’s a dragon, you know we might need your other form,” Yoongi swallowed thickly, his eyes trained upon the entrance of the cave. “The only dragon that’s on my side these days is Riven.”

“Maybe we should just go in there with the hope that I won’t find myself in my other form,” Jimin forced a sleepy smile toward the black-haired witch. “I wouldn’t want anyone else to get hurt.”

“What if it’s full of traps?” Taehyung stepped to the front of the group with Riven still sitting atop his shoulder. “We should cast a protection enchantment around us just in case.”

“I think whatever is beyond this entrance could easily break through a protection enchantment,” Namjoon chimed in. The violet-haired witch looked back at the entrance. His eyes seemingly skimmed over every surface before he took a deep breath and turned back to the group. “I’ll go first.”
“Namjoon,” Yoongi stepped to the front of the group. “If there is a creature in there, though I’m excommunicated, there is a better chance of me being able to take it down. You won’t be able to conjure up storms in there.”

“What do you expect to do?” Jimin hissed, moving to step in between the two. “Are you going to peck it to death with your crows? I can’t afford to lose either of you, let me go first. I’m the best bet we have—”

“No,” Seokjin interrupted. “It’s a cave. There’s bound to be water in there and I could at least hold it off long enough for the rest of you to pass through.”

The entirety of the group fell silent, all exchanging loaded glances between one another within a pregnant quiet.

“I’m the eldest,” spoke Seokjin once again, his eyes serious, voice unwavering. “I’m the most experienced with the strongest hold on my magic. I’m going first and that’s final.”

“He’s right,” Taehyung nodded. “He’s our best bet, but you need—”

“A clavis, just in case, I know,” Seokjin chuckled. “I’m sure it’ll be fine. We’re already so close. We can’t be scared now.”

“Alright,” Namjoon nodded. “But if anything happens in there, you get out the second you can and don’t worry about us.”

“You really think you all would be able to escape without me?” Seokjin chuckled. “Very funny.” He turned with his words and stepped toward the cave. “But if something does happen, Jeongguk, I need you to do me a favor.”

The youngest’s eyes widened with the eldest’s words. “Of course,” he replied. “Anything at all.”

“I want you to ask the oracle my question. Can you do that for me?”

“It’ll be the first question I ask,” Jeongguk forced a smile, only for it to falter the moment his eyes
met Seokjin’s over the eldest’s shoulder. “But you’ll be there with us, so there’s nothing to worry about.”

Seokjin nodded. “You’re right, I will be.”

Seokjin stepped farther into the mouth of the cave. Each of his footsteps over the rocky surface of the ground bounced off the roof, echoing out into the open. The others could only watch in silence and hesitation—seemingly each holding their breath as they waited for a signal or sign.

Suddenly, just as Seokjin was entirely within the cave, though still visible, a barrier formed to cover the entrance. The barrier resembled the protection enchantments that were often placed over their camps, though this one glowed white—not matching the aura of any of the witches.

Seokjin turned and nodded once more, taking a deep breath before descending farther into the cave until the others could no longer see him.

The witches looked between one another, though Namjoon’s eyes stayed fixed on the barrier that glowed brightly from the dark cave.

“Only one can go at a time—” he whispered. “There isn’t a creature in there, but something far worse. I might—I think I know what it could be, and we should each prepare ourselves. The moment the barrier comes down, I’ll go, and we’ll have to proceed one at a time. Just—” he turned toward the others, “try to prepare yourselves.”
Namjoon, Yoongi, and Jimin had already gone and Jeongguk was holding his breath. He knew that the barrier would flash and disappear at any moment and then it would be his turn. He and Taehyung had played rock, paper, scissors to see who would go first. It was Jeongguk’s first time losing the game since he had taught the silver-haired witch to play.

It felt like he had been staring at the barrier for hours, and perhaps it had been that long. Each passing moment only growing heavier as it weighed Jeongguk down as he stood in silence alongside his best friend.

The fact that the barrier would disappear, the two weren’t sure just what it meant. They had no way of knowing if the trial had been passed by each witch before them or if they had fallen into trouble, unable to conquer.

“What do you think is in there?” Jeongguk asked, realizing how shaken up he felt as his nerves began to eat away at him. Taehyung had taken a seat upon the ground beside Jeongguk as Riven curled up close against his neck, having fallen into another deep sleep.

He looked up at the younger, eyes squinting as the sun found its highest peak in the sky just above the break in trees. He finally stood just before curling a hand around the tiny dragon and placing him back in the pocket of his slacks. “I think you’re worrying too much,” Taehyung answered. “It could indeed be anything in there, but we’ve got a strong group.”

“You’re right,” Jeongguk nodded quickly.

“If any of us should be worried about getting stuck in there, it should be me,” he chuckled with a tilt of his head, his silver waves falling messily into his eyes. “That’s why it’s best if I go last—if I get stuck, you all can keep going without worry.”

“You think I would leave you like that?” the younger frowned with a sigh before his eyes snapped back to the cave, attention stolen by the bright flash of light as the barrier disappeared.

It was his turn.

“I would come back for you without a second thought,” Jeongguk whispered. “Even if it meant neither of us could continue.”
“You would?” Taehyung asked in a way as if the younger’s words were a surprise to him.

Jeongguk couldn’t help but stare at his best friend, his heart hammering in his ears. Did he truly think that he would be alright with leaving him?

He sighed, wishing he could say more—knowing that Taehyung was still heavily burdened by many things that he couldn’t understand. He wished he could take it all away.

“You really think I could live without you?” Jeongguk laughed before his eyes darted to the ground. In his mind, he couldn’t imagine a life without Taehyung.

His head snapped back up, eyes fixed on the cave. The others were surely waiting for him just on the other side, though he had no idea what he would find between the entrance and the exit. But one thing he knew for sure, was that he would without a doubt, see Taehyung on the other side and when he did—once they reached the oracle, he hoped he could tell his best friend everything he ever wanted to say.

He could only hope that he would be able to find the right words.

“I’ll see you on the other side,” Jeongguk smiled wide at Taehyung before hesitantly stepping forward.

“Is that a promise?” Taehyung asked from behind him just as his feet met the slippery, hard ground of the cave.

Jeongguk turned back to be met with silver waves as they danced within a harsh, yet calming wind. He could only hope that the song of the breeze would calm Taehyung’s heart as it did for him.

The barrier closed once more to separate the two.

“It is.”
There was an odd familiarity within the cave. Perhaps it was the sound of water dripping within the distance, or how cold everything suddenly felt. It reminded him of where he often found himself within his dreams. He could remember it so vividly, the damp ground like a rock beneath his body, the sounds of iron clinking in the far-off distance, a faceless voice.

The voice, he had come to assume that it belonged to the wind—though different, it would be no surprise because her voice changed often. But there was no calm within it, only unsteadiness as it spoke in broken questions with a bitter tongue, like the words they were forming was out of pure desperation.

But since he hadn’t been met with the voice anymore in his sleep, he could only assume that it was the wind and she had finally gotten the answer she required.

Being within the cave, however, was like being in another dream, though he was able to walk about and could only hope he was about to take the correct path as he was faced with a fork that parted in two opposite directions.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He had made a promise to Taehyung that he intended to keep as he focused.

“Please show me the way,” he whispered.

But he was only met with silence.

“Without you,” he tried once more, “I am nothing.”
A violent shutter moved up his spine to the base of his neck, causing his eyes to quickly snap open and tug his, now worn-out, cloak tighter around himself.

“You needn’t ask.”

The voice was melodic, piercing the ominous reticence. “Just listen to me, I’m always right here.”

Jeongguk held his breath as his eyes shifted between the two opposite directions, and suddenly, he felt he was being pulled toward the one on the left. Without question or hesitancy, he began down the path. With each step he took, it grew darker for the mouth of the cave was becoming farther away. Taehyung was getting farther away.

Within the dimness, however, Jeongguk’s eyes could still make out how the path began to widen, opening to what appeared to be a chamber that was unlike anything he had ever seen.

Living within a valley surrounded by mountains as Jeongguk had, he had small adventures with his friends growing up. On such endeavors, he and his elementary friends had come across a cave a time or two, often exploring and pretending they were seeking out treasure. The only treasure Jeongguk was after now was to make it out safely and meet his friends on the other side.

The open area of the cave seemingly went on for miles. There was one stone path, straight and narrow, and on either side, this path was surrounded by dark water. From the roof of the cave, there were thousands of small holes, allowing some beams of light to move in, but even with them, the look of the water made Jeongguk uneasy.

But the small light that his eyes could make out at the very end of the path was his ultimate goal, an incentive for continuing forward and praying that nothing lurked within the waters for he would ultimately be helpless should he come face to face with anything.

With another deep breath of the wet air filling his lungs, he moved forward swiftly. The sound of his boots echoed across the cave, only slightly drowning out the sound of the movement of water now and again. He did his best to ignore it, trying to pretend as if he couldn’t feel his pulse quickening as it fluttered within his throat.

He picked up his pace. He wanted to make it to the end, but no matter how far he ran, the exit of the cave only seemed to move farther away. Had he gone the wrong way? He couldn’t help but doubt himself. Too enraptured within his thoughts, he didn’t even notice the sound of rushing water from
behind him, that is until something told him to stop in his tracks.

With bated breaths and shaky legs, he willed himself to turn around, though he was fearful of what could be behind. The sound of his boots shuffling over the smooth rock of the path was drowned out by the water and he turned, eyes widening at the sight he was met with.

The figure had no true shape, though, with each passing second, it grew more human. Two legs and arms became apparent, the form of a body distinguishable as the dark water turned in color and the sight that he was met with was of someone he had hoped he would never have to see again.

Waves of black hair, a stark contrast to his brown hair. They cascaded over her shoulders, looking as unkempt as the last time he saw her. The wrinkles around her eyes seemed more prominent, however, eyes sunken above high cheekbones that framed what appeared to be a sickly face. Her brows furrowed in a twist of worry as the entirety of her body materialized.

She wore the same housecoat he had seen for years, tattered at the hem, holes in various places. He could recognize it anywhere because it was the very one for which he had saved up what little allowance he was given to gift to her all those Christmases ago. She held her hands out as she stepped closer, and Jeongguk felt as if he was nailed to the ground—like lead had filled the entirety of his body.

“My dear son,” she whispered. “How could you leave me like that?”

Too often had he heard the very same guilt trip. It was the one that kept him bound to his small town for so long. Her hands came closer and what he wouldn’t have given to be able to run.

“You’re such a disappointment, Jeongguk,” spoke his mother once more. “After everything I did for you, after all these years, you simply run away? How could you do that?”

The very same shrillness within her voice was there, just as it always was.

But something was wrong.

“You left me, and I became sick with worry,” her hands came up to meet her cheeks, fingers dancing across her cheekbones and then over the bags beneath her eyes. “You don’t even care about me. Look at what’s become of me. You’re nothing but selfish.”
“You’re not real,” Jeongguk whispered, flinching as her hand moved from her face towards his. A mechanical reaction because the back of her hand had collided with the flesh of his cheek more times than he could count. “Please go away,” the words were almost silent as the cold tips of her fingers met his skin. “You’re not real.”

“You left me to go and live out some twisted fantasy,” she chuckled darkly as the pads of her fingers traced over the boy’s cheek. “You left me and now you’re here, but they don’t even want you here. Do you think you’re something special? Please.”

“I said you’re not real!” he practically choked on the words as he quickly smacked her hand away. “That’s not true, I’ve found a place I belong!”

His mother stumbled back, eyes wide before her face twisted into something akin to rage and she stepped forward once more and the only thing that could be heard for a moment was the crack of her knuckles colliding with his skin. A blow so hard, that he could have sworn he could taste blood beginning to fill his mouth.

“What will you do?” she asked, even in her words, Jeongguk could hear the execrable smile taking over her features. But he wouldn’t look, he only screwed his eyes shut and shook his head, inwardly chanting to himself that this all wasn’t real.

“Look at me when I’m speaking to you!” her voice rang across the chamber as her fingertips gripped Jeongguk’s chin, forcing him to turn his head back to her, but still, he kept his eyes closed. This was far worse than any nightmare he had ever had, and he would have done anything to wake from it.

He was choking on a sob that sat heavily within his throat, eyes stinging, and he only squeezed them shut until they hurt. “Look at me!” she screamed again, her nails digging deeper into his skin like a knife. Jeongguk’s eyes snapped open and they were quick to betray him as the tears began to stream down his cheeks, but his mother only clicked her tongue. “My sweet boy,” she whispered, voice turning soft and spurious. “My naïve little boy. What on earth will you do whenever those misfits find out that you’re not the one they’re looking for? They won’t want you anymore and you’ll have nowhere else to turn but to me, but I won’t be here because you’ve left me to rot in my worry over my flesh and blood who abandoned me.”

Jeongguk shook his head as his lip began to quiver. Through the blurriness of his eyes, he could see the dark circles beneath his mother’s, how frail she truly looked. But even through his tears, he watched as something sinister flashed within her eyes.
“That isn’t true,” he forced out in a quiet hiss. “You can rot for all I care, you will not manipulate me any longer. You were never a mother to me. All you ever did was hold me back, but I’ve found my purpose and I’m sure it just kills you, but I won’t let it hold me back. You’re in the state you’re in because you feel sorry for yourself, but you’ll have to learn to live just as I’ve learned to live without you. They care about me. Taehyung cares about me more than you ever did.”

Her hand moved from his chin as she drew it back one more, but he held his ground, refusing to flinch. He wouldn’t show weakness any longer. “Go on,” he challenged, but there was a hesitancy in her movements before her hand dropped down by her side. The same look of worry took over her face once more as she frowned.

“Have I truly failed as a mother for you to care about someone you just met over me?” she whimpered and Jeongguk’s jaw ticked.

“No, you didn’t fail,” he whispered. “You were never a mother, to begin with.” His feet finally felt lighter and he took a step back, preparing to turn and run toward the exit as fast as his feet would carry him, but then something was holding him in place as water quickly crept over the edges of the stone walkway, taking on a form that resembled vines as they wrapped themselves around his ankles.

He held his breath as the form of his mother stepped forward, trying not to allow the fear to take over his entire being as she stepped forward with a face contorted in anger. He only had one idea to get out of this and he wasn’t even sure he could manage it. Terrified that the words of his mother were true, that he wasn’t what the others needed—he needed to prove himself as he reached out with an unsteady hand and moved it swiftly in front of him.

He had little hope, but suddenly, the ill-created form of the one he despised the most in the world was hit by a sudden crack of wind and he watched with wide eyes as her body was pushed from the walkway, disappearing entirely to fade back into the water from which she came as the vines around his feet also returned to their rightful place.

He couldn’t believe what he had just done. Struggling to catch his breath, he could only look at his palm, unsure of whether he had called the wind on his own and controlled it in the way that he wanted. But he didn’t have time to question it, too terrified that he would be met with a face that haunted him once more, he turned to run toward the exit and refused to look back.
The moment he broke out into the daylight, he found himself wrapped in the arms of the other four witches who had already passed through as they whispered how worried they had been, thankful to have the youngest back with them once more and every doubt that the words of the false animation had washed away with the tide of their condolences.

Once they gathered themselves, they turned back toward the cave, waiting with held breath as the barrier, just like the one on the other side, flashed over the opening and they knew that Taehyung had finally entered to face his trial.

The sun was disappearing, and the others only stared at the barrier in hesitation. It had been far too long. They each said that Jeongguk had passed through the cave in good time, faster than any of them. It was alright for the trial to hold them up, but Taehyung had yet to emerge from the cave and Jeongguk was growing uneasy as the sun moved to hide behind the trees.

They were sitting in silence, and Jeongguk chanced to look over at Yoongi who was now pacing back and forth, glancing at the cave every other second. The raven-haired witch’s face was almost grim, exhaustion painting itself beneath his eyes—but he would be lying if he said he didn’t notice that Yoongi looked the same from the moment he had found himself with the others once again. Only now, Yoongi’s face was contorted in worry.

“I’m sure he’s fine, love,” Jimin whispered from where he was sitting atop a rock. “He’ll be out soon. You know Tae, he will make it through.” But Yoongi only shook his head, his pace never faltering.

“It shouldn’t take this long,” he said quickly, his fingers twitching by his sides. “What if something went wrong?”
The group stayed silent, and it was only then that Yoongi stopped in his tracks and looked between the other witches with wide eyes.

“You know the rules of these trials,” Namjoon spoke brokenly from where he sat against the same rock where Jimin was. He refused to meet Yoongi’s gaze.

Yoongi’s eyes erratically snapped toward the violet-haired witch and his jaw twitched. “You want to leave my brother?” he asked, mouth agape as he shook his head in disbelief.

“I don’t want to do anything, but—”

“I don’t give a damn about the rules,” Yoongi spat, beginning to pace once more. “I’m not leaving my brother.”

“I didn’t say we were going to leave him,” Namjoon forced out, visibly trying to pull strength from deep within. “We will wait as long as it—”

“Something is wrong,” Yoongi’s hands were shaking as he ran a hand through his messy waves. “I can sense it—something happened,” his voice wouldn’t stop breaking as he tripped over every word, brows furrowing as if he was coming to some harrowing realization. “Taehyung—he—something is wrong.”

“Calm down, Yoongi,” Jimin quickly jumped down from the rock as he stepped towards the other witch. He spoke with a tone like velvet as he reached for Yoongi’s arm who only smacked it away.

“How the hell do you expect me to stay calm?!” his resolve was finally cracking and Jeongguk wasn’t sure why he was standing. He knew there was nothing he could do.

“I have to go after him,” said Yoongi as he turned toward the cave. “Seokjin—please can you—”

“You know I can’t do that,” Seokjin answered hopelessly before Yoongi could even finish the question. “Only one can—”

“I already told you that I don’t give a single fuck about the rules!” Yoongi’s voice rose with every
word as the hem of his cloak began to shake and feathers began dropping to the ground from beneath the material. “You can’t expect me to just sit back when something is clearly wrong—that’s my goddamn brother, and if you won’t take down the barrier then I’ll do what I must to make it through, even if I have to break it down with my own two hands.”

Yoongi moved without another word toward the barrier and Namjoon jumped from where he sat upon the ground, hesitant for a moment as they all watched the raven-haired witch stare up at the glowing wall of white. Yoongi shook his head, fists clenched by his sides before slamming them against the barrier over and over with every ounce of force he could muster.

“Give me back my brother!” he cried out, voice cracking and Jeongguk felt sick from where he could only sit by and watch idly. “I can’t—I won’t lose him!” his words echoed through the woods as his fists crashed against the barrier once again, drawing blood from the sheer force of the blow.

“Yoongi,” Namjoon spoke sharply as he took another step toward the elder witch, but Yoongi never stopped, growing more desperate with each passing moment—the tears beginning to stream down his face glistened in what remained of the sunlight.

Namjoon looked back at Jimin for a moment while Seokjin and Jeongguk stood back, looking back and forth between the other witches. Yoongi continued to cry out, but his voice was beginning to fade, strength faltering but still, he tried to break through the barrier with a desperation so deep that it hung heavily within the air.

The violet-haired witch moved quickly, his boots crashing over the hard dirt of the ground with a sound that was only drowned out by Yoongi’s sobs before he embraced the raven-haired boy from behind, forcing him away from the wall as he tugged him tightly against his chest. “Yoongi,” he forced out. “It’s alright—fuck—darling, it’s okay, you brother is just fine,” but the unsteadiness of his voice contradicted his own words as Yoongi spun around to bury his face against the younger witch’s chest.

“We all know that Taehyung is capable of so many things,” Jeongguk finally spoke out, his voice broken and barely audible as he hesitantly stepped toward the other witches. He looked toward Jimin who was standing wide-eyed with tears streaming down his cheeks as he glanced between Jeongguk and the two witches by the barrier. Jimin quickly shook his head, face morphed in fear, but his eyes bore a silent warning.

“Don’t,” Yoongi spat as he forced himself away from Namjoon’s embrace, his eyes burning into Jeongguk’s gaze. “We wouldn’t even fucking be here if it wasn’t for you, so don’t give me that—”
“Yoongi, that is quite enough,” Seokjin’s sharp words stopped Yoongi’s own right in their tracks as he completely stole the draconian witch’s attention from the youngest.

“You have no place to say a fucking thing,” Yoongi hissed, pointing a finger at Seokjin. “You don’t even give a damn that my brother is no doubt trapped or worse, sitting by idly when all you have to do is nullify the barrier!”

“You know I can’t do that,” Seokjin’s words were quiet, voice constricted.

It was as quick as lightning, Jeongguk thought, the way that Yoongi was shoving Namjoon away from him as he attempted to stop him as he began walking directly toward Seokjin. “I swear to whatever higher power may be listening, Seokjin—if you don’t break down that goddamn barrier then I’ll see to it that my crows have at you until there is nothing left of you but your bones,” he spoke with a venom in his words that Jeongguk could taste, thankful that the words were not directed at him but his throat was tight nonetheless.

“That’s enough,” Jimin had forced himself between the two elder witches, his tear-stricken eyes shifting back and forth between them. “That was too far Yoongi.”

Yoongi ignored the words of the green witch, his eyes piercing right through him as he looked back at Seokjin. The eldest witch’s brows were furrowed, his jaw ticked. Jeongguk had never seen him look so infuriated.

“Yoongi is right, though,” Namjoon said. “If we were to leave Taehyung behind without even trying to save him, it would make us no different than the witches that we refuse to call our own.”

“And him threatening to feed me to his birds makes him any better?” Seokjin asked, eyes still fixed upon Yoongi as he cocked an eyebrow.

“Seokjin,” Namjoon said sternly. “Just break the goddamn barrier, please. If we lose one of our own, then this journey was never worth it, to begin with.”

Seokjin stared back at Yoongi a moment before sighing. He stepped past the two witches without a word and toward the barrier. “This better not get me killed,” he murmured as he stepped past Namjoon until he was right in front of the barrier. He looked up at it for a mere moment before holding up his hand. “Finis,” he whispered, and the barrier disappeared with a flash just as it had before.
He turned back to the others as he crossed his arms, eyes fixed upon Yoongi. “Go on, you foul-tempered, creature of darkness,” he chuckled tensely, and Jeongguk watched in apprehension as Yoongi stepped toward the opening of the cave.

He was seemingly a little hesitant as he stopped next to the eldest witch. “Seokjin,” he said quickly, eyes fixed ahead. “I’m—”

“I know you didn’t mean it and I didn’t mean what I said either,” Seokjin interrupted. “Let’s just forget about it. Now go get your brother so we can get out of this horrible place.”

“I’m coming too,” Jeongguk spoke up, feet already carrying him until he was beside Yoongi. “Taehyung is my best friend. I couldn’t forgive myself—I mean, we just made a promise before I left him on the other side, and I intend to see it through.”

Yoongi looked at him with eyes that were narrowed, making him feel small but then the raven-haired witch nodded. “Very well, but you better not hold me back, and if we’re lucky, maybe we can put your magic to the test and awaken that vita fully,” he smirked before training his eyes back on the cave.

He stepped forward without a word and Jeongguk watched for a moment before trekking forward, following in Yoongi’s footsteps.

They moved quickly, though the cave had changed form since Jeongguk had been in there. Instead of a narrow pathway that led him straight to the exit, this chamber was more like a maze—each turn taking them somewhere new with vines that crawled up the walls.
With each turn they took, they grew more frantic, a sense of fear creeping up within their bodies as they rounded each corner. They found themselves standing once more with a path that had three openings.

“I don’t—” Yoongi stammered, voice returning to the shaky state it had been in while they were outside the cave. “I don’t know where to go—”

Jeongguk remained silent, only looking between the three paths—eyes flickering back and forth in hopes there would be some sort of sign he could go by, a way he would know just where Taehyung was. He felt like they were running out of time. They had already waited so long before going back to retrieve the silver-haired witch and Jeongguk’s heart sank—he only wanted to keep his promise to his best friend.

He should have fought harder to get to his friend sooner, but they didn’t know if returning to the cave was even allowed.

“Jeongguk?” Yoongi’s voice broke the youngest’s frantic thoughts and he only shook his head. He was growing to rely more and more on the wind—on her melody, and he wondered if she would, once again, listen to what he needed.

Yoongi stepped forward, but Jeongguk did not follow. He only closed his eyes and took a deep breath. The wind had told him that he didn’t need to ask for her assistance, but he had already taken so much. Still, he did his best to listen, hoping to hear her voice again.

He was only met with silence.

“Jeongguk!” the sound of Yoongi’s voice forced Jeongguk’s eyes to snap open, and for a moment he had forgotten where he was—too lost within the wind. “We need to go down the left path,” the raven-haired witch spoke confidently.

“I’m sorry—I—” Jeongguk’s brows furrowed, wondering how Yoongi could be so sure. “I was hoping the wind could—”

“We don’t need it,” Yoongi said sharply as he began walking down the path he had chosen. “It’s my brother we’re talking about. It took a moment, but I know he’s this way—”
“How?” Jeongguk asked, breath catching as he tried to keep up with elder witch who was now practically sprinting.

“I just know,” Yoongi called back over his shoulder and Jeongguk could only watch his raven hair swiftly move back and forth within the dim lights of the cave. The sound of their boots smacked loudly against the rock floor as the cave seemingly began to look more like the time that Jeongguk had spent within it.

Suddenly, there was silence and Yoongi had skidded to a halt just in front of Jeongguk, causing the younger’s chest to nearly collide with the elder’s back. The moment Jeongguk’s eyes beheld what was in front of him, he was grateful for stopping in time.

They were standing on a ledge and the path had opened into a chamber, only there was no path to continue, only space and a fall that the simple thought of had Jeongguk’s stomach twisting into tight knots. The light within this room was practically nonexistent, but within the middle, there was a bright light that was shining down upon a pedestal and on that pedestal—Jeongguk could have recognized those silver waves anywhere.

Taehyung was sitting atop the small area with his back to them, knees pulled to his chest, head hanging down atop his knees.

Jeongguk’s heart was flooded with relief at the sight of his best friend, a deep sigh forcing its way up to his throat. But every ounce of peace he had felt was ripped from within his chest as Yoongi called out Taehyung’s name across the room, voice echoing and sounding like shattered glass the moment that the silver-haired witch did not even acknowledge their presence.

“Taehyung!” Yoongi screamed out once more. The witch who always spoke quietly, his voice was laced with fear, shaking in a way that Jeongguk felt as if he could see it as the name of his best friend dangled within the air.

Suddenly, before Jeongguk could even reach out, he felt as he watched in slow motion as Yoongi lunged forward, feet planting firmly on nothing but thin air, and he could do nothing else but watch as the raven-haired witch moved across the space towards his brother.

He was hesitant, but the grimness that had been found in Yoongi’s tone granted him courage and he followed. The first step felt like it took a lifetime. He was terrified that he could not do just as Yoongi had, but the moment his feet were planted upon the invisible ground that stood within the air, he
followed quickly—feeling as if Taehyung was miles away.

“Taehyung!” Yoongi called once again as he skidded to a halt, standing over top of his brother who still didn’t move. Yoongi was trying to catch his breath as Jeongguk found his place beside him, and it was then that he could hear Taehyung’s quiet voice coming out in small, incoherent murmurs.

It was as if he was chanting or praying, his fingers trembling atop the back of his neck.

“Tae—” Jeongguk spoke hesitantly, a hand reaching toward his best friend’s shoulder, only to be stopped by Yoongi who had a found a tight grip upon his wrist.

“Let me,” he whispered before crouching down. Jeongguk watched Yoongi’s hesitant hands, now shaking as well, reach for his brother’s shoulder. “Taehyung look at me, please,” he nearly whimpered, like he was terrified of his brother, but it wasn’t horror that painted his face as he braced Taehyung’s shoulder, forcing him to turn around.

The sight they were met with was nothing short of gut-wrenching. The silver-haired witch, who had done hardly anything other than smile, looked as if he had a seen some sort of ghost. His face was a twisted consolidation of nothing but heartache and pain all wrapped in one, and it took everything within Jeongguk to not pull the other into his arms, to wipe the tears that were streaming down his face—the cave and it’s sick games winning.

“Taehyung—” Yoongi whispered once more, but his brother was still yet to speak, only shaking in fear as he curled back into himself, to which the elder witch responded by grasping both his shoulders tightly. “Taehyung,” he forced out sternly, voice only cracking slightly. “Whatever it is, you are better than it—you can—no, you must fight through what it’s telling you because I’ll be damned if I leave you here.”

It was a delayed reaction, the way that Taehyung finally shook his head.

“You should just leave me here,” he whispered brokenly, lip quivering as he screwed his eyes shut, like it pained him to look upon the very sight of his own brother. “It would be better if you just—”

“Don’t start that,” Yoongi reprimanded, his knuckles turning white as he gripped at the material of Taehyung’s blouse, now covered in dirt from his endeavor within the cave. “I’m not leaving you. I promised you, didn’t I? I told you that I would always be here for you.”

Taehyung’s eyes snapped open, turning wide as the floodgates within his eyes opened once more.
His eyes searched over Yoongi’s face, like he was searching for salvation. “It’s all my fault,” the words were barely above a whisper, yet it was as if they amplified and echoed throughout the cave.

“What?” Yoongi shook his head, brows pinching in confusion as he shook Taehyung slightly. “Look at me—I need—Taehyung, just look at me,” his voice rose with every word, shards of desperation returning to his tone. Jeongguk had never heard anyone sound so broken as if Yoongi was watching his world disappear right before his very eyes.

“Look at me, Taehyung,” Yoongi started once more, his hands moving to grip the cheeks of his brother. His breath stuttered, and the tears began to well up in his own eyes—his resolve completely gone. “You are not to blame for any of this. Listen to me.”

“I—I—” Taehyung tried, his eyes pinching shut. An overwhelming tide suddenly filled the room, forcing it to turn cold, a mirror of how Taehyung was feeling and it chilled Jeongguk to the core.

“I said listen to me, goddammit!” Yoongi’s voice had never been as loud as it had been at that moment. “You are not to blame for any of this!”

Taehyung’s lip shook as he inhaled sharply, seemingly trying to find some ground—the strength the keep his eyes fixed on his brother. “Everything,” he whimpered brokenly. “Everyone that I touch leaves me—”

“That isn’t true,” Yoongi shook his head as he gripped Taehyung’s cheeks tighter, the edges of his palms catching the tears as they flowed freely. “I’m right here. I’m right in front of you—you won’t—you haven’t lost me.”

Taehyung’s fingers weakly met Yoongi’s hands on his cheeks. “How much longer, though?” he asked, voice nearly lost within a sob. “How long until you’re gone too?”

Yoongi chuckled, though it was forced. “This wretched world hasn’t gotten rid of me yet,” his smile was forced too. “It’s tried time and time again, yet I’m still here. I made a promise to protect you,” he pulled Taehyung’s face closer to his own, his tears now in a race with those of his brother’s. “I’m not going to leave you in any way, shape, or form.”

“The words of the prophetess,” Taehyung choked out, his eyes falling to the ground before they weakly found Yoongi’s gaze. “I’m the one who will be your undoing—”
“Says who?” Yoongi scoffed, tugging Taehyung’s face closer once more until their foreheads rest against one another’s. “You really think that you could hurt me?”

“No—it’s just—”

“Exactly,” Yoongi said, cutting off Taehyung’s words.

“You should just leave me here,” Taehyung said and Jeongguk had never felt so frozen in all his life, never felt so powerless as he watched his best friend fall apart right before his own eyes.

“No,” Yoongi shook his head, dismay was woven into the simple word. “We have a task to complete and even if we didn’t, I would never leave you. You are the most important person in this world to me, no matter what. I know I sometimes do a shit job of showing it, but Taehyung, I love you.”

With Yoongi’s words, Taehyung was falling apart once more, or perhaps, falling back together. It was as if he had some sort of revelation as another sob forced itself from his parted lips.

“If this world has done anything right by me,” Yoongi said as his thumbs wiped away the freshly fallen tears. “It’s when it gave me you as a brother.”

The cold tide in the air was suddenly gone. Seemingly, the cave was brightly lit, like everything that had been plaguing Taehyung was washed away—everything eased by the words of his own brother. Jeongguk could only watch as they embraced one another, and for the first time, he felt he understood a little more about the brothers. The pair, he had so many questions about, but one thing was for sure—they had seen trials of their own, and not just within the cave.

The brothers pulled apart, and Taehyung’s swollen eyes found Jeongguk, a smile taking over his face—the very same one that Jeongguk had grown to love.

“Thank you,” Taehyung said as he finally stood, dusting himself off.

“For what?” Jeongguk couldn’t help but ask, a happy confusion taking over.

“For keeping your promise.”
as always, if you made it this far, i love you.

comments and kudos. (i'll probably update faster, plus they make me smile, ok)

i'm going to try to be more regular with updating, life has just been crazy lately.

next time, we gonna see the oracle ok. and get some answers to some questions ok. ok?
idk man, it's 3am and i'm exhausted.

i'm on twitter as @apolloyoongi if you wanna find me, i love to talk to you guys.

I never intended to drop over 11k for the first chapter, this was SUPPOSED to be an introduction, but I don't know what self-control is. This is going to be my first LONG chaptered story. Like I said in the intro notes, it's more of a challenge for myself than anything, but I wanted to invite you all along for the ride! My hope is to update biweekly, but if you're familiar with me as an author, you know that I work full time and go to school full time. BUT I WILL DO MY BEST. ALSO, if you're interested in the continuation of this story/loving this so far, LET ME KNOW. Your all's words will fuel me to get a move on for the next chapter!

I'm serious though, we've got witches, mythical creatures, BACKSTORIES UPON BACKSTORIES about to happen as well as a whole adventure getting ready to unfold!

Some tidbits about this chapter:

I've taken some artistic liberties with the way this particular world of magic/witchcraft and what not works. As the story continues, I promise you all will understand more. Many of the definitions I will be using in reference to abilities and what not are latin. I don't know why it just fit for me and jived. Some of the words we've seen thus far are: clavis (door), vita (power), and a big and important one is electi (chosen.)

As for the boys... I don't want to give away too much on their abilities and in the wise words of Joon himself, "all in good time," BUT these are the 'types' of witches that the boys are, though some... I'm not ready to discuss yet.

Namjoon: Storm witch.
Seokjin: Water witch.
Yoongi: Draconian witch.
Jimin: ?
Taehyung: ?
Hoseok: ?
Speaking of Hoseok, WHERE IS HE? NO ONE KNOWS. ANYWAY.
If you read the entirety of this chapter, I LOVE YOU. If you've read all my notes, I LOVE YOU EVEN MORE.
If you want to read more, let me know. If you hate the story, still, let me know.
FEEDBACK, COMMENTS, AND KUDOS KEEP US GOING SO DON'T BE A GHOSTREADER, we LOVE to hear from you all and perhaps I'll churn out my chapters a little faster. -wiggles eyebrows-

You can find me on twitter as apollovoongi. Stop on by and talk with me!
Until next time! uwu

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!