You Can Dance in a Hurricane

by WintersEve

Summary

Jeon Jeongguk and Kim Taehyung can't stand each other. Until they're alone together.

Or childhood friends Jeon Jeongguk and Kim Taehyung were each other's everything until tragedy, heartbreak, and misunderstanding drove them as far apart as they could get. But not far enough, as they seem to find one another, and solace in the other, at every turn. Accidentally, of course. Because they really can't stand each other. Especially when Jeongguk's playing basketball like his life depends on it, long hair tied up in the cutest regulation-meeting bun. Or when Taehyung's dancing like he wasn't born for anything else, moving like gossamer in the wind. Not that they're watching.

Because they really can't stand each other.
Hi yes it's me, the person who wrote 340k of heavy angst and then left you guys on a cliffhanger. Sorry about that. More importantly: I give you my stress-relief fic. Every time I got writer's block, I'd just turn to this thing for fun and eventually it became a lot more than that. So I really hope you enjoy! And lower your standards a little, probably.

thread of all nsfw outfits that make an appearance in this fic
(p.s. all of my basketball knowledge is based off of like, grades 5-9 and the internet so just bear with me)
(p.p.s. taehyung's birthday is moved to march for plot reasons and to put him and jeongguk in the same grade but in different age groups)

“Alright, that’s enough! Bring it in, guys!” Coach Yun called them to the edge of the court.

Jeongguk shook out his hair, sweat coating his brow, and accepted a fistbump from Namjoon on their way over. He’d screwed up his last three-point shot, but hopefully Coach Yun’s nose had been too buried in his notes to notice. The rest of the potential team crowded around, loudly comparing plays and making bets on the final lineup.


Jeongguk chewed his bottom lip. “Except for you.”

Namjoon clapped him on the back. “Well, obviously. I taught you everything you know.”

“And modestly, too,” he snorted.

Namjoon ignored his comment, turning instead to tease Yoongi. “You should probably just nab the smallest jersey, hyung. No need to wait for the roster.”

“Aw, that’s sweet. You think I’m guaranteed a spot.”

“If I don’t get to play center at least three games this season, I’m calling you out for liking Namjoon more,” Bogum jokingly threatened Coach Yun.

“You’ll get what I give you, and you’ll be grateful you’re on the team at all,” he retorted.

Bogum just grinned wide. “So I did make it.”

Coach Yun glared at him. “That’s not what I said.”

“That’s basically what you said,” Seokjin confirmed.

“Okay, quiet! All of you! Listen up! Before I tell you who’s starting, I’m gonna list off the names of the full roster. If I don’t call your name, sorry but it’s just not your season. Come back next year
and try again. And if it’s your last season, then tough luck. It’s not my fault you can’t play.”

Jeongguk rolled his eyes. Coach Yun was known for his no-bullshit attitude, but he was actually a massive pushover if you’d been on the team long enough. He’d made it every season since freshman year, lucky enough to get in to university on an athletic scholarship. They had a strict tryout policy in place, though; just because you made it one year didn’t mean you were guaranteed a spot the next. It didn’t matter how many scholarships or years of experience you had under your belt. Everybody tried out.

“Now, if I do call your name, I want you to go grab your jersey. I’m just going down by number. Yoon Jeonghan, 55...Yook Sungjae, 50...Park Chanyeol, 43...Choi Youngjae, 40…”

He kept count in his head. Five players on the court, thirteen spots in total. So far, nine were left.

“Kim Yugyeom, 33…”

“Congrats, man!” Jeongguk whispered, high-fiving Yugyeom before he ran over to collect his jersey.

“Jung Yoonoh, 31...Kim Mingyu, 24…”

Things were getting tight now. Jeongguk took a quick headcount as more guys headed for the stack of jerseys. There were six spots left, and ten of them still on this side of the court. The odds weren’t looking good.

Coach Yun ran his finger down the roster, like he’d lost his place. “Oh. Park Bogum, 22…”

A group of guys he didn’t really know clapped enthusiastically, and Bogum bowed graciously to their coach, dorky grin on his face as he dashed to collect his jersey.

Jeongguk tried not to resent Bogum, he really did. He just wished the guy would get better friends. And it didn’t help that he brushed Jeongguk off every time he attempted to be civil.

“Kim Seokjin, 15.” Coach Yun glanced up at their little huddle as soon as he called Seokjin’s name, just in time to see Jeongguk, Namjoon, and Yoongi erupt into cheers, pushing Seokjin over with the other players.

“Min Yoongi, 13…”

“That’s our Daegu boy!” Jeongguk whooped, clapping Yoongi on the back.

Yoongi just ducked his head, but a small smile graced his face as he headed over to the other side of the court.

He felt proud of Yoongi and Seokjin, obviously, but he’d be a liar if he said he didn’t feel a trickle of apprehension now. Only three spots left. But he already knew one of those had to be going to Namjoon.

Coach Yun let out a long sigh.

“Jeon Jeongguk, 05.”

“Fuck yeah!” he exclaimed, pumping his fist in the air.

“Language, Jeon.”

His coach just snorted, shaking his head. Jeongguk stayed on this side of the court, though, waiting to hear the last two players on the roster. All four hopefuls were shifting anxiously on their feet, all except for Namjoon, who seemed confident he would make the cut. Jeongguk was confident, too. If anyone was guaranteed a spot, it was Namjoon.

“Choi Minho, 04,” Coach Yun called. Minho exhaled in relief as his friends passed around high-fives and fistbumps. There was another teammate who could do with some better company. Luckily, it didn’t look like most of his other friends would be making it. As soon as Minho got across the court, he sidled up besides Bogum, and they exchanged congratulations.

“And last but not least…”

Jeongguk made eye contact with Yoongi and Seokjin on the other side of the gym. A silent agreement passed between them.

“Kim Namjoon, 01!” they shouted in unison.

Coach Yun waved a hand. “What they said. The rest of you, thanks for coming to this season’s tryouts. Keep practicing. I mean it when I say I want you all to come back. Other than that, focus on your classes. Don’t do anything Namjoon wouldn’t do. I’ll see you around campus. Come talk to me if you have any questions. But please, no complaints. I get enough from the faculty.”

The three remaining hopefuls didn’t seem too upset; a couple milled around to chat with the selected players, while the other headed out for the evening. Jeongguk knew they were mostly here to support Minho and Bogum. This season should be interesting...there was definitely a divide in the team. They’d have to work that out before the first game. Although, most of those factors were outside of his control. Besides, it was their friends with the problem. Not Jeongguk’s. Well, one friend in particular really.

A commotion by the jerseys caught Jeongguk’s attention. The guys were crowded around something, talking loudly, chests puffed out and arms flexed. What the hell? Was the volleyball team here? Curious, Jeongguk and Namjoon headed over to see what they were all worked up about.

He should’ve known.

“Hey! Back up, mister. I’m just here to ask Coach Yun about the schedule for this season. I need to know which days we can practice in the gym.”

Jeongguk slowed in his approach, eyeing the lithe brunette by the stack of jerseys with distaste. Bogum must’ve heard his voice. He perked up immediately, like a dog listening for his master to come home.

“Taetae!” he called, pushing through the crowd. Bogum gave the guy currently hovering over the dance captain a dangerous glare, and he backed off immediately. Probably the safest bet. Minho followed close behind Bogum, apologising to the players whose toes were stepped on in Bogum’s haste.

“Bogumie,” none other than Kim Taehyung, campus brat, purred. Jeongguk tried not to gag, but he couldn’t help it. Taehyung’s feline eyes narrowed the moment he spotted Jeongguk. “I know it smells like shit in here, Jeon, but you’re not allowed to gag if it comes from you.”
“Actually, I was just choking on your gallon of designer perfume. What are you trying to hide? The stench of your last desperate hookup?”

He really couldn’t help it at this point.

Taehyung’s pink lips curled into a winning smirk. Winning for everyone except him. “Now that’s no way to talk about your friends. Right Seokjin-hyung?”

The guys let out whoops and catcalls just as Seokjin blushed a deep scarlet.

Jeongguk rounded on him, furious. “You’re kidding.”

“I...w-well, not exactly…” Seokjin stammered.

Even Namjoon arched an eyebrow at that, Yoongi clapping slowly.

Jeongguk stared at the traitor. “I can’t believe you.”

Taehyung frowned, tugging on his full bottom lip. “Sorry if I started something. I thought you knew, golden boy. Oops. Anyways, this has been nice. Bogumie, Minho, I’ll see you later, yeah?”

Bogum was eyeing Seokjin with a little too much contempt for Jeongguk. Just because one of his best friends apparently slept with Taehyung (for the upteenth time), didn’t mean he wouldn’t deck their teammate for him.

“Someone’s jealous,” Yoongi muttered under his breath. What a keen observation.


He tore his stormy gaze from Seokjin. “Yeah, of course, Taetae. I’ll see you later.”

“Mm,” Taehyung nodded. As he brushed past them, the scents of lavender, cedar, and rose assaulted Jeongguk’s nose. He didn’t miss the hand that trailed up Seokjin’s arm.

The second Taehyung was occupied with Coach Yun, Jeongguk snatched Seokjin’s arm and dragged him to the edge of the court.

“I want an explanation. Right now.”

Namjoon and Yoongi came up behind him, jerseys in hand and just as many questions. Quietly, Namjoon passed Jeongguk the jersey with 05 printed on both sides.

Seokjin rubbed the back of his neck self-consciously. “He’s not a bad guy, Guk.”

“I beg to differ,” Jeongguk huffed. “And I think my opinion is worth a little more than yours on the matter.”

“Can’t you just let it go? It’s been years. He’s actually really nice when you’re not around. Well, maybe nice isn’t the right word,” Seokjin added as an afterthought. “Sweet. Yeah, he’s sweet. And uh…” he lowered his voice, like he had any secret worth keeping. “…really good in bed.”

Namjoon shoved his clenched hands into his pockets but kept his mouth shut. Seokjin was an idiot. The basketball star has been head over heels for him since they were sophomores, and he had been fucking around with Kim Taehyung for a year instead. Jeongguk definitely knew which of the two he’d pick. And it wasn’t the diva in designer kissing up to their coach.
“Literally no one wants to hear about how good he is in bed. How about how good he is at being the world’s biggest bitch?” Jeongguk offered.

“Can’t argue with that one,” Yoongi agreed, glancing in Taehyung’s direction. “And he definitely gets around.”

Seokjin rolled his eyes. “You guys are acting like I want to take him out to dinner or something. Trust me, there are no feelings attached. You should know that by now.”

Jeongguk wanted to press him further, but a disgusting simper echoed across the gym.

“But Coach Hwang said we could be in here Wednesday nights,” Taehyung appealed to Coach Yun, eyes wide, lips drawn in a pout.

The basketball coach seemed to be struggling to verbalise his complaint. “Dance team already has Mondays. And your own practice rooms. My boys need consistency.”

“Go collect your boyfriend before he steals all of our time slots,” Jeongguk hissed to Seokjin.

He shook his head. “Not mine to collect. Shame Bogum stormed out.”

Jeongguk craned his neck, searching the gym. Huh. Bogum had stormed out. Serves him right.

“I understand, Coach,” Taehyung sighed, faking a remorseful smile. “And I appreciate your help. I’ll just pass on this schedule to Coach Hwang, then, and ask her to change the times per your request. All I can hope is that this won’t impact our competition practices too much. You know how mean she gets when she’s stressed.”

That manipulative little bitch.

Coach Yun took the paper from Taehyung, frowning. “Well...maybe dance team could have Wednesdays. We could always take the time to work on something else. Team-building, maybe.”

“Really?” Taehyung gasped, totally oozing authenticity. Jeongguk felt like gagging. “Oh my goodness, thank you so much!”

He signed the schedule for approval and passed it back to Taehyung. “No problem, Taehyung-ssi. Let me know if you have any more problems.”

“I will, Coach.” He clasped his hands in gratitude. “Again, thanks!” Taehyung didn’t forget to flash Jeongguk his manicured middle finger as he passed by again and headed out the large gymnasium doors.

“Go screw yourself, Kim,” he jeered after him.

Taehyung whirled around, challenge alight in his eyes. “Wanna say that a little louder, Jeon? I couldn’t hear you over the desperate sound of jealousy.”

“Jealous of what? Your crowd of friends who only stick around because they want to fuck you or your pathetic simpering attitude that gets you everything you want?” Jeongguk took a step closer, meeting his daring gaze.

“At least people actually like me, and I don’t have to buy their affection.” Taehyung sing-songed. The insult struck a furious chord in him, too close to home. Too close to things he wanted to forget.

“Knowing you’re an easy lay isn’t the same thing as liking you, darling,” he informed him sweetly.
“But whatever keeps you from breaking down again in our morning lecture is fine by me. You’re an ugly crier.”

Brow furrowed in anger at the mention of the other morning, Taehyung retorted, “Lucky thing I’m only ugly when I cry, then. Imagine having ratty hair and giant front teeth twenty-four-seven. Now that would be tragic.”

Shrugging off the insult, Jeongguk replied, “The only thing more tragic would be having a personality the size of a grain of rice and manipulating your way into a dance captainship you didn’t deserve.”

“Jeongguk, that’s enough,” Namjoon interjected, a hand on his shoulder.

“Aw, how cute,” Taehyung sneered. “Little Jeonggukkie can’t fight his own battles so he gets his friends to do it for him.”

Seokjin swept past them to Taehyung’s side, squeezing his slender arm. “Taehyung, don’t. Please. You’re just arguing for the sake of arguing now. Let it go.”

Taehyung bit his lip, glaring at Jeongguk who glared right back, before flicking his gaze up to meet Seokjin’s.

“Fine. I’ll leave it. But Jeon can go fuck himself.”

“Why would I when you’ll let just about anyone do you?” Jeongguk threw one more jab at him, smirking as Taehyung returned his attention to him. There was nothing he loved more than seeing those familiar dark eyes gleam with fury.

“Your perception of me is so fucking skewed, you might want to try glasses,” he hissed, straining against Seokjin’s grip to get to him.

Jeongguk tapped his cheek in satisfaction. “Twenty-twenty, baby. Sorry. It’s why I’m the only one who sees through your bullshit.” Namjoon swatted his arm, a clear Let it go.

“Or you’re just fucking blind, and haven’t realised yet because your friends are too nice to point it out.”

“Okay, Tae,” Seokjin tried to soothe. “You have practice in a few minutes. You should go.”

Taehyung tore his gaze from Jeongguk who glared right back, before flicking his gaze up to meet Seokjin’s.

“I hate him,” Jeongguk spat as soon as he was out of earshot.

“We know,” Yoongi grumbled, speaking for the first time since they’d argued. “It’s all you talk about. Ever. Constantly. So much that if someone overheard you, they’d probably think you were in love.”

“Repeat that to anyone and I’ll set your bed on fire with you in it.”

“Okay, no need to get violent,” Namjoon reasoned, letting up his grip on Jeongguk.

“Especially seeing as if you set Yoongi’s bed on fire, the whole dorm’s going to burn down, there’s
“so much cheap booze on it,” Seokjin chimed in. “Which would be mildly unpleasant for the rest of us.”

Jeongguk turned to look at him. “Mildly unpleasant?”

He shrugged. “I said what I said.”


They jogged over to where their coach stood. The air still reeked of lavender. And as expected, Coach Yun chose to turn a blind eye to the fight that just took place. He was well aware of Jeongguk’s and Taehyung’s opinions of each other, and, like an intellectual, decided not to interfere.

“You’re all starters this season. Obviously, I won’t have to make too many adjustments to your jerseys. No one grew from last year, or changed their last names. I should have the other colours to you by the end of the week.”

Jeongguk nodded, hanging the black and red jersey over his shoulder. He’d won games in this jersey; it still had blood on it from that guy whose nose he’d broken last year. By accident, of course. He was glad he didn’t have to part with it this year.

“Namjoon, I’m going to have you and Bogum rotate center this year. Whoever isn’t playing center that game, I want to take shooting guard. I meant to talk to him about it, but I guess he took off. It’s both of your last seasons, so I want to give you as much spotlight as I can.”

“Thanks, Coach,” Namjoon grinned, content with his position. More modern coaches had switched to playing open court- anyone could jump on any position. But Coach Yun was a traditionalist, and preferred that everyone make a specific contribution. Less confusion, he said.

“It’s probably not a surprise, but you’re playing wings again this year,” Coach Yun informed Yoongi. “And for the last time, the term small forward isn’t an insult.”

“I’m allowed to take it however I choose,” Yoongi countered.

“Take it as a compliment for once, please,” their coach muttered. “Jeongguk, point guard. Not much else to say there, you’ve been playing the position since you were a freshman.”

And five years before that, too. Jeongguk fell in love with basketball towards the end of middle school. Yoongi got him interested in it, said it would do him some good to have a focus. It took his mind off of everything else that was going on. Early on, he realised that he had been made to play point guard; he loved the thrill of it, the careful calculations, the scrapiness that came with diving headfirst into the center of the game.

“And Seokjin-”

“Power forward?” Seokjin interrupted.

“Power forward,” Coach Yun confirmed. “That’s all. Feel free to head out. First official practice is on Thursday.”

*Thanks to Taehyung,* Jeongguk thought savagely.

“I can’t believe I made starter this year,” Seokjin marvelled once they were out the door. Evening was setting in; autumn leaves swirled in the cool, gentle breeze whistling through the campus.
They settled in reluctant piles on the concrete by their feet.

“You’ve earned it,” Jeongguk praised, animosity over the whole Taehyung thing forgotten with the good news.

“You really have,” Namjoon agreed, giving Seokjin a warm smile. Yoongi grunted his assent, not feeling the need to comment any further.

Seokjin examined his shoes. “Thanks, guys.”

“I’m starving,” Yoongi announced. “If we don’t hunt food down right now, I’m eating Jeongguk.”

“Good luck chewing through all that muscle,” Namjoon snorted.

“Trust me,” Yoongi said, eyes gleaming. “I’ll find a way.”

Jeongguk took a nervous step back. “We need to get this man some food right now. I’m not interested in being a Gukkabob.”

“I just don’t understand what his problem is,” Taehyung complained to Jimin and Hoseok. “I try and play nice, and he gets all angry. So then I play it his way, and he’s still a fucking dick about it. He should have to pick one. It’s not fair.”

“Just say he gives you a boner and go,” Jimin remarked, earning an acerbic glare from Taehyung.

“On the plus side,” he continued. “Seokjin dicked me down again this morning and it was fantastic.”

Hoseok scrunched his nose up in disgust. “Really? You had morning sex of all sex with Kim Seokjin?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” Taehyung asked, taking a sip of his lavender boba tea. “Neither of us have class until eleven on Tuesdays. And he’s handsome right out of the shower. And even more handsome when he has to take a second one.”

“Gross,” Jimin and Hoseok commented in unison.

“Oh, so we can talk about the boner you apparently think I have for Jeon but I can’t talk about the actual sex I’m having. I see. This is a setup, and I will not stand for it.”

“Thank goodness you’re sitting down, then,” Hoseok snickered, scooping up a mouthful of bibimbap.

Taehyung reached across the table and flicked Hoseok’s forehead, earning a loud, “Bitch, I’ll cut you.”

He noticed Jimin’s eyes wandering not a moment before the blonde whistled, “Speak of the devil. Jeon and his boy band were itching for bibimbap I guess.”

And indeed, the quartet of jocks were pushing through the double glass doors, talking as loudly and obnoxiously as ever, with enough Bro’s and Man’s and Dude’s thrown in to convince anyone they got plenty of pussy. Good thing Taehyung knew better. Shame he just wasn’t in the mood right now to make Jeon Jeongguk’s life a living hell.
The group made their way to the counter, hovering around as they waited for their orders to come out.

“I’m sure they’re celebrating the season’s lineup,” Taehyung ventured disinterestedly. “Probably all starters.”

“You know, hating them would be a lot easier if they weren’t good,” Jimin whined. “But we’ve won nationals two years in a row thanks to them.”

Hoseok reluctantly nodded. “We wouldn’t have gotten to dance in Jamsil Arena if it weren’t for them making the championship.”

“I’m not making you hate anyone.” Taehyung sat back in the red booth, arms crossed. “In fact, I don’t have a problem with most of the team. Just—”

“Yeah, Jeongguk, we know.”

Unfortunately, the conceited bastard seemed to be waiting to hear his name. Prime example of why Taehyung never said it out loud. His head perked up immediately, curious eyes searching the restaurant until they made direct contact with Taehyung. Instead of backing down, he just stared right back at Jeongguk, arching an eyebrow. The latter responded by shaking his head, incredulous expression plain as he turned to go crying to his friends no doubt. And just like Taehyung thought, they all “subtly” looked back at them. He caught Seokjin’s eye and offered him a small smile. He wasn’t really in the mood to flirt either, but he could be nice.

“The hell are you smiling at?” Jimin asked, turning around to glance behind him. “Oh. I should have known.”

Hoseok didn’t even bother turning, choosing to sip his sprite in peace.

Taehyung pushed them out of his mind, half-heartedly picking at his rice. His appetite went out the window real quick. Of course, the one time he didn’t want to pick a fight, Jeongguk was apparently itching for one.

“I didn’t know the great Kim Taehyung ate hole-in-the-wall bibimbap like the rest of us commoners,” Jeongguk commented as him and his friends passed. God, Taehyung so badly wanted to divulge his last little secret right there. It would be so easy; Jeongguk even set it up for him. He’d finally win this stupid game. But he held his tongue. He hated Jeongguk, but he didn’t like being hated by Jeongguk. Even after all these years, it still felt wrong.

Kim Namjoon and Min Yoongi didn’t stop, just slid into a booth a ways from theirs. Seokjin lingered though, torn between staying out of it and making sure they didn’t get into a full-blown fight. Taehyung didn’t look at him.

Instead, he replied, “It’s close to campus. And cheap.” Taehyung shouldn’t have to justify his dinner selection to him.

“Since when do you care if a restaurant’s cheap?” Jeongguk pried. “You drop thousands on designer brands, but this is your standard for food?”

So clearly, Taehyung’s facade was working. If only Jeongguk knew, maybe he’d have the common decency to feel a little remorse.

“Why the hell do you care?” Jimin instantly jumped to his defense. Taehyung reminded himself to get Jimin flowers.
Taehyung pierced Jeongguk with a flat stare. "I work hard so I can buy the things I want. I want Gucci sunglasses. I don’t want to spend that much on food that’s probably gonna taste the same anyway. Seriously, have you run out of things to insult me with? I mean, it was bound to happen. Unlike you, I only have so many flaws."

Jeongguk brushed his raven hair out of his eyes. It had gotten long over the summer. Far too long.

“At least I don’t sleep with your best friends.”

Seokjin, who had been hovering cautiously behind Jeongguk, turned a faint pink and hurried over to join their other two companions. Coward. He would punish him for it tomorrow. He’d been itching to use the handcuffs tucked in his bedside drawer.

“That’s probably because none of my friends would settle for your tiny dick,” Taehyung shot back. He knew if Hoseok had to suppress a laugh, he’d done a fair job.

Jeongguk raised his regal brows. “I didn’t realise you’d thought so much about the size of my dick, Kim.”

Every conversation with him was exhausting.

“It’s hard not to when that’s where you keep ninety percent of your ego. Although I have no idea how it all fits in there.”

“You’re one to talk about ego,” Jeongguk snorted.

A dull throb began to knock at his skull. All he wanted to do was lay down in his dorm and ignore the philosophy paper (of course the only fucking class he had with Jeongguk) he had due tomorrow that he hadn’t even started. Unfortunately, he had other obligations.

“Whatever,” Taehyung finally snapped. “I don’t have time for this.” He slid out of the booth and tossed twelve-thousand won on the table. “I’ll catch you guys later,” he said to Jimin and Hoseok.

“Call me after work, okay, Taetae?” Jimin asked, concern written in the furrow of his brow.

“Course, Chim.”

He could feel Jeongguk’s prying stare boring into the back of his head as he left the restaurant. It almost hurt when Seokjin didn’t acknowledge him on his way out.

... "You clockin’ out, Taehyung-ah?” the club’s manager stopped him just as he shoved his stilettos back in his locker.

Taehyung glanced up. “Planning on it, yeah. I’m already half an hour over.” A client had offered him an extra forty-thousand won to ride his thigh and although he rarely accepted bribes, he was kind of desperate these days.

Manager Jang gave him an apologetic smile. “Would you mind sticking around for another hour? Kwangsu called in saying he was going to be late. Something about his aunt spraining her ankle.”

He rolled his eyes. “You know as well as I do that he’s just getting high before coming in.”
“Please, Taehyung-ah? You’re making extra money. I don’t see what the problem is.”

Taehyung leaned against the bank of lockers. “The problem is that I have a philosophy paper due in…” he checked his phone, “…five hours. And I’d actually like to spend three of those hours asleep.”

Jang didn’t harbour much sympathy for his situation. “You should’ve taken care of that before the morning it was due. I’m not losing money because you procrastinated an assignment. Now get your expensive ass back out there. Besides, all the guys are drunk by now, and you know that’s when the best tips come in.”

“Jang-ssi!” Taehyung pleaded. “Make Minjun-hyung do it, please!” He really wanted to go home.

“No. You always bring in more. Now go. That’s final.”

Fuming, Taehyung unlocked his locker again and snatched the nude sequin stilettos back out, doing the straps up his legs over the cream lace stockings.

“I’ve gotta admit, I like the new dress, Taehyung-ah,” Jang commented.

“It’s not a fucking dress.” Taehyung tightened the bow of his gold satin sleeveless shirt.

“It looks like a dress.”

Taehyung checked his hair in the large backlit mirror. “I wear what I’m told to wear. Apparently I didn’t make the skimpy vest and tie cut this year.”

Jang chuckled. “Guys don’t like you for your non-existent abs, Taehyung-ah.”

Wetting his fingers, he scrunched more curls into the dark locks. “Really? I hadn’t noticed. You’d think two years in this hell hole would’ve taught me as much.”

“You gonna keep that attitude on the floor?” Jang asked as Taehyung reapplied his cherry lip gloss.

“Maybe.” He smacked his lips together, smirking back at the manager. “Everyone loves a brat.”

“Well, get going, brat. We haven’t got all night.”

“And yet you think I do,” Taehyung muttered, brushing past his manager through the locker room door.

“What was that?” He didn’t miss the warning in Jang’s tone.

“Nothing, Jang-ssi. Is Hojin-hyung calling me out again or should I just go?”

“Just go work the floor. If we decide we need you on stage, he’ll call you up.”

Taehyung nodded. “Got it.”

As soon as he was out of the back hallway and under the pulsing blue lights of the club, his demeanor switched completely. Even if he was exhausted, he had to pretend like he was having the time of his life. That’s how you made money, after all. Taehyung scanned the crowd, still packed at two in the morning, composed largely of older men in black leather chairs and couches. Sin drew a certain type of crowd. They were what one could consider a variety club; they offered a little more than the usual grimy bar scene. Each of their dancers were trained professionally, dressed to cater to particular breeds of patrons, and required a hell of a lot of money just to get in. As far as
stripping gigs went, Taehyung figured he could do worse.

His eyes narrowed as he selected a target. A man, maybe in his mid-thirties, sat a little farther from
the stage. The man had come alone. He wanted to be there, but was too inexperienced to feel
comfortable participating. But the watch glittering on his wrist caught Taehyung’s attention. Rolex.
He needed a little bit more than that to confirm he had money, though, so Taehyung took a quick
peek at the quality of his shoes. Polished black leather. That was good enough for him.

Taehyung sauntered through the crowd, pausing every now and again to indulge the fleeting whim
of a customer, bills tucked in the ribbons of his shirt, eyes never leaving his target.

“You look a little lonely,” he purred, perching on the arm of the man’s chair. “Mind if I keep you
company for a minute?”

His large, deep set eyes took in Taehyung’s form, the way he sat with his back curved, slender legs
crossed daintily.

“I suppose…” the man hesitated. Taehyung’s gaze flickered only briefly to the silver band on his
ring finger. Oh, he knew his type. Failing marriage indicated a need for control.

“Don’t worry,” Taehyung giggled. “I’ll only touch you if you want me to. And only in the way you
want me to. I wouldn’t want to do anything to make you upset.”

The man’s eyes darkened at that. “How much for a dance, darling?”

Taehyung tugged on the little silk bow around his waist, pretending to think. “It depends on how
much you want out of me, I guess. I’ll give you a show right here for everyone else to see, and
that’d run you about twenty-five thousand. Or you and I could go somewhere a little more…private.
Have a drink or two, and I’ll give you a personal dance. Maybe cost forty-five. But of course, it’s
up to you, sir.”

“All that for only forty-five thousand? They’re not giving you enough credit, baby boy.” Thick
fingers crept up his side, coming to rest lightly on his hip. Well, at least he knew what kink to
exploit.

“You haven’t even seen me dance yet,” Taehyung said, voice breathy. “But I wouldn’t stop you if
you thought I earned more. I’ll work really hard for you, daddy.”

This night was going to be longer than he thought. Jimin had probably blown his voice out
screaming at him through voice mail.

The grip on his waist tightened. “We’ll see, won’t we? Lead the way, baby.”

With over 500,000 won in total in his jacket pocket and his shift officially over, Taehyung drove
across the city back to the campus. The commute was a pain in his ass, and cost him way too much
in gas, but it was worth not running into anyone he knew. When he got back to his dorm, he hurried
up the stairs and into his room. Heavy bass reverberated from another room on the floor. Probably
Yugyeom, if he were to wager a guess.

He dropped his duffle bag on the floor and promptly collapsed onto his stiff bed, plugging in his
phone. Six missed calls displayed on the screen. Four from Jimin and one from Seokjin. He wasn’t
really in the mood for Seokjin’s three am booty call, so he ignored them. He was more interested in his background; a photo of his dad asleep, cuddling Yeontan. Taehyung gazed fondly at the picture for a moment. He missed days like that.

The last missed call was from his dad. Why would he be calling him at this hour? Immediately apprehensive, Taehyung called him back.

The phone rang once, twice, three times…

“I was beginning to wonder if you’d actually gone to bed at a decent hour,” a raspy voice chuckled across the line.

Taehyung grinned, relieved he was okay. “Of course not, Appa. You know me better.”

“You know, all this night-owl business is gonna ruin your health when you’re old and wrinkly.”

“Were you a night-owl?” he teased, and then instantly regretted it. “I mean-”

But his father’s laugh rang out over the line. “You could say that. See, Taehyung-ah? It’s no good for you.”

“I stay up to study. What’s the point in getting old and wrinkly if you don’t have a career?”

“My little scholar. What’s keeping you up tonight?”

Taehyung guiltily shifted the wad of bills in his pocket. “Philosophy paper.” Technically not a lie.

“What does a dance major need philosophy for?” his dad asked, clearly skeptical.

“Well, if you think about it, philosophy is the essential nature of things, right? The world at its most bare and vulnerable. And dance is sort of an expression of philosophy in that sense. A...personification of the way humans interpret purpose, existentialism, and reality. And a coping mechanism, I guess.”

The call went silent for a moment. Then, “Are you sure you don’t want to switch your major?”

Taehyung chuckled. “Appealing, but I’m pretty sure my life’s calling isn’t debating the moral obligations of human existence on a red leather chaise lounge.” Although it could make for a kinky roleplay.

“You wouldn’t make as much money, anyways,” his dad joked.

“And that’s always the endgame, isn’t it? You got the check I sent last week, right?”

“Yes, but-”

“And the hospital? They got theirs, too?”

A heavy sigh filled the air. “Yes. It’s all taken care of. But I’m worried about you. You must be working yourself into the ground. There’s only so many hours you can pick up waiting tables.”

The pile of guilt in his chest only grew. “I work at a nice restaurant, Appa. Don’t even worry, okay? The customers always...always tip really well.” He swallowed the lump in his throat threatening to break.

“You know I’m going to worry regardless. But I’ll do my best not to get too worked up over it. I’ll
have to come visit sometime while you’re working. Surprise you. What’s the place called, again?”

Panicking, Taehyung said, “That’s too far for you to come! Think of all those hours spent sitting, it’ll only worsen your back pain. I’ll take some time off for a trip home this semester, instead.”

“But I’m going crazy here, kid. I can’t remember the last time I saw something new.”

A wistfulness lingered in his dad’s voice that struck a blue chord in him. Taehyung wondered if this restlessness had anything to do with him being up well past midnight.

“I’ll bring something new to you, okay? At least you’re back home again.”

“You’re right. At least there’s that. Make sure the new thing is really exciting. It’s gotta make up for months of the same voices and sunrises and creaky floorboards. Something special.”

Taehyung couldn’t explain why he was choking up, but the words were hard to force out. “I promise, Appa. Something special.”

“Thanks, Taehyung-ah. I can always count on you.”

Muffling his shaky breaths, Taehyung asked, “Is everything else going okay?”

“Yes, I just wanted to hear your voice. I’ll let you get back to it now. Don’t stay up too late, kid, I mean it. You’re not invincible.”

He glanced at the duffle bag on his floor. “Trust me. I know.”

“You’re gonna rock that paper. I know it. Now get some sleep. And try to call me sometime during normal human hours.”

“I will.” Taehyung smiled, eyes watery. “G’night, Appa.”

“Night, Taehyung-ah.”

Taehyung sat cross-legged on his bed, staring at his lockscreen. Tears streaked down his face, no doubt smudging his eye makeup and cutting chalky tracks through his foundation.

He couldn’t do it anymore. But he had to. This job was the only reason his dad still had a roof above his head and blood cells that did their job. Quitting wasn’t an option. He didn’t make enough as it is. He needed to pick up more shifts, or start at a new place. Anything to make sure his dad was taken care of.

His phone rang again, screen displaying ‘Jiminie,’ the source of four of his missed calls.

C’mon, Taehyung. Pull yourself together.

Wiping his cheeks, he answered.

“Hey, Chim.”

“Kim Taehyung, I swear to god, if you ignore my calls ever again I’m tying you to the flagpole and leaving you there.”

“Uh...kinky?”

“No!” Jimin gasped. “Well, maybe a little. But that’s beside the point. Are you okay?”
“I’m fine. Jang just asked me to work late. One of the other guys called in a family emergency so I picked up the first hour of his shift.”

He knew Jimin got worried because of the atmosphere of his work, but luckily, he’d never been judgemental about it. Jimin understood. He’d been there through all of it. His mom, his dad...Jeongguk, even. And so, Jimin was the only one who knew. And Taehyung preferred to keep it that way.

“Did you at least make some good money?”

“Pretty good for a Tuesday night. The last guy I saw was very generous.”

“Well, if you’re gonna work extra hours I’d hope the guys are thankful. Imagine going into Sin and not seeing Kittae.”

Taehyung groaned, falling back on his pillows. “Oh my god, Jimin, for the last time, that’s not my stripper name.”

“It should be. It’s a good one.”

“It’s really not.”

“Since you won’t tell me your real one I have to keep coming up with them,” Jimin grumbled. “Did you finish your philosophy paper?”

“If by finish, you mean written exactly three sentences, then yes. Completely finished.”

“I’m not done either. You want me to come over there with snacks and we’ll knock this one out together?”

Taehyung felt like crying again. “Park Jimin...will you marry me?”

“We’ve been married for like six years now but sure, I’m down for another ceremony. We’ll pay for it in two-thousand won bills.”

“Fuck you,” Taehyung retorted, but his laughter betrayed him. “I’ll see you in a few.”

When he hung up, he felt considerably more light-hearted than he had ten minutes ago. That was Jimin’s magic. The moment he touched the lives of other people, he brought light into them. It didn’t matter how minimal the contact. Taehyung wished he could do the same for him.

The flash of hands over his teammates’ heads caught Jeongguk’s attention. Quick as lightning, he passed the ball in a perfect arc, heading up to the basket before it even landed within Seokjin’s grasp. The telltale sound of the ball falling through the net told him to race back to half-court. Another three-pointer under their belt.

This three-on-three match only continued to grow in intensity; Jeongguk, Seokjin, and Minho versus Namjoon, Yoongi, and Chanyeol. So far, they were losing by eight. And apparently, Yoongi had decided to make it his life’s mission to rain hell on Jeongguk.

He’d suggested they start doing the three-on-three's during their first practice, when Coach Yun was coming up with ideas for team-building exercises. Jeongguk offered to organise the matches and reserve a space for them. What their coach didn’t know was that Jeongguk held the matches in
The gym on Wednesdays, and they didn’t end until the dance team showed up. Getting to see Taehyung’s pretty eyes narrow in fury whenever he walked into the gym to see them playing felt more satisfying than any victory.

The pounding of the ball on the hardwood floor brought his attention back to the game.

Chanyeol and Seokjin checked the ball, and Chanyeol ran with it as soon as it came his way. Stepping around Namjoon, Jeongguk darted across the court but Yoongi headed him off, daring half-smile on his lips as he guarded Jeongguk. He tried to slip under his guard but Yoongi predicted this, stepping into the turn and elbowing him away from Chanyeol. They weren’t playing a regulated game so no one watched for fouls. Cursing, he tried to see past the pale skinny arms in front of him. The ball streaked over his head; Chanyeol must’ve passed to Namjoon. Jeongguk already prepared himself for the sound of the ball slamming against the backboard and the swish of the net.

“Forty-one to thirty,” Yoongi announced, just in case he didn’t know. The pair jogged back to half, breathing heavily.

His teammates pushed him up to check with Namjoon. The latter smiled kindly at him as he approached the line, but he wasn’t going to fall for his tricks.

They passed back and forth three times. The second the ball fell into Jeongguk’s hands again, familiar ridges and lines brushing against hardened calluses, he shot forward, evading Namjoon’s long reach and streaking for the hoop. This was the start of their redemption, he could feel it. The air whistling past his ears and the pounding of pursuing footsteps not far behind him. He was closing in now, arms raised to shoot. The ball…

Left his fingertips before he even put any momentum behind the shot.

Looking around in confusion, he finally spotted it on the edge of the baseline, spinning on a slim finger. His teammates raced up behind him. Minho was laughing his ass off.

“What the fuck, Taehyung?” he shouted. He had been so close to getting them back on track. How the hell did Taehyung even grab it from him? There’s no way he moved that fast.

Taehyung tucked the ball against his hip. “It’s seven. On a Wednesday. Which means it’s our timeslot.”

Jeongguk only now noticed the group of people standing behind Taehyung, guys and girls clad in black or white tank tops and flexible pants.

“This is the third week in a row, Jeon. I’m starting to think you do it just to piss me off.” Taehyung adjusted the collar of his black pullover, tossing the ball back to Jeongguk.

He caught it on reflex. “I wouldn’t put that much thought into something for you,” he growled, even if that was exactly what happened. It’s only fair. The dance team had been encroaching on their practices more and more. So what if they scheduled their three-on-three matches to end right before they got there? That’s revenge. He was telling the captain that they couldn’t be pushed out so easily.

Taehyung tucked a lock of chocolate hair behind his ear, smirking. “Well, you know what they say. Once is an accident. Two is a coincidence. Three is destiny.”

“I’m destined to break your nose one of these days.”
He felt Namjoon’s hands on his shoulder. “Calm down, Guk. He’s just…”

“Playing,” Seokjin finished, walking over to the baseline. “Right, Taehyung-ah?”

The snarl immediately faded from Taehyung’s face. He melted under Seokjin’s attention. It was infuriating to watch.

“Yes, hyung,” he agreed, voice deceptively soft. “Just playing. I really hate to do this to you guys again, but, well, I'm sure you know, next Friday is the first game and we're still trying to adjust our routine to fit the bigger space in here. By next month, I’m sure we’ll have the spacing down enough to give you your Wednesdays back. I’m sorry.” Taehyung blinked up at Seokjin, a hand splayed intimately on his chest.

Jeongguk turned away, disgusted. Yoongi and Namjoon followed as he went to put the ball back. The gym filled with the dance team’s chattering, the noise grating on his ears.

He didn’t want to look back but he couldn’t help it.

Seokjin and Taehyung were standing far too close. He couldn’t see Seokjin’s face but he could see Taehyung’s, eyes crinkling into little crescents as he laughed at what could only have been one of Seokjin’s terrible puns. It looked...weird. Taehyung wasn’t wearing his usual sultry pout. In fact, he wasn’t trying to flirt at all. He smiled widely, rare trademark boxy grin shining through. The memory of his bright smile caused Jeongguk’s heart to ache...if only for a brief second. Seokjin’s hand rested on Taehyung’s waist. They looked comfortable. Like a couple. It wasn’t a secret that they’d continued hooking up this past year, even if Seokjin liked to pretend no one knew. He wondered if it was really possible to have casual sex for that long without attaching any feelings.

Jeongguk glanced at Namjoon, jaw set in irritation. So he wasn’t the only one seeing how close they were. Quietly, he padded over to him.

“What do you think is going on with those two?”

Namjoon’s eyes never left Seokjin’s back. “I don’t know. Nothing good. He knows how much being with Taehyung hurts you, so I don’t-”

“It doesn’t hurt me,” Jeongguk snapped. “It just feels like betrayal a little, okay? Taehyung’s not a good person, and I’m afraid Seokjin is going to get hurt.”

“Jeongguk, you can’t call him a bad person just because you got in a fight in high school. That was literally five years ago.”

He knew seeing Seokjin with Taehyung probably hurt Namjoon more, but here he was, playing the devil’s advocate for him. Always the impartial judge.

Frustrated, Jeongguk said, “It was more than a fight, hyung. It’s like he became someone else. I couldn’t even recognise him after a while.”

Fortunately, Namjoon didn’t get to press him more because Taehyung suddenly stepped back from Seokjin and called out, “Chungha, could you go set up the music? I think the speakers are still hooked in. Hobi-hyung, do you mind leading a round of warmups while I take one last look at spacing?”

Hoseok stepped forward from the rest of the team, cheerful grin on his face as he motioned everyone onto the court. Jeongguk missed Hoseok a little, but he’d be ten times more likely to admit that out loud than anything to do with Taehyung.
A short blonde girl disappeared from the crowd and climbed into the commentators’ box to fiddle with the sound system.

Taehyung and Seokjin headed their direction, resuming their conversation. They were still laughing when they stood right in front of the trio by the basket.

“Are you planning on sticking around?” Taehyung directed the question to Seokjin, but Jeongguk answered for him.

“No, we were just leaving.”

Taehyung rolled his eyes, rounding on him. “I wasn’t talking to you, Jeon. I invited Seokjin-hyung to watch our routine and give me feedback. I couldn’t care less what the rest of you do. Well, except Yoongi-hyung. He’s honest. I want him to stay, too.”

Yoongi looked taken aback, face falling into a frown. “What?”

“Sit down.” Taehyung pushed Yoongi into a seat on the bleachers, and he complied easily, too shocked to cuss him out for touching him. Taehyung then did the same for Seokjin, but unfortunately, Jeongguk caught the whisper of, “And don’t you dare take your eyes off me.”

Resigned to their fate, Jeongguk and Namjoon reluctantly sat between the two and watched Hoseok finish warmups. The dance team had formed three lines, and Taehyung strutted to his place in the center of the first, facing the bleachers. He rubbed Hoseok’s arm, thanking him for leading, and the senior dancer fell into place beside him. Park Jimin whispered something to Taehyung, who just shook his head.

Chungha must’ve figured out the audio because she bounced down the home side of the bleachers and slipped into the first line as well, holding a little remote. She looked to Taehyung.

“...Five, six, seven,” and on beat eight, she pressed the button, sliding the remote into her leggings pocket.

Jeongguk braced himself the moment music came over the sound system. He knew the dance team was good. Arguably the best in the country as far as the university scene went. And he knew Taehyung was good.

But he’d gotten better.

The familiar beat to Girls’ Generation ‘You Think’ sent the dancers into motion. The front trio dropped their hips, while the other dancers popped their chests, coaxing the three back up in pulses. They’d cleaned up the original choreography a bit, made it slightly less provocative for a school-sponsored sports event. But it didn’t matter. Lately, Taehyung brought sex into everything he did, and this time wouldn’t be any different. Sometimes Jeongguk wondered if it wasn’t intentional, if he truly didn’t know what he was doing. He tried to focus on anything else as the song went on; his own feet, the overhead fluorescent lights, his friends’ rapture. But he couldn’t. Just like them, he became a victim to the seduction Taehyung had so cunningly laid out for them. No. Not for them. For the student’s section which would undoubtedly be going wild come next Friday. And it was all thanks to the way Taehyung moved. All of the dancers were phenomenal, he couldn’t argue with that. Especially the front line of juniors and seniors. Taemin, Jimin, and Hoseok moved with an energy and passion that you couldn’t find anywhere else. But that’s the thing. Taehyung didn’t move like the rest of the guys.

Taemin, Jimin, Hoseok, Kai...they all got their momentum from their shoulders and upper body,
grounding with their feet. But Taehyung danced more like Lisa, Seulgi, and Chungha, drawing his power from his hips and lower core, arms moving like he was parting water. And however much Jeongguk hated it, he couldn’t look away.

Taehyung wasn’t looking at him, though. He was looking directly at Seokjin, eyes gleaming as they fell into formation to highlight the season’s newcomers. He boosted a sophomore into a backflip, and she landed between Jimin and Hoseok who had slid into perfect splits.

And suddenly the song switched.

A fucking Girls’ Generation medley. Taehyung had to be targeting him on purpose. Targeting the muggy summer afternoons they would spend together in Taehyung’s sunbathed sitting room, blasting Girls’ Generation through his little old stereo, dancing without a care for who saw and singing at the top of their lungs. The bass from ‘Catch Me If You Can’ reverberated throughout the gym and the dancers’ movements got sharper, faster, thrusting and popping in time, switching positions. Taehyung danced in the center now, slender arms up as he gyrated to the beat. Jeongguk tried not to look as his sweater rode up, exposing his a strip of soft golden skin. Then the dancers parted, Hoseok leading a complicated step sequence that Jeongguk could barely follow.

And then the song changed and out boomed ‘I Got a Boy’ and Jimin was spinning into some sort of anatomy-defying flip. The dancers fell back into lines, perfectly synchronised as Chungha and a freshman girl he didn’t know went into cartwheels on the floor, landing back in their original spots.

The gym went silent apart from the heavy breathing of the dancers. Namjoon was the first to break the spell, claps echoing in the room. Then, Yoongi and Seokjin caught on, and finally Jeongguk. It would be petty to deny the whole team a boost of confidence just because he didn’t want to cheer for Taehyung.

“That one felt really good, guys. I’m proud of you,” the dance captain turned to address his team, smile on his face. It looked less fake than usual. “The first half-time show should be memorable, but for the right reasons. And I think we’ve got all of them here. Let’s take five, and then we’ll start getting into details, yeah?”

They nodded their assent and broke their flawless formation to mingle and sip from bottles of water. Taehyung stopped to exchange a few words with his friends. It sounded like they were recounting some of the mistakes of the dance, trying to figure out what they needed to go over. Jeongguk couldn’t imagine what mistakes, but then again, he didn’t choreograph the performance.

Taehyung skipped over to the bleachers not a moment later, more bubbly than Jeongguk seen him in a long time.

“So! What did you guys think?” They knew he aimed the question mostly towards Seokjin and Yoongi, so Namjoon and himself kept quiet.

Seokjin offered him a warm smile. “It was really good, Taehyung-ah.”

Taehyung frowned, clearly disappointed. “‘Really good’ isn’t good enough. It needs to be fantastic. I don’t care so much about flawless, you know that’s not my style, but it has to excite the crowd.”

“Exciting is one word for it,” Jeongguk snorted. He’d meant to keep that comment to himself. Oh well.

Taehyung sighed, focusing that sharp gaze on him. “I’m not in the mood for mind games, Jeon. Just use your words like a big boy.”
“I’m not saying it wasn’t good. It was. But it was also a little…” Jeongguk tried to catch the eye of Namjoon or Yoongi, someone who would know what he was talking about.

“Slutty,” Yoongi finished. Thank you, hyung. “Not all of it. But like...enough of it.”

Taehyung arched a perfect dark eyebrow. “Do you remember what we won nationals with last year?”

Jeongguk fought off a blush at the memory. He wouldn’t be forgetting that one for a long time. It was a miracle he’d been able to play after watching that half-time show.

“Sure, but that was just the varsity team,” Namjoon reasoned. “So you can do songs like ‘Bad Guy’ because everyone on varsity was an upperclassman.”

“I was a sophomore,” Taehyung pointed out. “So was Jimin.”

“Okay, but this year it’s one team, and that team has freshmen on it.”

Technically, it didn’t matter all that much since everyone should be overage, but still, it gave the university a bit of a reputation.

Taehyung considered this, tongue poked out the corner of his lips as he analysed the overhead lights. He must have come to a decision because he faced the gym and called, “Hey, quick, listen up!” Every dancer’s head turned immediately and the room went silent. Jeongguk couldn’t help but be a little impressed; he’d trained them well. “Does anyone feel uncomfortable with the current choreography? You don’t have to say so here, but if you do, please talk to me one-on-one. I don’t want anyone dancing a routine that doesn’t make them feel good. That’s not the point of dance. Don’t worry about hurting my feelings, I think my perception of what’s acceptable has probably gotten a little skewed over the years. So just let me know, alright? I don’t bite.” He glanced at Seokjin, mischief in his eyes. “Well, sometimes I bite. That’s beside the point. We’ll start again in two. We need to work out some spacing issues because Kai almost ran into Jiminie three separate times. That’s right, I counted. So prepare for that. That’s all. Thanks.”

“Taetae, I literally love this routine like my child and if you so much as adjust a hair on its head, I’m calling off our second wedding,” Jimin threatened from the floor where he sat with Hoseok. Were they...were they playing pattycake?

Jeongguk squinted.

Yes. Yes they were.

Seokjin repeated the words, “...second wedding?”

Taehyung nodded, like it was the most logical thing in the world. “I proposed again three weeks ago because he did something that made me feel extra soft. We figured another ceremony couldn’t hurt. Who’s to argue with twice as much cake?”

Jeongguk didn’t like the expression on Seokjin’s face. Or the way he wrapped his arms around Taehyung’s waist and pulled him close, knees pressed against Taehyung’s thighs.

“I’d buy you as much cake as you want, y’know,” Seokjin murmured.

Taehyung twirled a strand of Seokjin’s dark hair around his finger. “I don’t think you understand
the sheer amount of cake that is.”

He didn’t want to listen. He didn’t want to see. But it got harder to ignore them when they were less than a foot away from him.

“How about after practice? We’ll go to that bakery you like right off campus. They stay open late.” Since when did Seokjin know his favorite bakery?

“Mm, that sounds nice. But I have work after practice, hyung. I’m sorry.”

“I’ll drive you to work, then.”

“Sounds like someone’s desperate to spend time with me.”

Jeongguk couldn’t stand it anymore. He got to his feet and started down the bleachers. By the two pairs of footsteps following him, clearly neither could Namjoon and Yoongi.

“What the hell does he think he’s doing?” Jeongguk spat as soon as they were outside. The sun had set, sky a stubborn indigo, glazed over with the glow of orange street lamps. “I thought it would blow over. He promised it would. But now they’re...I don’t even know. It doesn’t make any sense.”

Seokjin knew why Jeongguk hated Taehyung. Had welcomed Jeongguk into his and Yoongi’s friend group after he lost everything, and had given him a sense of friendship he thought he’d lost for good. And now he was falling in love with the bastard who cast Jeongguk out in the first place.

“Seokjin’s getting himself into something he’s not prepared for.”

Jeongguk glanced up. He didn’t expect Namjoon to agree with him so readily, but his brow furrowed, and he kept looking back at the gym doors like he expected Seokjin to appear.

“I’m not trying to speak against Taehyung because I don’t really know him personally,” Namjoon continued. “But he strikes me as the kind of guy who throws his toys away the second he gets bored with them. And I guarantee Seokjin is just another toy to him.”

He thought back to the way Taehyung had looked earlier, boxy grin on his face and crescent eyes.

“What if Taehyung actually likes him?” Jeongguk ventured timidly, almost afraid of the answer.

Yoongi sighed. “Then we let nature run its course? Look, I know this is hard for you. Both of you, actually. But it’s not our place to interfere. If they want to continue going at it like rabbits, that’s fine. If they decide to go on a few romantic dates and get to know each other, also fine. And if they break it off next week and act like total strangers? Guess what? Still fine. You guys can’t stop Seokjin from enjoying himself just because you can’t stand his fling and you’re too much of a coward to tell him you want to hold his hand.” Both Jeongguk and Namjoon shifted uncomfortably under Yoongi’s merciless criticism, examining the leaf-strewn concrete.

“You’re right,” Namjoon finally admitted.

“Of course I am.”

Jeongguk glanced back at the doors again. “Should we wait for him?”

Yoongi shook his head. “I have a feeling he’s very content right where he is. On another note, though, that routine told me all I need to know about their sex life. That eye contact was intense, I
thought Taehyung was gonna devour him right there.”

“Great, now I have to think about that again. Thanks, hyung,” Jeongguk muttered, already working to shove away the image.

“I’m actually going to pass on that one as well,” Namjoon decided. “How about that three-on-three, though? We kicked your ass, Jeongguk.”

“If we hadn’t been so rudely interrupted, my team would’ve made the best comeback since 1998.”

“Utah was thirty-six points down. You were eleven. Still shitty, but there’s no comparison.”

Jeongguk gave a devilish grin. “I guess we’ll find out next Wednesday.”

“We should really stop playing three-on-three in there right before the dance team comes in. Taehyung wasn’t wrong when he said it looks personal,” Yoongi advised.

He shrugged. “And it just got a lot more personal.”

Yoongi stared at him in disbelief. “You’re getting yourself into a mess, Guk. That boy is like a hurricane; and right now, you’re barely standing in the eye. If you’re not careful, he’s gonna sweep you up and destroy you.”

“You make it sound like he hasn’t been trying to for ages. I’ve been the target since freshman year. Don’t worry, I won’t do anything too stupid. I just want to show him that he doesn’t own this campus, y’know? He has every coach, professor, and two thirds of the student body wrapped around his finger. He’s got everything. So a little opposition might just do him some good. Humility never killed anyone.”

“You realise he probably thinks the same thing about you, right?” Namjoon asked.

Jeongguk had never really thought about it. If Taehyung did think those things, he couldn’t be farther from the truth. “It doesn’t matter what he thinks. This is about overthrowing the social hierarchy via coup d’etat.”

“I think you need to retake world history,” Yoongi scoffed.

“And I think you just don’t want to watch me succeed. So...pizza?”

Okay, this was going too far. Jeongguk could tolerate a lot. He could tolerate hearing Taehyung’s deep, sultry voice from across the room at eight in the morning, he could tolerate the flirting that they couldn’t seem to do anywhere else besides right in front of his table...he could even (barely) tolerate the lavender lace panties he found under Seokjin’s bed yesterday looking for a pair of shoes he’d let his hyung borrow. But Taehyung stealing his seat in Philosophy? That was crossing the line.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” he demanded, standing over the table Taehyung and Seokjin currently sat at. The table that Jeongguk and Seokjin usually sat at.

“It’s not a big deal, Jeongguk,” Seokjin quickly tried to reason. “Just pull up a chair.”

Taehyung blinked his eyes open, dark and soft with sleep, looking up from where he had been
leaning on Seokjin’s chest. “Mmm...What?”

“You’re in my seat.” He refused to fall for Taehyung’s bleary gaze. He’d seen him win arguments with that look alone; he had years of training for this moment.

“Oh…” Taehyung glanced around the lecture hall, like he didn’t even remember walking in there. “Sorry, Jeongguk-ssi,” he yawned and got to his feet. Taehyung pressed a kiss to Seokjin’s cheek before wandering over to the other side of the lecture hall and slipping into an empty seat. Within seconds, his head hit the table, eyes closed.

Jeongguk just stared after him. Seokjin had to snap his fingers to get his attention.

“Aren’t you going to sit down? Clearly the seat means a lot to you.”

Reluctantly, Jeongguk sat and pulled out his notes. He glanced back again at Taehyung, who appeared to be fully passed out now.

Leaning in to Seokjin, he whispered, “What’s up with him?”

He sighed, pencil tapping against the table. “He’s really tired. Well, he usually is, but I think last night was particularly rough.” Upon seeing Jeongguk’s confused expression, he elaborated. “Taehyung works nights. He goes to class from eight to six, takes an hour for homework, does dance from seven to nine, and then heads to work. He finishes work between two and four, then takes care of whatever homework he has left. But last night he was out until five, and he still had a project to finish for his Gender Performance class.”

Jeongguk felt an unwilling pang of sympathy for the dance captain. He had no idea Taehyung worked so hard. It didn’t excuse his behavior, but it explained why he had been so short-tempered lately.

One point still perplexed him, though.

“Where does he work that would force him to be out until four in the morning?”

“Bartending.”

Jeongguk nodded. That made sense. “Anywhere cool?”

Seokjin’s brow furrowed. “Actually, I don’t know the name of the place. I don’t think he’s ever told me.”

“I thought you drove him to work?”

“No, he never lets me. Says he doesn’t want me out that late to pick him up.”

“Huh. That’s considerate of him, I guess…” Jeongguk looked straight ahead, attention caught by their professor walking through the door. She turned on the projector and he was locked in for the rest of the class, the newfound mystery of Taehyung pushed out of his mind.

Warmups were winding to an end. Jeongguk had made forty-four of the fifty baskets he shot. Not a terrible average, but he could do better. This was the first game of the season and he was determined to win. An early victory always meant high morale for the team. Namjoon and Bogum
had both made all fifty of theirs, Seokjin had made forty-two and Yoongi had made forty-eight. Minho and Yugyeom had both shot around thirty-five times and made all their baskets. The rest of the team had averaged over two-thirds. They had hope.

The team from Incheon looked pretty good, but Jeongguk felt confident that they were better. They’d won almost all of their preseason games, and they’d been practicing ceaselessly, or at least, as much as the dance team would allow them to. He felt like the second they left the gym, Taehyung was leading his dancers in there, insisting that they still had something wrong with the “spacing.” More like he just wanted an excuse to see Seokjin.

Speaking of, the dance team currently stood on the sidelines warming up with the pep band. All of the dancers were wearing variations of red, black, and white outfits, most even wearing the spare jerseys of players they were close with. Jimin and Hoseok were both sporting Yoongi’s extra jerseys. Jeongguk made a mental note to have a conversation with him about that later. And of course, just to be a bitch, Taehyung wore Seokjin’s red jersey over his black long-sleeve. The name Kim and number 15 were visible even from where he stood by the basket.

Jeongguk just gritted his teeth and waited for the telltale whistle that would signal the end of warmups. As soon as it did, he jogged over to the bench with the rest of his teammates.

“Alright, listen up,” Coach Yun said as soon as they got over there. “First game of the season. I know you’re all nervous, excited, adrenaline is rushing, all of that. But just remember everything we’ve worked on in practice. Breathe. Remember your plays. Think about where you put your feet. These Incheon guys look tough, but they’re nothing compared to you. Namjoon, I want you playing center first. Bogum, you’re good covering shooting guard?”

“Of course, Coach,” Bogum replied cheerfully. He seemed calmer than most of the team, stretching with a relaxed ease.

“Good. Jeongguk, we’re counting on you. You ready?”

Even though his heart raced with anticipation, he simply nodded, smile on his face. “Always, Coach.”

Coach Yun nodded approvingly. “Then let’s kick some ass, boys.”

The five starters raced onto the court as soon as the timer ran down. The stands were packed, cheers erupting when the buzzer went off. Jeongguk lived for home games, for the roar of the crowd, the familiar glossed hardwood under his sneakers, the band blaring their anthem, and yes, even Taehyung’s deep, excited voice leading rounds of chants, doing an effortless job of replacing the absent cheer team. (Traitors had chosen football as their sponsored sport this season). They were all staples of the game, memories he linked with the feeling of being home.

On the halfcourt line, they were met by the Incheon team’s starters and this game’s referee. They took their positions, Namjoon in front, across from Incheon’s center, a guy who’s jersey read Hyun, 11.

The call of the whistle sent the ball in the air. Namjoon tipped it back immediately to Bogum, who sprinted down the court. Jeongguk followed close behind, cutting off the forward that attempted to block Bogum. The player attempted to duck past him, but Jeongguk stepped into the shoulder check, allowing Bogum to pass to Seokjin. Their forward stood at the basket in a matter of seconds, Yoongi warding off attempted steals, and they scored the first two points of the game. Jeongguk could hear their side of the stands fill the arena with cheers, the band struck up a quick fight song, and as he jogged back to half he spotted Taehyung, Jimin, and Hoseok setting up a
They worked in nearly perfect synchronisation, the only slip-ups coming from the players who couldn’t stand each other. All those hours spent practicing were paying off. And actually, it was their unofficial three-on-three matches that seemed to be helping the most. The team knew each other’s moves by heart—where they moved, who they looked to, where they scored best from. Jeongguk felt a sense of pride, having been the one to suggest the matches in the first place. Mostly he’d done it to piss off Taehyung, but this was almost a more rewarding outcome.

By the end of the first half, they were up by thirty-two. The buzzer went off and all five players ran back to the bench, sweaty and panting. They could hear the band going into another round of the anthem.

“Bring it in, bring it in,” Coach Yun urged them, a rare smile on his face. They huddled around him, leaving space for their substitutes to join in. “You’re doing well, for the first official game. There’s always room for improvement, though. Bogum, you’re switching with Namjoon for this half, and Namjoon, I’m rotating Chanyeol in for this quarter. Seokjin, I need you to be more aggressive. I’m putting in Yugyeom for you. Yoongi, I need you to be less aggressive. We’ve given them three penalty shots because of you. I’m switching you out for Minho. We’ll reevaluate after this quarter.”

Yoongi didn’t protest, shrugging. Seokjin gritted his teeth, but held his tongue. Jeongguk wondered why he looked so eager to play. Namjoon seemed fine with the switch, though, and made no comment.

“Jeongguk, are you good to keep going?”

He nodded. Adrenaline had already begun coursing through him. Even if he felt tired, sitting down would just be frustrating. “I’m good.”

Coach Yun gave him a firm pat on the shoulder. “That’s what I like to hear. Take the rest of half time. Catch your breath, drink some water, watch the dance team. Whatever’s gonna get you motivated for the second half.”

Watching the dance team sounded like the least motivating thing to Jeongguk. It hadn’t been so bad last year when Momo had been captain because he could avoid looking at Taehyung. But now that he stood front and center, watching the dance team felt like a punishment. Besides, how Taehyung came into the captaincy was beyond him. Yeah, he was a fine dancer. Pretty good, if he were to be fair. But Hoseok and Taemin were phenomenal dancers. Jeongguk had never seen anyone better. And they were seniors. If Jeongguk were to guess, captaincy was an electoral position, and somehow Taehyung had convinced last year’s team to elect him instead. It wouldn’t be beneath him.

The dance team glided seamlessly onto the court then to the raging applause of the stands. The band quieted as the sound system came to life, and an expectant hush fell over the room. Taehyung counted off silently, tossing his dark hair as he eyed the crowd. His eyes were lined with soft coral shadow and brown liner, lips a cherry gloss. Something predatory gleamed in his gaze, something that brought the audience to the edge of their seats. Jeongguk even found himself tense on the metal bench; as always, he couldn’t look away.

And then the beat thrummed to life and they were off. The routine looked cleaner and more fluid than it had been last week, if that was even possible. All of the dancers exuded a confidence they had been missing, especially the underclassmen.
Beside him, he heard Namjoon lean over and whisper to Seokjin, “I’m surprised you let him wear your jersey.”

Jeongguk subtly watched Seokjin for his reaction, surprised when he simply smiled, eyes never leaving Taehyung. “He was going to wear Bogum’s. I persuaded him to change his mind.”

He didn’t want to think about what persuaded entailed.

The medley had switched into the second part. Taehyung’s highlight; the other dancers falling to the floor as Taehyung hit his moves in perfect rhythm, twisting his arms and gyrating his body in a way that Jeongguk couldn’t even fathom.

“Look at Bogum,” Yoongi whispered in his ear.

Intrigued, Jeongguk glanced farther down the bench. Bogum’s gaze followed Taehyung at every turn, but he seemed far less composed than he had during the game. Jaw clenched, eyes narrowed. Jeongguk had a sneaking suspicion his attitude had something to do with the jersey on Taehyung’s body. Even if it made him equally as angry, Jeongguk felt a wave of satisfaction knowing that at least Seokjin had bested him.

Their dance came to an end two minutes later, performance flawless. Taehyung beamed under the cheers, eyes bright with happiness and relief. Jeongguk realised then just how important this performance had been to him. It was his official debut as dance captain since the cheerleaders got every pep event, and if it didn’t go off without a hitch, his entire season would be filled with doubt and his team wouldn’t trust him anymore. He felt the same way about tonight’s game. If they didn’t win, their confidence and dynamic was in jeopardy. Hopefully, they could pull it off as cleanly as the dance team.

Six minutes were left of half time, and typically the players, dancers, and band mingled during this time or zoned out to stay in the headspace of the game. Jeongguk usually opted for the latter. So he focused on the other team, watching how they moved and interacted, running through plays in his head. Namjoon, Yoongi, Yugeyom, and Chanyeol remained on the bench with him, but Seokjin, Bogum, and Minho all headed for where the dancers were stretching.

Jeongguk ignored them. He knew exactly what they were all there for and he wasn’t interested in watching Taehyung tend to his harem. Instead, he documented how quick on their feet the Incheon players were off the court and tried to recall how each player had moved. There would undoubtedly be substitutions, but they were all coached by the same person, and that influence went a long way.

But it was hard to ignore the way Namjoon kept turning his head to see Seokjin, always turning back a moment later with a disappointed sigh. After the eighth time, Jeongguk couldn’t stand it any longer.

“Just talk to him, hyung, for fuck’s sake.”

Namjoon glanced at him in surprise. “What?”

Jeongguk sighed. “Seokjin-hyung. Talk to him. It’s clearly eating away at you.”

“And the rest of us are tired of you acting like a kicked puppy,” Yoongi added, voice monotone.

“I’m not acting like a kicked puppy,” Namjoon defended himself, highly affronted. “It’s just frustrating to watch. Taehyung doesn’t love him, but Seokjin clearly loves him. He deserves better than to throw himself whole-heartedly at a guy who’s never going to return that unconditional affection.”
“Then tell. Him. That.” Jeongguk emphasized each word, wondering how he could be any clearer.

Namjoon shook his head. “It’s not my place to interfere. Seokjin can make his own choices. And right now he’s choosing Taehyung.”

“Because he doesn’t know that he has other options,” Yoongi stated. “And he’s never going to know if you keep it all to yourself. If you think about it, you’re actually being kind of selfish. Taehyung is going to get bored with Seokjin and drop him faster than Jeongguk dropped the ball in practice yesterday—”

“Hey!” Jeongguk interjected, indignant. “That was one time! And it was slippery with your nasty sweat.”

“The point is,” Yoongi pressed on. “By not telling Seokjin your feelings for him, you’re basically making Taehyung his only option. So it’s going to hurt ten times more when Taehyung ditches him for Bogum or some other self-obsessed jock.”

Namjoon pursed his lips, uncharacteristically annoyed. “Maybe Taehyung won’t leave him. Maybe they’ll start dating.”

Yoongi rolled his eyes. “And if they do, it’ll last all of two weeks. We’ve been over this. They’re not compatible. Seokjin is a romantic who likes all that gooey shit and consistency. Taehyung is noncommittal; he likes excitement and feeling needed. It won’t work. All the more reason to make your point now, I think.”

The two-minute alert went off. Coach Yun beckoned them to the sideline, and Namjoon never got a chance to disagree with Yoongi. He gave them a few more instructions, telling them how to fix any mistakes they’d made in the first half and singling out players from the other team that might pose some problems. Incheon had rotated in their tallest, meanest looking guys, and a shiver of nervousness spread through his body. But Jeongguk pushed it aside. It would be fine. They had a good team. Chanyeol, Minho, Bogum, and Yugyeom were some of the tallest guys he knew, and deceptively fast. Jeongguk refused to be the weak link.

“Everyone got it?” Coach Yun asked. They all nodded. “Good. Then go bring this home.”

Bogum headed out first, the rest of them close on his heels. The ref blew his whistle, and the ball went up. Jeongguk prepared to dart after it if it tipped in Incheon’s favor, and it did. He tore after the player who ran with it, guarding him close, looking for an opening to steal the ball. Another Incheon player came up behind him, and shoved him out of the way. Side aching, Jeongguk listened for the telltale whistle to signal the foul but none came.

Oh, so they caught every little elbow of Yoongi’s but somehow missed a full-blown shove from the other team?

Annoyed, Jeongguk tried to block their shot, but the ball sailed over his head and into the hoop. Incheon was twenty-seven away from catching up now. Still a wide lead, but not a great way to start the second half. The opposite side of the stands clapped and cheered loudly. Whatever. It’s the only thing they’d have to applaud for the rest of the night.

Except that’s not quite how the rest of the night went.

By the time the buzzer went off at the end of the quarter, Jeongguk’s team was losing by eight. Incheon had somehow made a miraculous comeback, scoring twenty-five points in under fifteen minutes. But it was no mystery how they’d managed to get so far ahead. They got away with fouls
left and right; not a single time did the whistle blow, even when Yugyeom was ruthlessly pushed to the ground by one of the other team’s players. Chanyeol’s nose was bleeding. Jeongguk could feel a bruise blossoming on his side. Bogum was holding his wrist where another player had twisted it, and Minho was limping. Even the stands were in uproar, booing the ref and calling substantial bias.

Coach Yun was furious.

“Seokjin, get back in there for Chanyeol. I can’t have someone bleeding on the court, it’s a safety hazard. Chanyeol, there’s a medic on the way. Jeongguk, I’m putting you out for the last quarter.”

“What?” he exclaimed. “No! I need to be playing! What if-”

“That’s final,” Coach Yun cut him off. “If they’re going to play like this is prison basketball, then I can’t risk you getting hurt. You’re on the bench for the rest of the game. Mingyu, step in for him.”

“Got it, Coach,” Mingyu nodded. Determination glinted in his eyes.

Jeongguk bit his cheek, furious. He needed to be out there, taking this game back for them. Coach Yun switched out the rest of the team as well, putting in Youngjae, Jeonghan, and Yoonoh. The buzzer sounded and the team was gone, already pounding onto the court. Trying to suppress his temper, Jeongguk sat rigidly on the bench. No one spoke. Even their side of the stands had stopped chattering, watching for fouls with eagle eyes.

The last quarter was a disaster. Yoonoh tripped over his own feet at least three times, Seokjin missed the only two free throws that were called, Mingyu did his best to stay on guard and break through their defense, but the other team wasn’t afraid to shove him and step on him. Jeongguk felt every blow. The pressure of losing became too much.

The final score was sixty-two to forty-five. It was devastating and infuriating and unjust. They didn’t deserve to lose this game. They’d worked their asses off in practice only to be beaten by a team that cheated their way to victory. It left a bitter taste in his mouth.

Coach Yun didn’t even shake the Incheon coach’s hand.

They stayed in the gym long after the stands had cleared out. The dance team sat there with them, offering to rub the players’ sore muscles and bitch about the unfairness of it all. Seokjin sat dejectedly between Taehyung’s legs, the dancer’s nimble fingers undoing the knots in his shoulders. Hoseok massaged Yoongi while Jimin braided his hair. Even that image wasn’t enough to bring a smile to Jeongguk’s face.

Once the gym was truly vacant besides the two teams, Coach Yun stood in front of them and whistled for their attention.

“I know today didn’t go as planned,” he began, sighing in defeat. “It’s not going to do us any good to dwell on the things we can’t change. Sure, we can state the obvious: they played dirty. But it doesn’t matter. In the official standings, that was a legitimate game, which means we officially lost.”

“Great pep talk, Coach,” Yugyeom commented from the floor. The rest of the team murmured their agreement.

Coach Yun levelled him with a sharp stare. “I’m not done yet, Kim.” He waited until the players fell silent, then continued. “However frustrating this is, we still made mistakes. We still have things we can improve on. And it all boils down to movement. It was sloppy tonight, guys. You
held it together that first half but the heat wasn’t up as high. As soon as it got intense, you stopped thinking about your footwork and started tripping all over yourselves. Now, I didn’t ask the dance team to stay to rub your backs. I’ve talked with Coach Hwang and Taehyung-ssi, and they’ve agreed to practice with you once a week on movement.”

Jeongguk couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Extra practices? Taught by Taehyung? It felt like a slap to the face.

“Is this a punishment?” he burst out. He couldn’t help it.

Taehyung snapped his head up from where he’d been murmuring in Seokjin’s ear.

“Are you really that dense?” he hissed. “I’m trying to make sure you don’t embarrass yourself again. It’s not a punishment.”

“Extra practice with you sounds like a punishment,” he retorted, refusing to back down. “You don’t know the first thing about basketball.”

Taehyung pulled his hands away from Seokjin, glaring at him. “And you don’t know the first thing about moving without blocks of lead attached to your feet. It’s no wonder you couldn’t guard those Incheon guys, you could barely pick your feet up long enough to take two steps.”

Jeongguk balled his fists. He opened his mouth to shoot a stinging remark back, but his coach interrupted him.

“That’s enough! Both of you! Stop arguing like children. These practices are for your benefit,” he told the team, mostly speaking to Jeongguk. “So don’t get angry with Taehyung-ssi when he’s giving up his time and energy to help you ungrateful lot, per my request. Now hit the showers. I expect you all here on Monday at six-thirty with a serious attitude adjustment.”

The basketball team were surprisingly quiet, simply nodding their assent. Jeongguk kept his mouth shut, but he ached to protest. This was a terrible idea. They weren’t going to get anything done, and it would just add to their problems.

Coach Yun dismissed them and the team made their way to the locker room. Jeongguk, Namjoon, and Yoongi paused to wait for Seokjin, who seemed to be soothing Taehyung. The little diva’s face was pinched, like he was going to cry. Seokjin whispered something to him, but Taehyung shook his head and got to his feet. He brushed past Seokjin without saying anything and followed his team out the doors. Seokjin stood in silence by the stands until Namjoon walked over to him and put a comforting hand on his back. Quietly, he led him to the locker room, Jeongguk and Yoongi exchanging confused looks behind them. What did Seokjin say to Taehyung? Why was he so upset?

Jeongguk pushed the thoughts away. He had his own problems to worry about. If Seokjin wanted to talk about it, he’d be there to listen, but other than that, he saw no point in occupying his mind with it. Not only had they lost their first game, but he had to go break the news to his undoubtedly disappointed parents tomorrow over an agonising dinner. This was shaping up to be a fantastic weekend.

Chapter End Notes
I hope you liked the first chapter! I don't know how interesting it is, tbh, but I like writing it. Also taekook really went off gda today wow. You can check out my twitter if you'd like~ i follow back and post writing stuff!
hahaha so my beta pointed out to me that at least one character has daddy issues in all of my fics and i'd say it doesn't mean shit but i'm also not a liar, so enjoy another character with daddy issues~

also i'm posting this several days early but i felt like it so here it is. (chapter title, and the last one too, from king princess's 'prophet'.)

Taehyung and Hoseok lay on his dorm room floor, flicking popcorn at each other and reviewing the game. Jimin couldn’t join them; he’d gone off to...help Yoongi relax. Taehyung felt guilty for keeping Hoseok from joining in, but Hoseok had insisted he’d rather be with him, and he’d never been easy to argue with.

“It really was unfair, the way they lost,” Taehyung commented to his ceiling.

“Of course it was,” Hoseok agreed. “But what can we do about it? The judges ruled it a fair game.”

Taehyung sighed. “I know. If only someone had recorded the second half, we could’ve had the ruling appealed. But I don’t think anyone did.”

“I guess we’ll have to wait and see if anything comes out on it.” Hoseok plucked another piece of popcorn from the bowl, hitting Taehyung on the forehead with it. “So, what’s going on with you and Seokjin?”

Taehyung rolled his eyes. “The same thing that’s been going on with us since sophomore year. You’re not missing anything, hyung. We fuck and then we part ways. It’s not that deep.”

Hoseok sat up, piercing gaze on him. “I don’t believe you. You seemed really upset after the game.”

“I wasn’t upset,” he evaded. “I’m just tired.” Taehyung really didn’t feel like talking about it. He’d made that very clear to Seokjin, and his shameless request to bring him back to his fancy premed dorm and snuggle. Taehyung didn’t just snuggle with his hookups. That felt too much like a relationship, which Taehyung hadn’t signed up for. Besides, he had enough on his plate right now, which he’d also made Seokjin well aware of, in case he didn’t get it already.

“You’re always tired, Taehyung-ah. I spotted tears.”

“There were no tears.” Hoseok crawled over to him, pinching his cheeks. “Aish, get off me!”

“Tell me the truth!”

Taehyung shook his head, torn between wanting to laugh at or hit Hoseok. “You can’t make me!”

A dangerous smile appeared on Hoseok’s face. “You sure about that?”
Suddenly, Taehyung didn’t feel so sure. “...Maybe.”

Fingers assaulted him, tickling his sides and tummy mercilessly. Laughter bubbled and broke from his throat, so hard he couldn’t breathe, trying to swat Hoseok away to no avail.

“O-okay, okay! Stop!” Taehyung forced out, wiping his eyes. “I’ll tell you...please...just...no more.”

Hoseok sat back on his feet, a smug grin on his face. “That’s what I thought.”

Taehyung sat up, catching his breath. When he finally felt ready, he confessed, “I guess I’m just feeling really stressed. I’m working six nights a week, I have dance practice every other day, and now I have to help the basketball team for an extra two hours on Mondays, which means I have to push back dance another half-hour at least. I’m barely keeping up with my classes. I think I might fail Gender Performance which makes me so frustrated because I love that class, but I just haven’t been able to catch up because I’ve devoted so much time to my stupid Movement Analysis project. Philosophy, Jazz, and Pedagogy are the only classes I have full marks in, and that’s only because I don’t have to think as much. And to top it all off, Seokjin keeps trying to convince me to go out with him and I can’t bring myself to do it. And I know every time I change the subject or just ignore it completely, it breaks his heart a little, which in turn breaks mine. I don’t want to hurt him, hyung. I just don’t love him the way he wants me to. But I’m too selfish to break it off entirely, because I really do like him. I want us to stay friends. He’s so sweet and caring, and really I can’t figure out why I don’t love him. I should. He’s never given me a reason not to. But I just don’t feel that spark with him, y’know?”

He desperately wanted Hoseok to provide him with all the answers he needed, but he knew he shouldn’t expect so much. It felt good to get it all off his chest, though.

Hoseok’s bright eyes filled with sympathy. “Taetae, you know it’s not fair to him to lead him on like that. Wouldn’t it just be easier for both of you to end it? You’d have the weight lifted off your shoulders and he could move on.”

Taehyung recognised the wisdom in his words. And yet, “I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because he...he’s one of the only things keeping me going, y’know? Like if I didn’t have him, I don’t know what I would do. He’s always there to listen to me and love me and I’m too selfish to give that up.” Taehyung felt ashamed, but refused to hide the truth. Not from Hoseok, who’d turned out to be a better friend than he ever could have deserved on his own. He had a lot of people in his life to thank for Hoseok, yet he’d never really gotten around to it. Then again, he’d never properly thanked Hoseok either.

And now Hoseok took his hand in his own, lacing their fingers together. Always knowing exactly what he needed.

“I need you to listen to me. Do you promise you’re listening?”

Taehyung hesitated, but nodded. “Yes, hyung.”

“What you’re doing right now is hurting yourself and it’s hurting him. Would you want someone to do that you?”

Hoseok looked him in the eye, and seemed to realise that he had Taehyung squirming under the question.
“If...if it felt like they loved me then...yeah.”

“Aw, Taehyung.” Hoseok scooted closer, wrapping him in his arms. Taehyung rested his head on Hoseok’s shoulder where it felt familiar and safe. “That’s not normal, honey. It’s not healthy. I love you. Jimin loves you. Your dad loves you. And that’s real. It’s not some fantasy you’re making up to cling onto. We all love you so much. You need to talk to Seokjin before this gets out of hand. And when you do, Jimin and I will be right here with lavender boba tea and anime waiting for you. Okay?”

Slowly, Taehyung nodded against him, something stinging his eyes. “Okay,” he mumbled.

Hoseok pulled back, smiling. “Good. Then let’s start working on some of your Gender Performance assignments.”

Taehyung laughed. “I knew this was a setup.” But he was secretly glad for the support. He hadn’t been entirely honest with Hoseok- he fell behind on his classes because he had decided to take on more and more hours. But he was simply grateful to him for being there and willing to help him out. Maybe he didn’t need Seokjin to feel complete.

“So, how’s university going?” his stepmother inquired tentatively over dinner. His parents’ far too large, far too empty house was just about the last place he wanted to spend his Saturday night, especially after last night’s defeat, but he didn’t exactly have much say in the matter.

Jeongguk shrugged. “Good, I guess.”

“We’re not sending you to university just so you can come home and say it’s ‘good,’” his father scolded.

“I’m on an athletic scholarship, it’s not like you’re paying for anything.” Jeongguk tried to keep himself in check, he really did. More than anything, he felt grateful that his little brother stayed at a friend’s so he didn’t have to sit through this painful exchange.

His stepmother placed a comforting hand on his father’s arm, rubbing gently. Her diamond rings flashed with the overhead crystal light. “Remind me what you’re majoring in again, sweetie?”

They asked every time he came home, and it always started a fight. Did they really have nothing else to talk about?

“Film,” Jeongguk replied shortly. He knew this time wouldn’t be any different.

“Oh…” His stepmother went quiet as she picked at her steak. It probably cost more than the bed in Jeongguk’s dorm.

His father’s knife clattered to his plate. “And what exactly do you plan on doing with a degree in film? You’re an athlete.”

“I’m not going to play basketball all my life,” Jeongguk retorted. Especially if they didn’t even make it past the first round. “And I like film. I like capturing the world and shaping it to tell a story.”

"Then explain to me why you’re attending under an athletic scholarship when you don’t plan on pursuing the sport as a career.” His father sat back in his chair, firm dark brows raised in
skepticism.

Because that’s what people do to get a free ride when they don’t want to rely on their asshole father’s money all their life?

Still, Jeongguk met his challenging stare, even if it felt like looking his executioner in the eye. “Because I like basketball, too. Why wouldn’t I do something that makes me happy?”

“Because it’s a waste of your time. If you don’t plan on doing it professionally, quit and focus on your major, however absurd it is.”

He dropped his fork, angry now. “I don’t understand what the problem is. Basketball isn’t just a hobby. It’s a passion. I’m committed, and I have been for years. Didn’t you have other interests when you were going through law school?”

“Nothing that I devoted eight years of my life and millions of university won to.”

“Well, that’s not my fault, is it?” Jeongguk snapped.

“Jeongguk!” his stepmother chided. “Don’t speak to your father with that tone of voice.”

“Sorry,” he muttered.

His father shook his head, black hair staying rigid in its gelled hold. “I keep waiting for you to grow up, Jeongguk. But at this point I’m beginning to wonder if it’s ever going to happen.”

“Don’t try and make me feel guilty about it. It’s my choice. You just want me to become a famous athlete and make more money than I need, even if I don’t love what I’m doing. Because that’s all that matters, right? The amount of won in my bank account?”

“You are on thin ice right now, Jeon Jeongguk.” His father’s voice bit like frost, striking him all the way across the dark oak table.

Jeongguk stood abruptly. “Then don’t let me risk cracking it.”

“Sit down, Jeongguk!” his stepmother pleaded. She turned to his father. “Please don’t fight. Not tonight. Not again.” Always playing the mediator. His father made no such attempt, broad arms crossed, daring him to walk out.

Hot waves of fury roared through him. How dare his father sit there and act like the king of his own goddamn castle while his wife begged for peace? If Jeongguk walked out now, his father would just take his anger out on her.

Biting his tongue, Jeongguk resumed his seat. “Sorry, Sae-eomma.”

“It’s fine, Jeongguk.” Despite how hard she tried, her smile looked weak, red lipstick fading. “Would you like more potatoes?”

He nodded stiffly. “Yes, please. Thank you.”

When Taehyung showed up to Philosophy, he found Seokjin’s seat oddly vacant. Confused, he sat down in it and sent him a quick text.
Me

are you coming today?

Me

i’m keeping your seat warm but i’d prefer cuddles

He didn’t have to wait long for a reply. That’s one thing Taehyung loved about Seokjin; he always texted back.

Seokjinnie

Sorry :( I woke up sick

Me

aw don’t apologise! it’s not your fault hyung

Me

want me to come over there and take care of you?

Seokjinnie

Absolutely not. Stay in class, Taehyung

He seriously contemplated ditching Philosophy to go make soup for Seokjin. It sounded a thousand times better than whatever pointless lecture he was minutes away from having to sit through.

Seokjinnie

I mean it. I know what you’re thinking

and the answer is no.
Me
fine. fine. no chicken noodle soup for you mister.

Me
feel better 😊 let me know if you need anything

Seokjinnie
Thanks baby. I’ll text you after class

Taehyung smiled at his phone, even though he could feel guilt weighing him down. He was supposed to be breaking things off with him, not pulling him in even deeper.

A shadow fell over his screen. Taehyung looked up, smile immediately slipping from his face. Jeon Jeongguk’s lips were drawn into a confused pout.

Why did he always pout when he was angry?

“Where’s Seokjin?”

“Sick.” Taehyung didn’t owe him more of an explanation than that.

“Huh,” Jeongguk simply said, pulling out the chair next to him.

Taehyung eyed him, suspicion bordering on paranoia. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Jeongguk pulled his notes out, not giving him even a glance. “Sitting down. In my seat. The seat I’ve been sitting in for the past two months.”

“You’re really fucking attached to that chair, y’know that? You might want to take it to couples’ counseling because I’m not sure if the feelings are mutual.”

He couldn’t explain what it was about Jeongguk that got him so riled up even after all these years. He just felt like Jeongguk always tried to antagonise him in whatever way possible, so he had to jump to get the first and last words.

Jeongguk sighed, loud and pompous. Like he had any right to act superior. Just because he was Jeon Jeongguk, with his famous daddy and his big fat fucking wallet. Taehyung could give less fucks, honestly. “You’re welcome to move. In fact, I encourage it. Please. Please move.”

Taehyung stubbornly remained glued to his seat. “No. I like this chair.”

“What happened to last week’s Taehyung who scampered away, with an apology to boot, when I asked?”

The memory still haunted him.

“I got some sleep and common sense knocked into me. I will regret that morning for the rest of my
life.” Taehyung checked his phone. It was officially past eight, but their professor hadn’t shown yet. Of course, of all the mornings to be late, she chooses the one when Taehyung is stuck sitting next to Jeon Jeongguk. And yes, he’s aware that technically he could move whenever he liked. But it’s the principle of the thing.

“I see no one’s over here kissing your ass this morning.” Jeongguk commented, ruffling his long dark hair.

When he started growing it out, there had been a very very brief moment where Taehyung considered burying the hatchet. He was thankful that slip of mental cognisance had passed, although the urge to run his fingers through that hair never quite did. Whatever. It didn’t make Jeongguk special. Taehyung just wasn’t above ignoring good hair.

Instead of voicing all this, Taehyung shot him a sharp look. “No one kisses my ass. They have nothing to gain from it.”

Jeongguk arched an eyebrow in disbelief. “Dude, everyone does.” Dude? Please. “All the time. They’re trying to get in on the popularity contest. Why, exactly, I have no idea. This is uni, not high school. That’s why it’s so fucking annoying to walk in on every day. Although, to be fair, it’s probably safer than pissing you off. I would know, after all.”

Perplexed didn’t even begin to cover it. Popularity contest? That didn’t make any sense, he’d never tried to be popular. He’d been a goddamn outcast in high school, that much he knew. Uni had just been a fresh start. Nothing major had changed. He had a few more friends, but his reputation remained just as shitty. At least he’d designed it that way, though. Better to be a slut than a crybaby. Still, Jeongguk’s perception of his friends had to be wrong. Assuming little shit that he was. His friends were genuine; Taehyung had nothing to offer.

Still, as he thought about it, he realised they rarely stuck around for long. Usually after they’d extended the shameless hookup offer (which Taehyung usually shot down on sight) they disappeared. Not that he cared. But he didn’t need more impermanence in his life. And now he felt stuck, counting the number of “friends” that had vanished from his side in the past three years alone. The number went up higher than it should have.

“Oh my god, you really didn’t know, did you?” Jeongguk stared at him in astonishment, doe eyes wide.

Taehyung tugged on the sleeve of his black sweater. “No, I didn’t. I never thought about it, I mean...I just thought...Do people really not like me?”

He hadn’t felt this insecure in a long time. *Fuck you.*

Jeongguk blinked, like he couldn’t believe what he heard.

“Well, no that’s not it. A lot of people like you. Way too much, if you ask me. But I think some people take advantage of you. You change your mind really fast if someone has a different opinion than yours. And you take advantage of them, too, obviously. It’s your specialty.”

He tried to think about it, ignoring Jeongguk’s thorn-pricked words. *Did* he take advantage of people?

“Like...how?”

Jeongguk shook his head. “This is ridiculous. I can’t believe you.”
“Don’t be an ass,” Taehyung snarked. “I’m trying to be civil. It’s not like we have anything better to talk about.”

“We could just not talk,” Jeongguk suggested.

“Not an option. I’m terrible at that.”

Jeongguk snorted. “Never noticed.”

“I’m not above smacking you in this lecture hall, Jeon.”

“And I’m not above smacking you right back, Kim.”

Taehyung glared at the screen in front of them. “Glad we’re on the same page then.”

“You manipulate people,” Jeongguk stated flatly, a few awkward minutes later.

Taehyung chanced another glance at him. Jeongguk had his cheek pulled between his teeth, biting hard. It must hurt.

“I don’t try to.”

Then he thought about it for a second. Thought about how he convinced Coach Yun to let them use the gym on Wednesdays, how he remembered what people liked and didn’t like about him to win their affection, how he used his body and spoke prettily to patrons because he knew it would earn him more money.

“Actually, you’re right. I do try sometimes. But not to hurt anyone. I just...know what people like, I guess. And I try to become that. Is that...is it really so bad?”

Jeongguk watched him out of the corner of his eye. Neither of them could believe the amount of amiability occurring between them, but here they were. “I wouldn’t say it’s good. Why become who you think people want you to be when you could just be yourself?” He fought hard to suppress his incredulous snort, but succeeded. “Then you know all of your friends are genuine.”

Taehyung scratched at the tabletop. “Because isn’t being liked by a large number of people better than being loved by a few?”

The bitter laugh that escaped Jeongguk startled him.

“I would take one good friend over a thousand shitty ones any day.”

The words felt like they were meant for him, molded into just the right shape to pierce his heart. Because he had been a shitty friend. When he promised to be the best friend in the world. When Jeongguk needed him.

“Jeongguk, I-”

“Forget it,” he cut Taehyung off sharply. “It wasn’t supposed to be personal. Just act like I didn’t say anything.”

“But.”

Jeongguk glared at him, the coldness residing in his black pupils enough to shut Taehyung up. “Leave it, Ta- Kim.”
Sighing, he turned to face the front of the room. If Jeongguk didn’t want him to apologise then that wasn’t his problem. He’d already tried to make it up to him so many times, but clearly Jeongguk had no interest in his fruitless efforts. He refused to waste any more energy trying to fix what had been broken for too long.

Their professor rushed in a few moments later anyway, hair a mess, giving them the simple excuse of “They took forever to make my coffee.” Taehyung had no idea why she even bothered. It wasn’t a secret that she hooked up with the psychology professor.

Throughout the class, he did his best to ignore Jeongguk, even though he could feel his proximity like a space heater. They hadn’t been this close in a long time, except for when they got in each other’s faces. But just sitting without snapping at each other? It’d been years.

The drone of their professor’s voice and the warm, comfortable atmosphere distracted Taehyung from Aristotle’s theories of justice and political philosophy. He couldn’t stop thinking, actually, with Jeongguk so close. The last time they’d sat beside each other without fighting was when they were sixteen. Right before everything went to hell.

To be fair, the descent into hell had started two years before, when his family doctor first discovered the malignant cells growing in his mom’s body. Breast cancer, they said. At age fourteen, Taehyung had a grasp on what cancer was. He knew it was a sickness. A bad one. He didn’t know that the five-year survival rate was iffy estimation at best, and his mom became one of thousands who fell victim to an evil that didn’t pick fairly, that took the kind and good without remorse. Two years, most of their savings, and several bouts of unsuccessful chemo later, she died in a barren hospital room on the shortest day of the year, with her hand clutching weakly at Taehyung’s, and his dad crying beside her bed.

He was allowed three weeks to grieve. That’s all he could bear to miss in their rigorous schooling system. When he came back, he clung to Jimin like a frightened stray. Jimin was the only one who knew, his mom having been the nurse that befriended Taehyung’s mom and looked after her as best she could. She cried too, that day.

And he found that his best friend, and maybe something more, had made new friends while he’d been gone, older friends. Jeongguk had grown so angry with him. Taehyung had no idea why. He’d tried to keep it together as much as possible during the chemo; he hadn’t even told Jeongguk it happened because he didn’t want to ruin the few moments of happiness he got when they were together. Jeongguk had been the only thing keeping him going. But suddenly, after twelve years of friendship, he wanted nothing to do with Taehyung. It was a bitter welcome back, to say the least. He tried talking to him about it, but eventually stopped. The verbal abuse wasn’t worth it.

Taehyung didn’t understand, the first time Jeongguk stood by and let his friends call him a number of slurs for trying to make up with him.

But what really ate at him had been the look on Jeongguk’s face when one of his friends pushed him against a bank of lockers, laughing as he spat out “Aw look who’s back here again. The little bitch keeps coming crying to you, Guk. What’d you do, tear his favourite fucking skirt?” And then he’d felt his nose break, blood spattering everywhere, and Jeongguk didn’t move a muscle. Didn’t say a word. Just glanced at his teary eyes and crimson-stained face, lifted his chin, and walked away.

Taehyung didn’t understand because he knew Jeongguk was gay. They’d always talked about boys; boys at school, boys on the street, boys in movies, boys in bands. They’d been each other’s first kisses. And yet, Jeongguk said nothing to defend Taehyung. To his credit, he never pitched in, but his passivity was enough to seal the deal for Taehyung. If Jeongguk could watch his newfound
friends treat him like shit, then he didn’t want anything to do with him, either.

Eventually, Taehyung made himself forget what Jeongguk’s room looked like and the way his eyes lit up when he saw something particularly enthralling. He stopped paying attention to what Marvel movies were coming out. He stopped caring what Jeongguk and his homophobic friends thought of him, dressing and acting how he pleased.

The animosity between them only grew with time. When the fights started, they were all about the little things at first. Accusations of stealing a pencil, a stupid comment in class, a shirt that Taehyung wore (that he looked fantastic in, thank you very much), Jeongguk cutting his cute coconut hair without consulting him first...those things grew into something bigger. Soon enough, they were arguing over every breath the other took, it seemed, whether they wanted to or not. They couldn’t help themselves. As soon as Jeongguk walked in a room, he had to make some comment about Taehyung. The moment Taehyung’s eyes landed on him in the hall, he had to remind Jeongguk of a mistake he’d made or some embarrassing thing Taehyung had caught him doing. It was petty and sickening, the mess their relationship had devolved into. But getting a rise out of him became addictive. He thought it would all come to an end with high school.

Of course it was just their luck that they’d end up going to the same university. Luckily, they were interested in different things. Jeongguk got in on an athletic scholarship for basketball, and he chose to study film. Taehyung felt secretly happy that Jeongguk chose to pursue his passion; he knew his father had been pushing Jeongguk to become a lawyer and politician like himself. And while Jeongguk was busy becoming a campus star and partying every weekend, Taehyung barely made it through his freshman year. He spent most of it back home, actually.

The news came in November. They’d suspected for a while, but didn’t want to put a name to it. But time passed, and his dad’s never-ending exhaustion, illness, weight loss, and pain became too much to ignore. Leukemia. Chronic myeloid leukemia, to be exact. That’s all their doctor told him.

Taehyung was older then. He knew. Knew his dad had a chance of dying, and he’d be left alone with more grief and debt than he could manage.

But they were lucky. Advancements in research had been made rapidly in the last two decades. There was a new (expensive) treatment plan they could get his dad on that raised his five-year survival chance from sixty-seven percent to ninety percent. He started showing signs of life again. He smiled, he squeezed Taehyung’s hand when he held it. He didn’t hate the world as much. And soon, he was discharged from the hospital’s care.

All of this came at a price. A high price. One that Taehyung still paid today. But it was worth it. Every second with his dad was worth the hours spent selling himself to men that had no idea what they were paying for, and they didn’t care. Taehyung preferred it this way.

“Kim Taehyung!”

Startled, Taehyung blinked and looked up. His professor stood with her hand on her hip, tapping her foot impatiently.

“Um, yes?”

“Why enroll in my class if you spend half of it asleep anyway?”

Taehyung tried his best to muster a nervous smile. “I enjoy your class, Kyosu-nim. It’s not my intention to fall asleep.”
Jeongguk snorted beside him and Taehyung kicked his ankle.

His breath hitched, whispering furiously, “You little shit.”

Jeongguk kicked him back.

Their professor arched her thin brows. “I’ll let it pass this time, and only because you maintain full marks. I recommend you start discussing with your project partner.”

Taehyung cocked his head. “Project partner?”

“Yes. While you were constructing your own little narrative in your head, the rest of the class were assigned partners for their end-of-semester project.”

“And mine is…?”

She shook her head in disbelief, pointing a manicured nail to his left.

Taehyung slowly followed her finger, eyes locking with Jeongguk’s. He didn’t exactly trust the murderous intent he found there.

Immediately, his hand shot up. “Kyosu-nim, can I switch partners? I feel threatened by my current one.”

“Hey!” Jeongguk exclaimed indignantly. “I’m not threatening you!”

“He kicked me,” Taehyung pressed on. “And said he was gonna hit me.”

“Only because you said you were going to first!”

“Stop it, both of you!” his professor shouted angrily. The rest of the class had been watching their exchange, as they always did, and flinched at her tone. “I’m sick of you arguing constantly when I’m trying to teach. Even when you’re sitting across the room from one another, you manage to cause a commotion. Which is why, through this project, you’re going to figure out whatever the hell it is that makes you fight all the time and resolve it so the rest of us can enjoy our mornings again. That’s my final decision, and I don’t want to hear another word from either of you to the contrary. Understood?”

Taehyung gaped at her in astonishment. He refused to believe they’d been that obvious.

“Understood, Kyosu-nim,” Jeongguk stated clearly. Kiss-ass. Content with that, she let them be and headed to her desk.

Quietly, he whispered to Jeongguk, “She’s a sociopath. No one enjoys their mornings.”

“I happen to enjoy the morning very much,” Jeongguk sniffed.

“My point exactly.”

“It’s the best time to run.”

“And how does that not make you a sociopath? Who the hell runs?”

Jeongguk’s narrowed gaze travelled down his body for a split second. Taehyung couldn’t explain why he had to suppress a shiver. “You’re a dancer. Isn’t cardio like your number one type of exercise?”
Taehyung rubbed the back of his neck guiltily. He shouldn’t let Jeongguk shame him for his exercise habits. “Um, I think it’s supposed to be.” A laugh escaped Jeongguk. Huh. Wasn’t expecting that. By the look of shock on Jeongguk’s face, neither was he. “Not to say I don’t exercise!” he rushed to defend himself. “Because I do. A lot. I’m just...I get distracted easily, okay? I can’t focus when I run. There’s too much going through my head. I start thinking about classes, or work, or what my dog is doing, and soon enough, I forget to run at all. The worst is when I think about routines because then I have to go plan them out right then and there. Running is basically the worst for me. Music can only block out so much.”

“You’ve just gotta find one thing to focus on that motivates you to run,” Jeongguk said, confident. Surprise coursed through him; Jeongguk didn’t make fun of him. “I think about how running now will make practice easier later. Set your sights on a goal.” He eyed Taehyung thoughtfully. “You like cake, right?”

Taehyung felt a flush creep up his cheeks. So Jeongguk had overheard his conversation with Seokjin that day. No wonder he walked out.

“I love cake,” he admitted, even though he was certain Jeongguk already knew the answer. They’d had enough cake together. Birthday cake, in particular. Twenty-four birthday cakes. “Vanilla in particular, but I’m open to trying new things.”

Jeongguk’s lips formed half a smile for a split second. It disappeared as quickly as it came, like Jeongguk had suppressed it the moment he registered its presence. “Then think about how much more cake you can allow yourself to eat if you run. Obviously not enough to make yourself sick, but you’d probably feel better eating it if you knew you weren’t going to gain weight, right?”

It’s like he could see right through Taehyung. He denied himself a lot of the things he loved these days to keep his body in the condition the club demanded. He was supposed to be slim, but soft. A perfect blend between edges and curves. Thin waist, round hips, slender legs. It wasn’t an easy shape to maintain, but he did his best. Desserts had always been his favourite temptation. A little running could probably go a long way.

And maybe...a little effort could go just as far. Far enough to take him to the reconciliation he’s sought for five years. Or not. He didn’t care. It’s not like he had anything to lose. It’s not like he had anything he wanted to gain.

Hesitantly, he nodded. “Right.”

Jeongguk seemed satisfied knowing he his assumption had been correct. Nothing satisfied him more than being right. “So just set a goal and stick to it. Start by running three times a week. Allow yourself a reward on the first day and the third day. Then make it four times a week. Switch to rewards on the first and the last days. And then make it five, and switch the reward days again. Go until you’re comfortable, and when you want to run without the motivation, you’ll know your body has adjusted to the routine. It usually helps to run with someone to make sure you hold yourself accountable, at least for the first couple weeks.”

Taehyung thought about this for a moment. “I used to work out with Jimin, but he’s way more committed than I am, and I felt like I was holding him back. Hoseok-hyung isn’t available in the mornings, he teaches a morning dance class for his Pedagogy project.” An idea struck him. “Maybe I’ll ask Seokjin-hyung. He’s always wanted to do something like that together. Once he’s better, of course.”

He didn’t expect Jeongguk’s flat reply.
Tilting his head, he inquired, “Why not?”

Jeongguk had his tongue pressed against his cheek, like he wanted to say something, but couldn’t. Finally, he shrugged. “Seokjin just doesn’t like running. Especially not in the mornings.”

Confused, Taehyung responded, “But he’s always suggested working out together…”

“Believe me, Taehyung, he’s not interested.”

Suddenly this felt like it was about something else entirely.

“You just don’t want me spending time with him.”

Jeongguk didn’t deny it.

Feeling both victorious and frustrated, Taehyung said pointedly, “What is your problem? It’s not hurting you. It’s not even about you. I like Seokjin-hyung. We’re friends.”

“You’re a lot more than friends,” Jeongguk replied shortly.

“Not really,” Taehyung muttered. “Even if he wants to be.”

Jeongguk stared at him. “So you’re really just leading him on, then?”

“No!” Taehyung defended himself. “He knows where we stand. I’ve made that very clear since the start. We can be friends and we can have benefits, but we can’t be anything more than that. It doesn’t mean I just want to sleep with him. I want to do friend things with him, too. Like running.”

Jeongguk shook his head, long wavy hair bouncing. “He’ll never be able to discipline you.”

Poor word choice. Taehyung scooted to the edge of his seat, eyeing Jeongguk with a mischievous gleam in his eyes.

“You think you could?”

He’d meant to toy with him, never one to shy away from the chance to see him blush.

But Jeongguk just shrugged indifferently. “Probably. Not that I’d want to. I’ve already committed to extra practices taught by you, I’m not going to take on more suffering.”

Taehyung sighed. He still had one more card in his hand. “Guess I’ll just have to beg Bogumie- hyung to do it with me, then. He’s very athletic. He’d know how to whip me into shape.”

Jeongguk’s attention snapped back to him faster than whiplash. Victory. “He’d go too easy on you.”

“You’re right, he probably would. But he’s all I’ve got. And I know he’d take good care of me.”

He could see the struggle on Jeongguk’s face, torn between his fermented distaste for him and his even stronger hatred of Bogum.

“Fine. I’ll do it. But we’re doing this my way. When, where, and how. Got it?”

Triumph filled his grin. “Absolutely.” Another idea struck him. “Wait, Jeongguk!”
Startled, the basketball player flinched. “What?”

“Our project! We should do it on the effectiveness of a reward-based system and how that applies to Aristotle’s theory of appetitive motivation. We could even use our runs as the study.”

Jeongguk raised his eyebrows. If Taehyung wasn’t mistaken, that was the face of someone who looked impressed. “That’s...actually not a bad idea. In fact, it might be a really good one. Your first good one,” he added, just in case Taehyung thought he’d gone soft in a matter of minutes.

Yet he just beamed, responding, “Yay! I get to eat cake and get an A!”

Sometimes when sweets got involved, he forgot to be mean.

“Don’t forget the part where you have to run every other morning,” Jeongguk snorted. At least he remembered.

The smile immediately dropped from his face. “Oh yeah…”

“And I get the pleasure of running with you.”

Taehyung decided to pretend like he wasn’t being sarcastic.

“You’re welcome.”

“This doesn’t make us friends,” Jeongguk warned.

“I’m well aware. But it makes us talking, which works for me.” He tried to hide his vulnerability with a nonchalant shrug.

Jeongguk looked at him, doe eyes narrowed in confusion. “Since when were you interested in us interacting at all? I thought we had a good thing going.”

Taehyung picked at a nail. “Kyosu-nim had a point. I’m sick of fighting with you every second of every day. It’s getting old. We’re not friends. But a break would be nice. Coming up with so many clever retorts is exhausting, not that you’d know. That doesn’t mean I won’t take every opportunity to push your buttons, though. You make it too easy.

“Wow. Do my ears deceive me, or was that the most dickish apology I’ve ever received?”

“No. It’s a compromise. Take it or leave it.”

_I’ve tried apologising a thousand times, yet somehow this is the only one that got through your thick skull._

Jeongguk hesitated, then said, “Yeah, sure. I’ll take it. But only because I don’t like seeing the dance team and the basketball team at odds. It’s bad for the energy during games.”

“Sure, Jeon,” Taehyung scoffed, but he allowed more tease than venom in his tone. “Let’s make an outline for this project before class ends, yeah?”

... Taehyung sat on the metal bench, stretching his legs. He’d switched into a pair of soft black pants and a black and white striped sweater as soon as he got out of class, then ran to check on Seokjin.
He had started feeling a little better than he had been this morning, and allowed Taehyung to stroke his hair as he talked through all his plans for tonight’s practice. He had dance practice right after this, and then work, so he’d just tossed his outfit for later (folded carefully in separate smaller bags, of course) into his duffel bag, along with his makeup and hair products. Mondays were about to become the worst day of the week, as if they weren’t already.

The sound of the gym doors clattering open alerted him to the team’s arrival. Coach Yun informed Taehyung he couldn’t make it to these practices, something about the addition of Monday faculty meetings, so he instructed him to take charge. How exactly he was supposed to wrangle the twelve jocks strutting through the doors, he had no idea. Apparently he’d just have to figure it out.

Ah, improvisation. His favourite.

“You’re all two minutes late, but I’ll give you points for showing up together,” he greeted them, sliding his legs off the bench. He didn’t miss Jeongguk’s eye roll. Of course he wasn’t going to act like they’d come to an understanding in front of his friends. He never could. That’s fine. Taehyung didn’t have to treat him differently, either.

“Have you been waiting long?” Bogum asked, voice filled with genuine concern. Taehyung felt bad; he’d been cutting their time together short lately. But today was about business. He had no interest in flirting with the basketball team. He had enough problems with just two of them already.

“Not at all,” he said smoothly. “I’m glad you all dressed appropriately. What we’re going to be doing today is a little different than what you’re used to, but I’m glad you all came. If you didn’t, I’d have to hunt you down and drag you here by your ears, and that wouldn’t be fun for any of us.” Ignoring the quiet laughs and murmurs, Taehyung continued, “We’re gonna start with a round of simple warmups. Nothing too strenuous. I just want to get a feel for your stamina and how good you are with aerobic movement. Form two lines of six.”

To his surprise, the basketball players complied immediately. Namjoon, Yoongi, Jeongguk, Bogum, Minho, and Yugyeom formed the first line while Chanyeol, Youngjae, Yoonoh, Jeonghan, Mingyu, and Sungjae formed the second. Taehyung vaguely wondered if it was just natural to put your starters in front. Did they have some sort of unspoken basketball hierarchy?

He stood in front of them, trying to exude confidence and ease.

*If you can seduce a crowd of hundreds every night, you can whip twelve athletes into shape.*

“First things first, I just want you to do some easy arm stretches.” He led them through a round of stretches they were familiar with, watching as they worked their upper-body without discomfort.

Once he had a good gauge of their basic abilities, he instructed, “Alright, now I want you to try full body movement using body rolls. Start with the spine.” Taehyung paused, demonstrating by first rolling his shoulders, arching his back to roll his spine, and then his hips. He did a variation of that move on men’s laps frequently, but he made sure to keep it PG for his onlookers tonight. “One thing I noticed on Friday was how tight all of your movements were. Tense shoulders, tense arms. That’s going to inhibit speed and affect your confidence.”

The basketball players were hesitant. Namjoon tried to move his shoulders, but his motions were in stutters, like he didn’t quite get it. Bogum did it for a second, but then turned his attention immediately back to the front. Yoongi wasn’t even trying. Jeongguk and Yugyeom did it perfectly, though, grinning as they tried to one up each other on sex appeal.

“Yes, just like that.” Taehyung gestured to them. “Do it how they just did. Minus the cringy
thrusting, though, if you would. Start with the shoulders, carry the movement through your body. Don’t split it up into three different parts. I want to see thirty seconds of body rolls. Loosen up, or else we can’t move on to more important things.”

They started to get it, then, keeping their eyes on Jeongguk and Yugyeom. Taehyung counted off, voice steady and clear. Their bodies began moving in synch. If only they’d been this coordinated, maybe they still could’ve pulled that rigged game out of the bag.

“...twenty-nine, thirty. Perfect. Okay. Now that your shoulders are loosened up and your spines are aligned, take a seat on the floor.” Taehyung sat first, waiting patiently as the players settled in a circle. “You should be familiar with these. Just your average leg stretches. Always stretch your upper body before your legs, otherwise you’re not going to be as flexible, and you increase the risk of cramps and pulled muscles.” He placed a straightened leg in the circle, bending his body in half to reach it with both hands, then pulled back up with a sweep of his arms, stretching those as well.

“I...didn’t know that,” Sungjae mumbled. “Sometimes we stretch our arms, but mostly Coach just has us do lunges and occasional full leg stretches.”

The other players nodded. Even Jeongguk agreed.

“Usually, we don’t even stretch,” Yoongi added. “We jump right into warmup free throws.”

Taehyung was appalled. “But you have to stretch. Your body can’t perform to its fullest if you don’t give it a chance to adjust. Going from one to one-hundred is just about the worst thing you could do for it. No wonder you’re all so tense.”

“It’s not exactly the highest thing on our list of priorities,” Jeongguk pointed out, also reaching for his leg with a frustrating amount of ease. It would be nice to watch him struggle with something for once. “We can’t beat the other team by stretching.”

Taehyung arched an eyebrow. “And who said you can’t? Basketball is as much of a mental competition as it is a physical one. If you go into the game with the wrong headspace, you’re never going to score. And if the team is collectively dejected or put off, then you’ve already lost. Stretching relaxes the mind and puts you in a positive mental place to focus. It gives you a chance to think and pay attention to your body. Which brings me to what I wanted to talk about today. When you feel ready, take a seat on one of the benches.”

All of them remained on the floor for another few minutes. They seemed to have taken Taehyung’s advice to heart, and were focused on becoming intune with their bodies. Yoongi was the first to stand, of course, and Jeongguk followed close behind him. Minho and Bogum were predictably the last to get to their feet.

“Alright,” Taehyung began, facing them. “I’m here to talk to you about movement. Not necessarily the change in physical location from one place to another. I prefer a different definition. In art, movement is defined as the path an artist creates for the viewer’s eye to follow by using lines, shapes, and edges. That’s what I try to remember when I dance. I’m creating a path of movement for the audience to follow, and it’s up to me to choose the tools I use. The same thing applies for all of you. You’re drawing patterns on the court with your steps. It’s intentional and deliberate. A perfect combination between thought and action. And it’s all about connecting your head to your feet. Now, I know that for some of you, this might be difficult.” He looked straight at Jeongguk with a slight twitch of his lips, not wasting an opportunity to piss him off. “It’s a concussion-heavy sport, after all. But I need you to find balance. If you use your head too much, you’ll overthink the entire game. When you inevitably screw up, because you will, we all do, you won’t be able to find your rhythm again. But if you rely too much on instinct and how quick you believe yourself to be,
you’ll end up making a split-second decision that could cost you the game. Balance. That’s the word I want you to remember today.”

He surveyed the players, eyeing all of them thoughtfully. He needed his example to be clear and precise, otherwise the analogy would fall apart.

“Hmm...let’s see. Jeongguk?”

Jeongguk’s eyes went wide. “Huh? I mean, uh, yes?”

Taehyung smirked in satisfaction, always pleased to catch him off guard. “Never mind, you’re not ready. Yoongi-hyung? Could you join me out here for a minute?”

He saw Jeongguk’s mouth fall open in anger, but he shut it again after a minute as Yoongi trudged over to Taehyung. The basketball player eyed him nervously, like he thought Taehyung might attack him at any moment. What a silly worry. Taehyung only attacked the people he cared about.

“Jeonghan, could you pass me that ball over there?” He pointed to the ball rack the player was sitting beside, catching the ball he tossed in his direction. “Great. Follow me.” Taehyung walked over to half court, and levelled Yoongi with a pleasant smile when they reached the center line. “Your only job is to steal the ball from me and make a basket. You have from half court to base. If I beat you there with the ball in hand, I win.”

Yoongi arched an eyebrow, clearly skeptical. “I’m a shooting guard. Stealing is literally my job.”

Taehyung shrugged. “Then it’d be really embarrassing if you lost, wouldn’t it be?”

His cat-like eyes narrowed. “I’m not going to lose.”

Taehyung said nothing, simply smiled again and took off, dribbling down the court. Yoongi tore after him, caught off guard. He darted in front of Taehyung, arms in proper position, but his feet were angled all wrong. Taehyung thought that might be the case, which is why he picked him in the first place. Gracefully, he weaved in and out of Yoongi’s guard, unsurprised when the athlete’s ankles twisted together and he stumbled, cursing. Taehyung continued towards the basket, Yoongi chasing him the moment he got his bearings.

He didn’t plan ahead. The moment he sprung in front of Taehyung again, he made exactly the same mistake, forgetting to anticipate his turn. Taehyung spun on his toes, heard Yoongi’s telltale cussing, and jumped. The ball passed cleanly through the hoop. He retrieved his own shot and tucked the ball against his hip.

Yoongi stared at him in astonishment, expression mirrored by his teammates. “How...?”

“You rely too much on your instincts,” Taehyung explained. “Which might not be a huge problem among basketball players, since you learn the same things, but in dance, that wouldn’t fly. I pulled the same move on you twice, and you didn’t learn from either of them because you were so sure you could just figure it out when you got in front of me. Not a single thought was spared to your footwork, which is why your feet always ended up bent the wrong way to block me. I predicted where you’d stand to guard me, and used that to figure out how to trip you up.” Yoongi blinked a couple times. Taehyung fended off a laugh at his amusing expression. “Thanks for your participation, hyung, you can go sit down now.”

Taehyung watched the players on the benches again. They were looking back at him almost eagerly. Their stances were oddly similar to the ones of the club’s patrons when he went on stage. Maybe stripping and teaching weren’t that different after all.
“I’m gonna need another volunteer,” he stated. Hands shot up instantly: Bogum and Minho of course, but others, too. Sungjae, Jeonghan, Yoonoh...But Taehyung needed someone specific.

“Namjoon-hyung,” he decided. “Would you come here?”

Taken aback, the team’s star player pointed at himself. “Me?”

Taehyung had the strangest urge to poke his dimples, already putting himself in character “Yes, you. You’re exactly what I need.” He curled the end of the word a little, higher than his usual pitch, breathier.

Namjoon swallowed, but stood up and made his way to half court.

“Same rules apply. And you should do even better than Yoongi seeing as I told you exactly what I was looking for. Stealing this ball from me should be a piece of cake. You’re the best there is, right?”

“I-I don’t know.”

Damn, did that boy need a little self-confidence.

Taehyung squeezed his bicep, trailing his fingers down his arm as he moved into position. “That’s what I’m told. It’d be a shame if you didn’t live up to that expectation now. I’ve been waiting to see you in action all day.”

He could see the gears in Namjoon’s brain working, processing each word that came out of his mouth. Got you, he thought with triumph.

Not one to use the same trick twice, he made sure Namjoon knew he decided to go before he took off with the ball. The tall center streaked after him, but his steps were uncertain. He was watching Taehyung, keeping an eye out for his every move. Deciding he liked this game, Taehyung suddenly switched directions, now dribbling to the right side of the court. He could hear Namjoon falter behind him. The center cornered him, arms raised like a cage, and a flash of victory appeared in Namjoon’s eyes. Too soon. Taehyung turned, ducking under Namjoon’s arm, and ran for the basket. Heavy footfalls picked up in pursuit. He raised his arms to shoot, but Namjoon was suddenly blocking him, so he changed his mind and snatched the ball back before it could leave his fingertips. Not technically travelling, since he’d never ceased being in motion. Taehyung dribbled a neat box step around Namjoon because he could and shot again, this time allowing the ball to enter the air and sail through the hoop. Applause erupted from the guys on the bench.

Namjoon lowered his arms in defeat. After a moment he said, “Damn. I take it you’re going to give me a detailed rundown of everything I did wrong?”

Taehyung patted his back. “You bet your ass I am. Take a seat.” Once he had settled back on the bench, Taehyung addressed all of the athletes. “Anyone have an idea where Namjoon messed up?”

Hesitant, Mingyu raised his hand. Taehyung pointed at him. “He always waited for you to move before he did. It was all defensive and reactionary.”

“Good guess. That was part of the problem, but not his first mistake. Anyone else?”

Minho piped up. “He didn’t expect you to switch it up so suddenly. He should’ve predicted that.”

Taehyung ruffled his already mussed hair. Coaxing it into an acceptable shape for work was going to be such a painstaking task now. “Not quite. That was a result of the first thing that went wrong.”
Jeongguk sighed dramatically. “You psyched him out before the game even started. The flattery, the touching, all of it was to mess up his headspace.”

Pleased, Taehyung applauded. “Bingo! Namjoon-hyung was entirely in his head. And I made sure to put him there before I even had the ball in my hands. Your opponents aren’t going to be above doing this before a game, especially during warmups. And the moment you’re too far in your own mind, you stop paying attention to your feet, or their feet for that matter. You could argue that it’s an underhanded tactic, but it’s effective, and probably more widely used than you know. Figuring out your opponent’s strategy is half the game. The other half is moving your own feet to counter your predictions for how they’ll move theirs. Balance. Between up here,” he tapped his head. “And down here,” he bent, folding himself in half to touch his toes. “I need one more volunteer. Someone who thinks they can manage to actually complete the challenge now that they’ve seen both sides of the spectrum. And remember- you’re the professional basketball players. I’m just a dance major. If none of you can steal a ball from me, then I think Coach Yun needs to reevaluate his team.”

He knew poking at their pride would get a good reaction. Every hand shot up. One hand in particular caught his attention.

“Put your hand down, Jeon. I already told you, you’re not ready.”

Jeongguk’s hand remained firmly in the air. “How the hell am I not ready? I know I can do this. Give me a shot.”

“See, that’s exactly it,” Taehyung huffed in exasperation. “You let your temper get the better of you. I’m afraid you’ll get mad when you realise you can’t do it and hit me or something.”

Jeongguk’s jaw dropped with indignation, hand falling with it. “I would never!”

Taehyung raised an eyebrow. “You literally threatened to break my nose last week. You said you’d smack me this morning.”

Yes, he brought it up again. He had a right to be petty.

“Seriously? You’re on this again? You threatened me first,” Jeongguk retorted, standing up. “I’m doing this.”

Taehyung was sick of arguing with him. In fact, he might just relish the chance to prove Jeongguk wrong. It seemed all semblance of the careful peace they’d established in class disappeared on the court.

Funny how that worked.

“Fine. Get your ass over here, then.”

Jeongguk stalked across the court. Taehyung tried to ignore the way his muscles flexed as he crossed his arms, the sleeves of white t-shirt doing nothing to hide his prominent veins. He gulped involuntarily. Yes, he hated Jeongguk. Hated him for the things he’d done, for the promises he’d broken. But he’d gotten frustratingly attractive as time passed, morphing from this adorable, bunny-toothed kid to a powerful, intimidating man. And that exact type had always been Taehyung’s weakness.

“You alright there?” Jeongguk asked, confident and smug. “You seem a little distracted.”

Taehyung realised he’d been staring. “Perfectly fine.” He tore his gaze away and picked the ball
up. It’d be an embarrassment to have his own tactic used against him, so he pushed his memories of Jeongguk from his mind, as well as any half-formed notions about his body, and focused on the task at hand.

If he lost to Jeongguk, he’d never live it down.

“Ready, Jeonggukkie?” He stared daringly into those dark eyes, a half-smile curving his lips.

Jeongguk stared right back at him. “Always.” The word sounded more like a growl.

And Taehyung took off. Or at least, he tried to. His nose collided with Jeongguk’s chest, who’d stepped into his dribble. Hissing, he side-stepped out of it and ran again, maintaining a steady rhythm. Jeongguk’s footsteps pounded behind him. Before he knew it, the athlete darted in front of him once more, body like a brick wall. Taehyung twisted on his heel, managing to pass him again, but Jeongguk turned the other way and cut him off before he got far enough in the key to shoot. He wasn’t a basketball player, he didn’t have the technique to make a three-pointer on the fly like this. Jeongguk seemed to pick up on his hesitation and his hand flashed out. Taehyung felt the ball leave his grip. Jeongguk twirled it in his hands, smirking at him before racing towards the other side of the court. Refusing to give up so easily, Taehyung followed in hot pursuit. His opponent glanced back at him, long hair flying in his eyes. He should really tie that back.

Taehyung was gaining on him now, and cut in front of Jeongguk, making a snatch for the ball. His fingertips brushed the rough surface, but didn’t find sustainable grip. Jeongguk surged forward, trying to move past Taehyung, but he put too much of his body weight into it. Their chests collided, toppling them to the ground. The ball rolled away as Jeongguk’s body landed on top of his, hands pinning Taehyung’s wrists on either side of his head in an attempt to break his fall, putting all his weight on his knees so as not to hurt him.

Taehyung locked eyes with Jeongguk, and time froze for just a moment. They were suspended, caught in a time and place that they were never meant to be. A tense, silent space, filled with heat and an inexplicable electric burn that seemed to twine around his legs and arms, keeping him motionless.

There was a brief flash of something other than hatred buried in those bottomless shining pupils, bunny teeth visible through his parted pink lips. Taehyung couldn’t help but stare. The grip on his wrists tightened. And then Jeongguk released him, abruptly getting to his feet.

“We’ll call it a draw,” he muttered, heading for the door.

Taehyung sat up, not even aware he was out of breath until he was panting for air. He watched Jeongguk’s retreating back, wondering what the hell had just happened.

Slow, sarcastic applause broke the tense silence that had somehow settled over the gym. Yoongi had begun clapping from his place on the bench.

Torn between anger and confusion, Taehyung stood up and brought the ball back over. He barely faced the team to address them.

“That’s all for today. You’re free to go.” An unwelcome tremor lingered in his voice.

The players seemed more than happy to leave and forget whatever that was, but a couple paused to thank him for his lesson. Taehyung accepted the praise, and thanked them for coming. After a few minutes, and a quick hug from Minho, only Bogum remained in the gym with him.

“You wanna sit?” Bogum asked quietly, patting the bench beside him. Taehyung nodded and sat,
not trusting himself to speak. “Do you know what that was about? Why he just walked out?”

Taehyung shook his head. He had no idea. But Jeongguk remained as immature as ever. “I mean, I get it. He hates me. Bowling me over in front of all his friends is probably the last thing he wants to do. But he could’ve just brushed it off. Why would he leave?”

Bogum shrugged. “Jeongguk is weird sometimes. He spends a lot of time in his head, I think. I bet there were a million things he wanted to say but just couldn’t figure out how to say them. It happens during practice, too. If he’s frustrated or angry, he usually just removes himself from the room. I would know,” Bogum joked. “He’s angry with me every two mintues.”

“What would he be angry with you? You barely talk.”

Taehyung asked even though he knew the answer. Jeongguk had never liked Bogum. Why exactly, well, he didn’t know that answer.

The bench creaked as Bogum shifted self-consciously. “Well, I think it’s because of you. He knows we’re close, and that pisses him off.”

Why would it?

Still, Taehyung’s chest bubbled with guilt. “I’m sorry, hyung. I didn’t know I was causing you problems.”

Bogum wrapped an arm around his shoulder. “Don’t worry about it, Taetae. I’d much rather have you as a friend than some egotistical asshole. He just thinks he’s better than the rest of us.”

Usually, Taehyung would have agreed with him and moved on. But his conversation with Jeongguk from earlier was still ringing in his ears. He knew Jeongguk. At least before all of this had happened between them. Sweet, dorky, big-hearted Jeongguk who never once had an asshole bone in his body.

“Maybe he thinks that about us,” Taehyung eventually reasoned. “What if he’s right, and I’m just making everyone’s lives more complicated? I’m causing conflict in the basketball team, I’m messing up Seokjin-hyung’s life, and now Jeongguk can’t even stand being in the same room as me. We fight a lot, but I never thought it would go this far.”

“About...about Seokjin,” Bogum began hesitantly. Taehyung couldn’t help but feel slightly annoyed- he didn’t want to talk about Seokjin. That’s all anyone wanted to talk about with him lately. Everyone except Jeongguk. And he had absolutely no business being the exception.

Nevertheless, he indulged Bogum. “What about him?”

“Are you together? Like, dating?” Bogum brushed his messy dark hair out of his eyes to look at Taehyung properly.

“No, hyung,” he stated firmly. “And we never will be.”

He didn’t miss the flicker of relief across Bogum’s face. “Ah. Okay. I guess that’s all there is to it, then.”

“Yes. That’s all there is to it.”

Bogum got up, extending a hand. “Can I walk you back to your dorm?”
Oddly relieved to have an excuse to decline, Taehyung replied, “I have dance practice in half an hour. I’m going to do some homework here while I wait. You can head out, though.”

Bogum’s face fell, but he nodded. “That’s cool. Do you have cologne or something? I don’t feel like hitting the showers but I don’t want to walk across campus smelling like the court.”

Taehyung chuckled. “You barely moved, hyung.”

“I stretched, and went to the gym before this.” Another skeptical look from Taehyung had him surrendering, “I like smelling nice, okay?”

Rolling his eyes, Taehyung said, “Duffel bag. Should be right on top.”

But as Bogum reached for the zipper, the realisation hit him. All of his work stuff was in that bag.


“Oh,” Bogum said, retracting his hand. “That’s fine, sorry.” He spared Taehyung an awkward smile. “I should get going now.”

He nodded shortly. “Yeah. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Bye, Tae,” Bogum waved from beside the door. Taehyung waved back, although his heart was racing with the close call and the strange turn of events. And his night wasn’t even half over.

…

The patron’s eyes glinted in the red lighting of the private room as he held up four ten-thousand won bills. He sat with his legs wide, on his fourth glass of scotch. Baekhyun got the message, fingers dancing along Taehyung’s body. He leaned back into the touch, like it was the most electrifying sensation he’d ever experienced. He felt a tug on the collar of his golden top. Blinking his eyes open, he gave their client a sultry look, licking his lips when the man pulled out another ten-thousand and set it on top of the first four. But Taehyung had a few more tricks up his sleeve. He pouted, casting his best wide doe eyes on the man and dragged his finger down his bottom lip, his jaw, across his throat, then finally to his chest, teasing himself through the silky fabric.

“Brat,” the man murmured, satisfied smirk on his face.

Yes, that was sort of his brand.

Another ten-thousand on the pile. Baekhyun popped the button, and Taehyung let the fabric fall, exposing his collar and chest. Those same fingers that had been running along his sides came up to caress him, Baekhyun raking his nails against Taehyung’s skin. Taehyung turned and hooked a finger in the metal ring of Baekhyun’s choker, yanking his body against his own. Pressed together, they looked at their client expectantly, who was watching them with a heady, drunken gaze.

At least this one wasn’t a talker. Taehyung swore he spent more time giving therapy than he did dancing. But this customer had already dropped 100k for an hour in the champagne room, and seemed willing to pay them for a lot more. Thank god, because he had another hospital payment to make by the fifteenth. Money had grown even tighter with how much he was spending on the things the dance team needed that their department just couldn’t cover.
“Aren’t you gonna take it all the way off?” the man coaxed, voice slightly unsteady.

Taehyung cocked his head, tugging at one of the ribbons still hanging around his waist. “This?”

“That’s right, baby.”

Baekhyun turned him so his back was pressed against the other dancer’s firm chest. His arms locked into place around Taehyung. Although Baekhyun usually played more of a submissive role in most dances, their client had specifically requested both of them by name, and Baekhyun naturally fell into a less passive headspace when he danced with Taehyung. They worked well together, communicating through brief eye contact and muted touches.

“You want it off?” Taehyung asked softly. Repetition tended to lead to more money. It was about building up the tension, testing how badly the customer wanted them.

“That’s what I said, now isn’t it?”

Tch.

Attitude. Taehyung had no qualms with being ordered around. Craved it, even. But not from strangers who didn’t know the first thing about control. He and Baekhyun held all of the power in this room. And it was funny just how many of their clients thought otherwise.

But of course, he was more interested in getting tipped well than making a point, so he didn’t protest when Baekhyun dragged his top down his legs, allowing Taehyung to step out of it, now wearing nothing besides his lace panties, stockings, and heels.

He remembered the first night they switched him from vest and tie to ribbons and lace. Jang handed him a contract for the new dress code, saying it “just suited him better.” He’d never envied that side of the room. He was terrified by how exposed he felt. So much that he trembled through his first dance of the night. It didn’t take long to become accustomed to the feeling, however, even if he had almost everything on display. Because that was the point. And the more a customer got to see, the more they paid. Ideally, at least.

And their current customer was clearly enjoying his show. Taehyung didn’t miss the flash of another bill in his fingers, the pile beside him growing. The man licked his lips and patted his thighs. Baekhyun made sure to skim Taehyung’s exposed torso before withdrawing his hands, moving to straddle their client’s right thigh. Taehyung followed with a smirk, settling on his left but facing the room.

He arched his back just right, angling out his ass and bracing himself on the edge of the couch. Slowly, he rolled his hips, taking the movement through his body like he’d taught the basketball team only a few days ago. Baekhyun grinded on the man’s thigh and reached out to slap Taehyung’s ass. Not enough to hurt, but enough to make it jiggle enticingly. He knew it worked from their customer’s sharp intake of breath. But he kept his hands obediently at his sides, not touching the dancers until they gave him permission.

Taehyung discreetly checked the clock beside the security camera. They only had twenty minutes left in here. They’d already gone through their less explicit dance.

He tossed his hair back, looking behind him to meet the man’s lustful gaze. “You wanna touch us?” he asked, making his voice breathy and hopeful. He really couldn’t care less what the man wanted as long as he wanted to give Taehyung money.

Not wasting time with a response, he slid a hand from Taehyung’s shoulder down his spine to grope his ass. His right hand caressed the sculpted planes of Baekhyun’s torso, who wore nothing
besides shining black spandex shorts and a sequined vest. With another smack from Baekhyun, he started moving again, taking care to make plenty of noise when he felt a hard squeeze or heard praise whispered in his ear. The tips continued to pile up.

…

They brought six men to the champagne room that night, and between the two of them, Taehyung and Baekhyun made two million won. They really should tag-team more often. The first thing he did when he got back to his dorm was set three quarters of the money aside in an envelope, tucking the rest of the loose bills into his wallet. The hour had already reached long past four. So he was surprised, to say the least, when a knock came at his door.

Back in normal clothes but still wearing his makeup, Taehyung froze. Who would be dropping by at this hour? Jimin and Hoseok always gave him a heads-up and Seokjin, Minho, and Bogum had gone out of town for a game.

“Tae?” a nervous voice said quietly through his door. “It’s me.”

He recognised that voice, but it shouldn’t be here. Perplexed didn’t even begin to cover it. He walked over to the door and unlocked it.

“Thanks,” Seokjin sighed in relief. Even at this hour, in his sweats and black shirt, he looked incredible, the picture of ideal Korean masculinity standing on Taehyung’s threshold. “I thought I was going to get caught. Is it okay if I come in?”

“Yeah, of course.” Taehyung held the door open, allowing Seokjin to pass through before shutting and locking it again. “What are you doing here?” he said as soon as he was facing him. “I thought you had a game.”

Seokjin shut his eyes, like the words hurt to hear. “We did. And we lost. Again.”

Realisation dawned on him. “So Coach Yun brought you home early.”

He nodded, sitting dejectedly on Taehyung’s white comforter. “It was so embarrassing,” he finally admitted. Taehyung went to sit beside him, delicately taking Seokjin’s hand in his. The latter squeezed it gratefully. “To be fair, we didn’t lose as badly as we did last week. It was only a six point gap. But they weren’t cheating, either. I just thought…” He stared at his lap in frustration. “I thought we were better than this, you know? I wanted my last season to be one to remember. For all the good things. Because after this, I’m probably never playing again. Being a pediatrician doesn’t leave much room for basketball.”

With that statement alone, Taehyung had been reminded of just how hard-working Seokjin was. He was finishing pre-med school, already neck-deep in an internship, and applying for a four-year graduate program to become a full pediatrician. And on top of that, he’d been a staple of the university’s basketball team since his freshman year. Those were big commitments, ones he’d put every ounce of his heart and soul into. He deserved to have the best final season imaginable.

“It’s only the second game, Seokjinnie,” Taehyung tried to console him. “You have plenty of time. The team is just finding their rhythm, that’s all. And you won eight of your preseason games. You’re not out of the running. Not even close. Have some faith in yourself, and in your teammates.”

“It’s kind of difficult to have faith in them when they’re so divided all the time.”
Taehyung thought he knew what this was about, but asked anyway. “Well, what are they divided over?”

Seokjin glanced at him, guilt sparkling in his almond eyes. “I think it might have something to do with you.”

Alright, he needed a full explanation to figure this out once and for all.

“What about me?” He kept his tone soft and gentle. He knew from experience that he could easily startle Seokjin into backtracking, so he phrased the question carefully.

Seokjin ran his thumb over Taehyung’s knuckle. “Promise you won’t be mad?”

“When do I ever get mad?”

“Well, not mad. But...pouty. You sulk, Taehyung-ah. You get all quiet and glare at me from the corner of the room and I don’t know if I’m prepared to handle that right now.”

Slightly offended, Taehyung frowned. “I don’t sulk.”

Seokjin arched an eyebrow. “You’re doing it right now, baby.”

The nickname made Taehyung want to throw himself onto Seokjin’s lap, but he had a feeling that he needed something else right now. Were they really at the point where Seokjin should be coming to his room at four in the morning to talk out his problems? He had friends. Lots of them, who he’d known longer than Taehyung. And yet here he was. In his room. Holding his hand. It felt…wrong, somehow.

“Just tell me,” he said, a little harsher than he’d intended.

Seokjin seemed taken aback by his tone, but tried not to show it. “It’s Jeongguk, really. And Bogum. They’re...they’ve created this sort of division in the team. Everything is a competition. Jeongguk won’t even pass to Bogum if he can help it, and Bogum refuses to talk to Jeongguk. And now that he knows you and I...well, do what we do, he won’t even look at me. Things are rocky between Yoongi and Minho because they play the same position and are constantly arguing over time on the court. Yoongi caught Minho gossiping with Chanyeol about how he should’ve been given the starter position. Bogum and Namjoon are at odds, too, even if they’re being more mature about it. Bogum is jealous of Namjoon and Namjoon doesn’t like him because he can’t stand the way he treats Jeongguk. Yugyeom takes Jeongguk’s side because they’ve been friends for ages. But that’s causing problems between him and Sungjae because Sungjae is your friend, too. The same double standard goes for Jeonghan and Youngjae. And then of course, Yoonoh and Mingyu are being petty because they’re with Jeongguk.”

Taehyung didn’t even realise his mouth dropped open in shock until he had to close it to swallow. “Fuck. I didn’t realise it had gotten that bad. I...is this stupid thing between Jeongguk and I really the source of it all?”

Offering him a small apologetic smile, Seokjin said sheepishly, “Yeah, kind of. It’s gotten worse as the years have gone on because they realised you two aren’t going to just kiss and make up or whatever.” He must’ve seen Taehyung’s disgusted expression because he rushed to correct himself. “Not like that! I just mean that they know they can get away with a lot since you two just get meaner and meaner every day that passes. No one’s going to tell them to stop for fear of pissing one of you off.”

Taehyung sighed loudly, massaging his temple. “This is ridiculous. It needs to stop. Right now.
I’m not interested in sparing Jeongguk’s feelings, but this has far surpassed being just between us. When it’s inhibiting your ability to work as a team, it’s officially gone too far. Give me Jeongguk’s number.”

Seokjin gasped. “I just remembered! He actually asked for yours on the bus, but my phone was dead and I don’t exactly have it memorised. That’s why I couldn’t text you to let you know I was coming over.”

Frowning, Taehyung asked, “Why would he want my number?”

“He said something about a project.”

Oh, duh. Their philosophy project. They’d spent the past few days in class outlining the model they were going to use, and how they were going to apply Aristotle’s theory, but hadn’t gotten into the actual experimentation yet. Taehyung had been dreading it a little, to be quite honest. Spending a tense hour with Jeongguk every morning was enough for him. More than enough. They could barely get out three words without chewing the other’s head off. He almost longed for Monday, when they’d had some semblance of a real conversation. But Monday night had ruined that for them. They haven’t even talked about what happened at practice. Taehyung still felt confused and Jeongguk refused to acknowledge it, so he let it be.

Which was why spending even more hours with him (doing his least favorite activity) sounded like volunteering himself for hell and frankly, it wasn’t his time yet.

Seokjin squeezed his hand again, getting his attention. Taehyung blinked and realised he’d been zoning out.

“Sorry, hyung. Tired.”

“You must be.” Seokjin sounded sympathetic. “I noticed you’re all prettied up, though. I didn’t know you wore makeup to the bar.”

It took him a minute to figure out what he meant by the bar.

“Oh.” Taehyung self-consciously touched his cheek, where he knew a light blush lingered to make him look innocent and tantalising. He had on shimmery gold eyeshadow and brown liner, too. Maybe there was still some gloss left on his lips but he had a feeling Baekhyun had kissed most of it off. “It’s, um, a certain type of crowd. Better tips, y’know.”

Seokjin met his gaze, something dark there. “I can imagine. But I don’t like the thought of you selling, yourself, Taehyung-ah. You’re not a stripper. There’s no need to get pretty for men’s money.”

Taehyung gulped. He had no idea how wrong he was. “Y-you’re right, hyung. But who am I to say no to a little extra money? Besides, you don’t get a say in the matter.” He added a laugh to lighten his tone. He wasn’t trying to be mean. He just felt like the boundary he’d set had begun slipping away.

But he didn’t miss the face Seokjin made, brow furrowing involuntarily. “...I guess that’s true.”

“So, Jeongguk’s number?”

“A little eager, aren’t we?” Seokjin joked, but it felt strained. “I still need to charge my phone. I can text his number to you when it turns on.”
Taehyung pointed at his nightstand. “Just charge it here.”

Seokjin’s mouth formed a perfect ‘o’. “I hadn’t even thought about that.” He scooted over and pulled out Taehyung’s charger, plugging in his phone. It came to life at once, low battery symbol on display. Taehyung moved to be beside him, laying his head on Seokjin’s shoulder. His free hand unconsciously came up to stroke Taehyung’s hair. “You should get some sleep, Tae.”

“I will once I figure out this project stuff with Jeongguk,” he decided. If he didn’t do it now, he never would. Even if he wasn’t being completely honest with Seokjin.

Sighing, Seokjin held out his phone for Taehyung to copy down Jeongguk’s contact information. Smiling, he pressed a kiss to Seokjin’s cheek.

“Thanks, hyung.”

“That’s all I get?” Seokjin teased.

Taehyung playfully shoved him. “Yes, that’s all you get. You show up here at four in the morning wanting therapy and affection? You’ve gotta pick one, and you’ve already chosen the session. No refunds.”

Seokjin wrapped his arms around Taehyung, pulling them both so they were laying down. “How can I pick when you give great advice and you look so pretty?”

He pushed him again, trying to get him out of his bed. “That’s not my fault. C’mon, I’ve gotta be up in a few hours to plan choreography.”

“All right, alright, I’m going,” Seokjin chuckled, sliding out from under him and standing. He unplugged his phone, casting him a warm look. “Thanks for listening to me, Tae.”

“Of course. I’m always here. Between the hours of four and eight in the morning, of course.”

He leaned down to kiss the mole on Taehyung’s nose. “You really need to get some sleep.”

Taehyung batted him away with a smile. “And I plan on it. You better do the same. Bye, Seokjinnie!”

“I’ll text you later!” Seokjin promised as he shut the door behind him.

The moment he knew Seokjin had gone, Taehyung unlocked his phone and sent Jeongguk a quick text.

```
Me
we need to talk.
```

```
Me
oh it’s kim taehyung btw
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To say the instant vibration of his phone surprised him would be an understatement. Taehyung almost dropped the device. Was everyone awake tonight? Then again, he supposed it made sense that Jeongguk would be up. They came back on the same bus, after all.

**Juancock**

thank goodness. thought you were a needy ex for a second

**Juancock**

not that it’s much different

**Me**

you know what?

**Juancock**

lmao what

**Me**

fuck you.

**Juancock**

little early don’t you think? you just got my number

**Me**

I’m trying to talk about something important.

**Me**
so do me a favor and stop talking for like two minutes.

Juancock

...

Me

please i’m begging

Juancock
doesn’t look like begging

Me

...

Me

PLEASE JEONGGUK

Juancock

that’s not the magic word

Taehyung was ready to call it quits right then and there. Getting rid of the animosity on the basketball team suddenly didn’t feel worth forking over his pride.

Because Taehyung knew exactly what Jeongguk wanted him to say. He hadn’t said it since they were kids, and he lorded it over Taehyung like a badge of shame. Because technically, he was supposed to say it. They weren’t close enough anymore for him not to. But he never did. He shouldn’t have to. The difference consisted of a few months, okay? No one else would even point it out if they weren’t Jeon Jeongguk. Then again, Jimin did the same thing just to annoy him sometimes…

 Fuck it, he decided. He’d started this conversation with the intention of finishing it, and he would be damned if he let Jeongguk’s attitude ruin that.
Me
please /hyung/

Me
jeongguk-hyung, please.

*Juancoc* took a *screenshot of chat!*

Me
you little bitch.

Me
… you know what? fair play tbh
i’ll let you have that one.

*Juancoc*
how generous of you

*Juancoc*
i’m listening now. what’s up

Really? *What’s up?* They haven’t texted in years and he goes with *what’s up?* The fucking audacity.

Me
basically this thing between us has to
stop.

*Juancoc*
if that’s the line you’re planning to use on Seokjin it’s not very good

Me

i’m talking about US jeongguk. this petty shit. it’s fucking with the basketball team’s dynamic and i don’t want to be responsible for that.

Juancock

funny how i’m still not seeing an apology

Me

that’s because i’m a decent fucking person and would prefer to actually talk with you.

Jeongguk took longer to respond to that. Taehyung flopped on his bed while he waited, scrolling through choreography videos for inspiration. He didn’t even know what song, or songs, he wanted to set their next performance to, and they were supposed to be ready in a couple of weeks. Finally, twenty minutes later, Jeongguk texted back. He was so lucky Taehyung felt too lazy to take his makeup off and fall asleep.

Juancock

yeah okay

Juancock

meet me outside your dorm at ten.

wear comfortable shoes
Me
i swear to god if you make me run
i’ll beat your ass

His body ached from dancing all night and being gripped roughly all over. Running five hours from now sounded like just about the worst thing ever.

Juancock
not really into that. i usually prefer to
do the ass beating

Me
wow i did not need that bit of
information, thanks

Juancock
no problem.

Juancock
we’re just gonna walk the route we’ll
eventually run

Me
that…

Me
is manageable
good. see you then

Taehyung almost didn’t want that to be the end of the conversation. They were making progress. Progress they’d refused to make for what felt like centuries. Hatred had become moderate dislike. This was something. And maybe Jeongguk didn’t seem as happy about it as he did. That’s fine. Taehyung couldn’t force him to like him again. He’d made his opinion on that matter very clear.

Makeup free, just as he got ready to turn out the light, his phone vibrated again.

**Juancock**

and for fuck’s sake kim

get some sleep. soon your skin

is gonna stop glowing and you’ll

throw a fit and the rest of us will

have to deal with it

A faint smile touched his lips.

**Me**

imagine how boring your day would be

without my fits.

**Me**

and thanks for the compliment. it’s this

magical thing called moisturiser. you’re

welcome to try it.

**Juancock**

didn’t realise boring equaled

pleasant nowadays
and i will have nothing to do with your
black magic

goodnight taehyung

anddddd you made it weird.

that smiley face is going to
haunt my dreams

andddddd you made it weird.

that smiley face is going to
haunt my dreams

aww so you'll be dreaming of me.
cute.

nightmares taehyung

Taehyung, he'd called him.
you are the subject of my nightmares

Me

this is what we call progress.

Me

sleep well.

Juancock

bitch

Juancock

...you too

And he did. To his surprise, he fell into a deep sleep far faster than he had in years, his mind not feeling the need to generate another wave of rising anxiety about money, sex, and status. Maybe it had something to do with how well they’d done tonight with their dances. And absolutely nothing to do with the way Jeongguk had returned his goodnight sentiments.

Chapter End Notes

i may or may not drop my playlist for writing this fic because, as an impartial party: it slaps. anyways, here's my twitter if you want to yell at me about how absolutely trashy this is. thanks for reading!
Jeongguk tapped his foot impatiently. Only Taehyung would be late for a meeting at his own dorm. He had been shocked when the dance captain texted him, but eventually figured that Seokjin must’ve given Taehyung his number. He had asked for it on the bus, already resigned to his torment. Losing last night had stung, talking with Taehyung could only make it so much worse. To his surprise, though, their conversation hadn’t been that bad. Still painful to get through, but...well, talking with Taehyung wasn’t the worst thing in the world. Their jabs felt more like banter than truly hurtful. And he’d gotten Taehyung to call him hyung, which was always a win.

But it left him with dozens of conflicted feelings, more at war with his own opinions than anything else. Taehyung irritated the hell out of him, made it his personal job to annoy him with everything he did, but for some reason, Jeongguk didn’t mind so much when it happened solely between the two of them. Or maybe he’d just been angry and sleep-deprived last night. That sounded more like it.

Finally, about twenty minutes past ten, Taehyung bounced down the staircase, rushing to the bottom of the concrete steps.

“I. Am. So. Sorry.” His words came out between pants, as if he’d been running for miles. In no way would he be able to hold up when they actually went running. And what a nightmare that would be.

Still, mildly concerned because Taehyung never apologised to him, Jeongguk arched an eyebrow and asked, “You alright?”

“Peachy,” Taehyung replied, collecting his breath. “Just overslept a little. Nothing new. I- uh, have problems getting up sometimes. So, am I acceptable for walking?”

He couldn’t miss the way he preened even if he wanted to, practically begging for a compliment.

Deciding not to give in, Jeongguk slowly took in Taehyung’s casual white v-neck knit sweater, light jeans, and... yes white sneakers. Good. He knew how to listen every once in awhile.

“Could’ve done worse,” he shrugged. “Let’s go.”

Unfortunately, Taehyung didn’t get nearly as riled up from being ignored or slighted as he’d imagined. Oh well.

They started down the sidewalk trail that led through the on-campus park.

“How’d you know my dorm was over here?” Taehyung eventually asked.

He never did well with silence.
“It’s the side of campus that Seokjin, Bogum, and Minho always disappear to after practice, and yours is the only undergrad dorm over here. Plus, Yugeyeom’s mentioned living on the same floor as you. Kinda put two and two together.”

Taehyung gasped. “I didn’t know you could do math.”

Jeongguk bristled, snapping back, “I didn’t know you were insufferable on the weekends, too.”

Instead of getting angry, Taehyung simply gave a small smile. “Gotta stay consistent. Otherwise people stop trusting you.”

Sometimes, it didn’t even take that much.

At a loss, he simply hummed. He realised then and there that he liked Taehyung a whole lot more when he didn’t have a thousand people fawning over him. It was admittedly a rather nice morning; not too brisk, a light autumn breeze playing with the kaleidoscope leaves overhead, crisscrossed branches beckoning through slanted beams of sunlight. Other students passed them on the path, some walking in pairs, some jogging, some on bicycles. A few even glanced back at them in surprise. Jeongguk supposed they did make an odd sight. Their rivalry wasn’t a secret. No one expected to see Jeon Jeongguk and Kim Taehyung strolling through the park side by side on a Saturday morning.

“So this is where you usually run?” Taehyung broke in. Jeongguk tried not to be as irritated by the loss of silence as he had been before.

“Yeah. The ground is flat and there aren’t too many turns. It’s nice and...well, consistent, I guess.”

Taehyung’s smile grew. “Told you consistency is important.”

Jeongguk rolled his eyes. Of course, he’d played right into Taehyung’s hands. “Whatever. You’ll be the one running it soon, so you can evaluate the consistency all you like.”

“Gross, don’t say that. I don’t wanna think about it.” Taehyung wrinkled his nose, taking care to step over a fallen leaf.

“You’re the one who begged me to agree,” Jeongguk reminded him. This whole situation felt out of place. The space between them crackled with awkwardness and the tension of mutual dislike. He’d only agreed because the thought of Taehyung getting all sweaty and whiny with Seokjin or, god forbid, Bogum rubbed him the wrong way. Even though he knew Taehyung did both of those things with Seokjin on a regular basis.

At least that was Seokjin.

Taehyung shrugged. “I didn’t actually want to run with you. Or anyone, for that matter. I just needed an excuse to hang out with you, and look! It ended up being the subject of our philosophy project.”

Momentarily stunned, Jeongguk felt something uncomfortable prickling at him. It sounded like Taehyung was just manipulating him to achieve god knows what, just like he always did. And Jeongguk thought this might happen, but he fought it down, curiosity winning out. Figuring he had never been good with nuance, he decided to be blunt. “Why would you want an excuse to hang out with me? You literally insult me every chance you get. You hate me.”

“I told you. I’m putting it on hold. At least until the basketball season is over. This shit’s exhausting. Doesn’t make me dislike you any less, but hey, now we’ve got until the end of the
semester to dislike each other in the same space. Lucky us.”

Even more confused, Jeongguk pressed, “And why would you want that? More time around each other? Like you said, it’s exhausting. And frankly, I think our time could be better spent. You know, apart.”

“Drama queen,” Taehyung muttered. “Don’t you see? I’m trying to be nice. You’re welcome, by the way.”

Jeongguk suppressed the urge to send him sprawling with a well-placed elbow, already imagining the look on his face when he inevitably stained his white sneakers.

“I’m not going to thank you,” he informed him.

Taehyung sighed. “Wasn’t expecting you to. You’ve never really been a verbal kind of guy. Although, you did used to thank me in the cutest-“

“Don’t.” Jeongguk cut him off before he could say something they would both regret.

A soft murmur came from Taehyung. “Jeonggukkie and his unbreakable barriers.”

“Taehyungie and his big mouth,” Jeongguk replied venomously.

“One of my best qualities, actually.”

“Sure,” he snorted. “And mine’s what? Something about how much you hate my hair, I’m sure.”

Taehyung side-eyed him, gaze roaming all the way down his body. The intensity of the look had Jeongguk glancing resolutely down, studying the concrete beneath their feet. “Your best quality? No, nothing to do with that. I think it’s your optimism. Even when you know something isn’t going to go well, you try anyways for the slim chance you might get a good result. It’s endearing, and honestly, gives the people around you hope too.”

And the fact that Taehyung knew this about him, paid enough attention even now, should have told him all he needed to know. Taehyung knew things about him that most of his friends didn’t because he’d been there when Jeongguk discovered those things about himself. They’d explored the world together, and figured out what kinds of people they wanted to be.

Of course, some of this changed with the passage of time. Humans aren’t static creatures. But even then, they had to watch each other grow from the frustrating position of an outsider. He’d watched Taehyung shut out all the joy he used to express in every excited word, every fond touch, every boxy smile. He’d watched Taehyung become a person he didn’t know. Someone closed off. Someone vindictive.

And it devastated Jeongguk. They went from being each other’s everything to passive acquaintances at best, and bitter enemies at worst. And now here Taehyung stood, pretending like they could just play at acquaintances for the sake of the team. Maybe they could. Still, he doubted it would end well. In fact, he knew it wouldn’t. It couldn’t.

“I didn’t sign up for therapy.” Jeongguk backtracked, panicking. He didn’t want to slip into that easy of a rhythm with Taehyung. Too many years had passed.

Taehyung chuckled, light and sweet. “It’s instinctive at this point, honestly. Actually…” He stopped in his tracks and grabbed Jeongguk, holding him by the biceps.
His eyes went wide, taking a wary step back. “What do you think you’re doing?”

There was only determination in Taehyung’s gaze. “Apologising. At least a little bit. I won’t say sorry for the things I’m not sorry for. But, Jeon Jeongguk, I’m sorry for doing my best to make your life a living hell since we were freshmen. In my defense, I toned it down a lot this year. Again, you’re welcome. But still, it probably wasn’t the most helpful thing to add to your pile of stress from basketball, family, and your classes, and for that, only that, I’m sorry.”

Shock seeped through his system. He’d joked plenty about making Taehyung apologise just to get a rise out of him, but he hadn’t expected the dance captain to actually do it. Much less, with that amount of sincerity. And yet, frustration still took root in him. Because this wasn’t the apology he’d been so desperate to hear. He wanted an apology for Taehyung shutting him out and abandoning him all those years ago.

Still, he had a feeling this was the best he could get for now.

“I’m sorry, too,” he managed to say. “For going out of my way to hurt you for the past…” He had to pause and count. “…five years. Holy shit, that’s a long time.”

“Yeah, it is a long time.” Taehyung sounded bitter. He didn’t blame him. They’d hurt each other a lot as time went on. Jeongguk had said and done so many things he would never be proud of. In his opinion, the end of high school had been the worst. He was closeted, technically still was even now to everyone besides his close friends, and he hadn’t been hanging out with the best people, most of them in Yoongi’s grade. They were the kinds of people who stopped Taehyung in the halls and made remarks about what he wore, who he’d been with, calling him disgusting, homophobic names, and Jeongguk didn’t have the courage to stop them. He’d just felt so terrified of losing his friends again. He didn’t want to graduate alone. Being alone never spelled good things for him, that much he’d learned about himself pretty early on.

Not that any of his sacrifices mattered. His only friend in his senior year was Yugyeom, since the rest graduated a year before him. And that became the year that Taehyung went from outcast to idol- everyone either wanted to be him or be with him. And he started biting back, repaying Jeongguk for all the shit he’d made him go through the past two years. Just when he had thought about working up the courage to bury the hatchet now that his friends weren’t around, Taehyung turned a new leaf and played at karma. He did a pretty good job of it, too. So good, in fact, that their stupid feud continued into university, conjuring every and any petty excuse to get on each other’s nerves. It didn’t help that they both became high-profile students in their own rights. Him with basketball and what apparently came across as stellar film work, and Taehyung with dance, and well…sleeping around.

“I’m willing to let it go, though.” Taehyung’s deep voice brought him back to the present, wrapping around him like a silk shawl. His hands dropped from Jeongguk’s shoulders, tucked in the pockets of his jeans. “If you are, of course.”

Jeongguk hesitated. It was impossible to erase years of pain with a simple decision. But he realised, they didn’t need to erase it. They just needed to move on.

He nodded.

“Let’s just put it in the past.”

Taehyung beamed, and his smile in that moment made everything leading up to this morning worth it.
“So, uh, how long until we get to the cake part of the morning?”

Shameless.

Jeongguk arched an eyebrow. “What makes you think we’re getting cake at all?

Taehyung stuck his bottom lip out, puppy eyes in effect. He blinked at Jeongguk. “Because you want to?”

And suddenly, Jeongguk understood how Taehyung had everyone on campus wrapped around his finger. He used to pull the same thing when they were kids, and Jeongguk was ashamed to admit it worked every time. But he’d grown older now, stronger.

“You mean you want to.”

Taehyung waved at a passing group of students, all of whom were already waving at him.

“Oh course I want to. But you do, too. Besides, you were already planning on taking me there. Don’t play hard to get. No man has resisted the promise of vanilla cake.”

When they made plans last night (or this morning, depending on how you look at it), he had been planning to take him for cake as a peace offering. He simply felt cheated since Taehyung figured it out first, already pissed Taehyung had beaten him to apologising, too. And it he couldn’t help but make a scathing remark about it.

They just came so naturally nowadays.

“I’m not sure if it’s the cake that men find irresistible,” Jeongguk muttered pointedly.

But he regretted opening his mouth the second Taehyung cooed, “Aw, was that a compliment, Jeonggukkie?”

Ignoring the way he batted his eyelashes, Jeongguk retorted, “That’s hyung to you.”

Taehyung didn’t have to say it.

“Fine. Was that a compliment, Jeonggukkie-hyung?”

But he knew he did it to indulge him.

Jeongguk gave him another obvious roll of his eyes, brushing past him to walk ahead. “Nope.”

He ignored Taehyung bouncing around him in a flurry of gossip-ridden chatter for the rest of the walk, wondering just how far he could push the dancer. Apparently Taehyung reached his limit the moment he held the door to a quaint brick cafe open for Jeongguk and promptly hit him with it the moment he stepped inside.

“What was that for?” Jeongguk hissed, clutching his back.

Taehyung shrugged, but said nothing. Jeongguk knew this was a shallow form of payback. Whatever. Getting the silent treatment from Taehyung was a blessing in disguise, as far as he was concerned, not in the least because it saved Jeongguk from embarrassing himself.

“Go order whatever you want,” Jeongguk sighed. “I’m going to hunt down an open table.”

He didn’t give Taehyung the chance to reply as he dove headfirst into the bustle of the cafe; it felt
like everyone in Seoul had decided to get brunch here, the tables and chairs pressed so close together he could barely walk between them. Which also meant they were bound to be spotted by people they knew. Worse things could happen, he supposed, as long as Taehyung didn’t try to pull something ridiculous.

Trying to keep his head down, Jeongguk slipped between the crowd with muttered apologies, finally singling out a round wooden table by the window right as its patrons were vacating it.

Taehyung leaned up on the counter, chatting animatedly with the barista at the register. He giggled prettily at whatever the guy had just said, white sweater sliding off his shoulder to expose his golden collar. The barista reached forward, tucking a lock of Taehyung’s chocolate hair behind his ear. Taehyung gave him another soft laugh, trailing his fingers along the guy’s hand as he withdrew. Jeongguk gritted his teeth, but couldn’t look away. There had to be a reason Taehyung decided to blatantfly flirt at the register.

And sure enough, as the barista pulled two pieces of fluffy white cake from the patisserie case, Taehyung offered out a few bills only to be immediately shot down with a chuckle and a shake of the barista’s head. Taehyung faked a protest, but conceded and accepted the free food with a shy, grateful smile. Jeongguk had a sneaking suspicion that any drinks he got were on the house, too.

Jeongguk realised with a start that Taehyung was picking his way over and hurriedly tried to look busy staring out the window.

“Cake,” Taehyung announced, dropping a plate and fork in front of Jeongguk and taking the rickety wood chair opposite him.

“I kinda lost my appetite, actually.”

Taehyung arched an eyebrow. “And why is that?”

Jeongguk shrugged. “Can’t imagine.”

A fork clattered against Taehyung’s plate as he set it down. “What’s your problem now?”

Now, he said, as if Jeongguk always had a problem. He didn’t.

“I’m just not interested in eating food that wasn’t paid for.”

Taehyung rolled his eyes. “What’s so bad about it? I offered. The guy was just nice, that’s all.”

“Oh yeah, I could tell how nice he was from the way he was totally eye-fucking you during your whole conversation.”

With a dainty little shrug, Taehyung replied, “Almost as good as getting fucked over the counter. Imagine how much free cake I’d get for that.”

Jeongguk should’ve caught himself before he spoke, but after years of speaking to Taehyung without a filter, it was almost involuntary.

“You’re kind of a slut, Taehyung.”

Taehyung simply arched an eyebrow, unbothered. But a glimmer of hurt lingered in his dark eyes, even if he didn’t think Jeongguk could see it.

“I’m not a slut,” he contested with a pretentious sniff, managing to come away with all his pride
and confidence. “I’m poor. There’s a difference. So if I can flirt my way into a free breakfast, then I’m going to. Sorry if that makes you uncomfortable. Besides, I was joking about the counter thing. Trying to lighten the mood. Clearly not your brand of humour, I get that now.”

Jeongguk immediately felt like an asshole. He didn’t want to hurt Taehyung over something like this. But he didn’t understand.

“You literally own Gucci sunglasses.”

“Yeah, the single expensive thing I bought all year so people wouldn’t think I’m barely living paycheck to paycheck.”

“Oh…”

Now that Jeongguk thought about, he’d never seen Taehyung dress as expensively as he believed. More often than not, he just wore a sweater and jeans. The occasional beret. Perhaps it was the air about him that made everything seem designer. The way he carried himself, regal and priceless. He even smelled expensive. But maybe that was simply Taehyung.

“I could’ve covered the food and drinks,” Jeongguk muttered.

Taehyung waved him off. “Yeah, I know. Don’t forget just how well I know you, Jeongguk. I’m well aware that you could’ve done it, more so than any of those friends of yours.”

A heavy weight settled in his chest. Taehyung knew him too well. He had secrets of Jeongguk’s that he could use to ruin him. But even after everything Jeongguk had put him through, Taehyung kept those to himself. A sliver of gratitude flashed through him.

“But that doesn’t mean I’m sacrificing my pride on our first ‘mutual dislike’ outing. You’re not paying for a damn thing. Speaking of,” he cocked his head, listening. “That’s our order. I’ll be right back.”

He got up from his seat and meandered back over to the counter. Less bounce lingered in his step than before, but he didn’t fail to smile sweetly for the barista. A couple of students stopped Taehyung on his way back, pointing at Jeongguk. Not really interested in being part of their gossip, he turned away to focus on the window again.

“Well, we might have a bit of a problem,” Taehyung declared cheerfully as he set a coffee cup in front of Jeongguk. He sniffed it suspiciously. “Don’t worry, it’s just a caramel macchiato. I remember what you like.”

Jeongguk took a tentative sip. So he did remember.

“Hot cocoa?” Jeongguk asked, indicating Taehyung’s cup.

“Yup,” he replied with a coy wink.

Smug, and absolutely ignoring that wink, he said, “I can remember things, too.”

Taehyung didn’t like coffee. He never had.

“So, what was this problem?”

“We’ve been recognised. Bound to happen. I guarantee by the end of the day, we’ll be getting questions left and right. Sorry about that. But it’s actually not all that bad, because this should help
with the lesson I have in mind for Monday.”

Well, the damage was done, then. It’s not like they were really trying to hide, coming to a public place, but their curious classmates were going to be a pain to deal with. He’d almost forgotten about Taehyung’s special Monday lessons. The last one had gone swimmingly.

“And what lesson is that?”

“Setting aside personal differences for the good of the team. Because that’s what’s really holding you guys back. You need cohesion. All of those grudges and conflicts should be left at the door, because the second you’re on the court, you’re no longer individuals. You’re a team.”

What he said made sense. It was just easier said than done. Besides, “What does that have to do with movement?”

Taehyung sat back in his chair with his cocoa, cake untouched.

“I’m gonna teach you guys a routine and in order to follow it, you’ll have to work together. If one person is out of line or off balance, the entire routine falls apart. Not only that, but it should help with…” he examined the table, avoiding Jeongguk’s eyes. “…with last week’s lesson.”

“Oh...right.”

“Why did you just walk out?” Taehyung suddenly burst; he’d clearly been thinking about it all week. Jeongguk would be a hypocrite if he pretended his own mind hadn’t wandered there constantly. “You left in the middle of my first lesson ever and made me look like shit. And I’m not even that mad, I just don’t understand.”

Had Taehyung really not felt the same tense atmosphere that had settled over them in that moment? He’d had Taehyung pinned to the gym floor by his slender wrists, pressing his body weight into him as the dancer’s pretty dark eyes searched his own for something he’d been far too close to finding. Of course Jeongguk walked out. If he’d stayed any longer, he would’ve said and done things he’d regret later.

“I just...you didn’t think it was weird?”

Taehyung’s eyes shined with such deceptive innocence as they went wide. “Weird how?”

Jeongguk shifted uncomfortably, nails raking along the side of his cup. He knew what being baited felt like, and it felt a hell of a lot like this.

“Just...weird. It was really close. You know I don’t like close contact with people. And we’re not exactly on the best of terms. I was embarrassed, too, I guess.”

Taehyung blinked, cocking his head. Feigning curious naivety. “Embarrassed because you were that close to me?”

Jeongguk returned his clueless look. Two could play dumb. “No, that’d be stupid. Embarrassed because you’re like...I don’t know, it’s hard to put into words.”

That same embarrassment began heating his cheeks and he tried to avoid looking at Taehyung, instead analysing the piece of cake below him. It did look rather inviting. He couldn’t explain why neither of them had touched their slices yet.

“You’re really good at what you do,” he admitted with difficulty. “You made the entire team look
like newbies. I’ve never thought about the court in the way that you described, but once I did, there was a whole new element to the game brought in. It was like I didn’t know how to play anymore.”

“But you were still the only person to beat me,” Taehyung said, tugging his plump cherry bottom lip between his teeth.

“I didn’t beat you,” Jeongguk snorted. “I tackled you. There’s a difference. Besides, I only got that far because I got to watch you kick both Yoongi-hyung’s and Namjoon-hyung’s asses.”

A smirk toyed at Taehyung’s lips. “Did you like the show?”

Jeongguk wrinkled his nose, trying to block out the image of Taehyung moving across the court with golden gilded wings on his feet, playing his favourite sport as if it were just another flawless routine. The way the ball spun in his delicate hands, the way his cheeks flushed and his breaths shortened to breathy pants after the exertion of outsmarting their best players.

“Not even a little bit. You do know how you come off to other people, right?”

Taehyung ticked off on his fingers, seeming entirely unbothered by Jeongguk’s reaction.

“Uh, conceited, pretentious, whiny, image-obsessed, and a little too sexy.”

Jeongguk leaned back in his seat, surprised.

“Yeah, spot on.”

He didn’t expect Taehyung’s satisfied smile. “Good.”

Just as he opened his mouth to question him about it, however, a familiar face practically ploughed through the crowd to reach their table.

“Tae!” Bogum called from halfway across the cafe. Jeongguk sighed loudly, already bracing himself for the attack that had to be coming his way. “What are you doing?” he asked the dance captain the second he hovered over them, eyeing Jeongguk with obvious disdain.

Taehyung glanced down at his untouched food and drummed his fingers on the table. “Well, the idea was to get cake but Jeongguk’s conversation was just so scintillating, I haven’t yet had the chance.”

Jeongguk didn’t miss the sarcasm that crept into his tone. He couldn’t explain why it stung.

“But why...you know, with him?”

At least Bogum was kind enough to lower his voice.

“If you’ve got something to say, then fucking say it,” Jeongguk spat, glaring at Bogum. “I’m right here.”

Taehyung clicked his tongue. “Now, now. Don’t be rude. Remember? I want you to play nice.”

Bogum furrowed his brow, leaning close to Taehyung to whisper in his ear. Whatever Taehyung whispered back made the both of them chuckle, Taehyung’s more of an irritating giggle. As he drew back from Bogum, he pressed a soft kiss to his ear.

The sudden desire to leave overtook him in an instant, but he remained fixed to his chair, at Taehyung’s mercy like always.
“I’ve gotta go tie shopping for my cousin’s wedding, and I need you to come with me. You’re the best at that kind of thing,” Bogum said louder, straightening up. “Besides, you’re my plus one so I figured I should consult you anyways. Do you mind getting a box for that?”

Taehyung looked once more at his cake, then at Jeongguk, who had started to get more pissed off by the second. Expression unreadable, but it wasn’t one he was used to seeing on Taehyung’s face.

“Yeah, of course,” he finally decided. He picked up his plate and passed it to Bogum without really looking at him. “You mind bringing it up to the counter for me? I’ve gotta get my stuff together and then I’ll meet you outside.”

Glancing warily between Jeongguk and Taehyung, Bogum nonetheless nodded. “Sure. I’ll see you in just a sec.”

Taehyung waited a moment for him to walk away before standing up and coming around to Jeongguk’s side of the table.

“Ditched on my first mutual-dislike outing, huh?” Jeongguk tried to joke, even if his insides were simmering with anger.

Taehyung shrugged apologetically. “You’ve gotta admit, it’s pretty on-brand. Besides, he’s so annoying when you ignore him. Needy, that one. Quick, is he looking this way?”

Jeongguk craned his neck to see over Taehyung’s shoulder. Bogum stood waiting outside by the entrance, box in hand, pretending like he wasn’t watching them through the large windows. “Yeah, why?”

Fingers curled in Jeongguk’s collar as Taehyung pulled him close to kiss his cheek. Jeongguk almost shoved him away on reflex, but had enough sense not to lay a hand on him. Still, he hissed in disgust, “What the hell was that for?”

Taehyung’s eyes were bright with excitement.

“He’s gonna be so mad.”

Jeongguk pierced him with a stare. “Did you really just have the fucking audacity to kiss me in public just to piss off your lapdog?”

“Yes!” Taehyung said happily. “Hopefully he’ll punish me for it. Thanks, hyung!” Indulged him once again. “I’ll see you on Monday.”

And with that, he glided out the door, brushing off the many people who called for his attention. Jeongguk could see as Bogum wound a possessive arm around Taehyung’s waist, hand slipping into the back pocket of his jeans.

His cheek felt sticky with cherry lip balm where Taehyung had kissed it, and for some unholy reason, all of his nerve endings seemed to have migrated to that spot. Furious, Jeongguk reached for a napkin to wipe off any and every remnant of him. But then he noticed the phones.

Cameras angled his way, all held by his classmates. Their little moment had been caught.

_Fuck you, Kim Taehyung._

Jeongguk stubbornly kept his head down, not acknowledging anyone who tried to stop him as he pushed past the crowd and out the door.
Taehyung was a reckless, vengeful demon possessing the body of an angel, and Jeongguk hated him for it.

~*~*~

The death grip on his hip only lightened up when Bogum opened the passenger door to his white Audi for him.

“What a gentleman,” Taehyung muttered, brushing past him to sit. With an irritated huff, Bogum closed the door behind him and got in the driver’s side.

“Tell me I didn’t just see what I think I saw.”

Taehyung tilted his head, blinking innocently. “What do you think you saw?”

Bogum glared at him. “Taehyung.”

“Bogum.”

He sighed loudly. “Did you really just kiss Jeon Jeongguk of all people on the cheek? In front of that many onlookers?”

Feigning shock, Taehyung pointed at himself with a french-tipped nail. “Me?”

Bogum narrowed his eyes. “Tae, I’m so not in the mood for this.”

Taehyung rolled his eyes, dropping his hand. “Then what are you in the mood for?”

A large hand rested on his own. With a skeptical eyebrow arched, Taehyung asked, incredulous, “Really? No. You don’t get to be a dick and then act like you’re entitled to my attention.”

He couldn’t even explain why he did it anymore. Why he played all these games. All he knew was that without them, he really didn’t know who he’d be. Dragging Jeongguk into the mix had been a spontaneous decision, and certainly not one of his best. There would be hell to pay for it. But it was fun for a second.

And that’s really all that mattered to him. Sorry, Jeongguk.

“You’re one of my best friends, you know that?” Taehyung went on.

Bogum’s eyes softened. “Of course. You’re one of mine, too.”

“It doesn’t mean you own me,” he finished, letting a serrated edge slice along his words. “I can do whatever the hell I want with whoever I want, and you can’t stop me. That doesn’t mean I love you any less. But I’m not yours, Bogum. So if I want to flirt with Minho, then I’m gonna flirt with Minho. If I want to sleep with Seokjin, then I’m gonna sleep with Seokjin. And if I want to kiss Jeongguk on the cheek, then I’m gonna kiss Jeongguk on the cheek. I’m not forcing you to hang around. That’s just how I roll. You can take me the way I am, or you can let me live my life without you constantly butting in. And yeah, I’d be sad if you decided to up and go. But I’d understand. I’m not an easy friend to have, and I know that. So it’s up to you.”

This was pretty much the opposite of the conversation he’d wanted to have with Bogum when he kissed Jeongguk, but here they were. Oh well. He’d been meaning to say it for a while. Now seemed as good a time as any.
Bogum searched his face for a moment, gaze flicking between Taehyung’s. Eventually, he appeared to come to an internal consensus.

“I’m never going to not want to be your friend, Tae. I care about you a lot. Which is why I just don’t get this...I don’t know, this destructive behavior. You’ve just gotten worse and worse over the years, and I don’t understand where it’s coming from. It’s like you’re trying to make yourself a difficult person to be around. And I don’t mind so much, but I just want to know why. You used to be really sweet. All the time. I remember when you were a freshman and we had the same Intro to Movement class, and you were like...better than most of the second-year students. And instead of flaunting that, you helped everyone out and smiled all the time, and you just seemed so happy to be alive, you know? But then you disappeared for a few months, and when you came back, you were withdrawn, moody, and unbelievably hard on yourself. You cried when you got a B in Writ 101. Every time I invited you to come to dinner with us or go to a movie, you said you were working. And as the years went on...you didn’t change. I kept waiting for you to move on, for something to happen, for things to get easier for you. But they haven’t. You’re still making the same mistakes. You’re still trying to push people away. And it’s getting hard to continue putting up with it.”

Taehyung crossed his arms, defensively hugging himself because Bogum’s accusations hit a little too close to home. “Then why the hell do you keep putting up with me if I’m so fucking annoying?”

“Because I love you, Tae. You know that. I love you, and I hate watching you do this to yourself. You always pick people who you know are going to throw you away, because it just validates whatever fucked up view you have of yourself, and I’m never going to be one of those people. I’m never going to throw you away.”

“Maybe that’s why I don’t love you as much as you love me,” Taehyung taunted bitterly. “And it fucking hurts, doesn’t it?”

Bogum’s kind, warm eyes glinted with anger. “Yeah. You know what? It hurts like hell. What did I ever do to not be good enough for you?”

“Maybe that’s why I don’t love you as much as you love me,” Taehyung taunted bitterly. “And it fucking hurts, doesn’t it?”

“Good enough for me?” Taehyung repeated, astounded by the absurdity of his notion. “That’s not the problem. You’re too good for me, Bogum. I don’t want you because I need you.”

“How does that make sense?”

“I need you to make me feel like shit,” Taehyung insisted. “I’ve earned it, and you’re the only person who’ll check me on my bullshit. But that’s not going to make me want you.”

Bogum stared at him, at a loss for words.

“See?” Taehyung chuckled, a sardonic smile on his lips. “You don’t really want me. You want the idea of me. Your pretty little emotional support bitch that you can cry to all you want, and never handle a damn tear in return.”

Shaking himself from his pained daze, Bogum accused, “How the hell can you say that when all I’ve done is give you opportunities to be genuine with me?”

“I am genuine with you! But every time I want to talk about all of the shit hitting the fan in my life, you brush me off and it’s just about you.”

“Oh, really? Because every single time I try and ask you if you’re okay when I know for a goddamn fact that you’re on the verge of tears, you tell me to mind my own fucking business. And
now you’re pissed at me for listening?”

“Yes!” Taehyung burst out. “I’m pissed at you for listening! You’re supposed to be the one person that pushes me to not bottle everything up, but lately you don’t even care to try! You are the only one I can confide in, but I hate doing it because I feel like such a burden. I love Jimin and Hoseok but they don’t seem to want me around lately, they’re so fucking busy with each other. You’re the only one who wants me, the only one who gets it.”

“I’m not responsible for your feelings, Taehyung. It’s your choice whether you bottle them up or not. I don’t deserve you lashing out at me just because I’m not going to dig at you until you spill your guts. That’s not my job, and you can’t expect me to always fight for any semblance of honesty from you. That’s not fair.”

Fury consumed Taehyung because he was right. Every single thing he said rang true, yet hearing it just made him feel worse.

“What’s not fair is you begging me to change just because I don’t fit this picture you’ve painted of me in your head.”

“I am not your enemy in this!” Bogum shouted. “Every time I say that I love you, I mean it, and you don’t see that! I love you more than I love anyone, Taehyung, and it’s fucking exhausting! Loving you is just expecting punishment, day, after day, after day. I must be the world’s biggest masochist, because all you do is fucking hurt me at every chance you get. I hope all of the pleasure you get out of it is worth the ridiculous amount of space in my mind I’ve spent worrying about you and feeling like I’m not good enough. You go ahead and tell me. Go on. Tell me it’s worth it.”

Taehyung sat perfectly still for a minute, hearing his words over and over, cycling through his head like a shitty pop song. And then he shoved open the Audi’s door, slamming it behind him as he set off back towards campus. For once, Bogum didn’t chase after him.

So far, he’d let six men buy him drinks. Most of them tasted like absinthe and window cleaner, and he was barely in control of himself, but it got the job done. Besides, the beginning of the month always got easier when he spent most of it drunk. He didn’t have to think about his actions, or their consequences. He just gave services and got money. A couple fifty-thousand won handjobs. A few hundred-thousand won blowjobs. Probably something a little more potent than liquor in his system, but he didn’t want to know. It became harder to get addicted if you didn’t know the name. Human psychology is funny that way. But when he looked in the dressing room mirror, his pupils were huge and everything had just the right edge to make it hilarious and exciting all at once, and he couldn’t exactly rationalise some of the shit he saw, so a guy might have given him a line off his thigh. Taehyung didn’t really remember, and he didn’t really care.

“Go home, Taehyung-ah,” Jang sighed.

Taehyung spun away from the mirror, staring at him. “And why should I?”

“Because you’re drunk, high, and it’s almost four. And I think you sold some guy your stockings and garter belt.”

Glancing down at his bare legs, a snort of laughter escaped him. And then it became a string of hardly coherent giggles, to the point where he wasn’t quite sure when he started and when he
stopped.

“Please, Taehyung.”

Jang was _pleading_ with him. What a hysterical concept, if you thought about it.

“Please yourself,” he shot back before another giggle escaped him. “I mean, I’d do it for you if you paid me- Hey! Stop nosing around my shit!”

His manager sifted through Taehyung’s bag, ignoring his outraged cries until he found what he was looking for. Gripping Taehyung’s phone tightly, Jang demanded, “Password.”

Taehyung crossed his arms stubbornly. “No.”

“Taehyung.”

He squinted at Jang. “When did you dye your hair pink?”

Jang opened his mouth, shut it, then replied, “I’ll tell you if you tell me your phone password. It’ll be like a secret swap.”

Taehyung’s eyes went wide. “Oh! Fun! Okay, okay, it’s 9719. Your turn, Jang-ssi!”

The longer he looked though, the less pink Jang’s hair became. Now it glowed more of a lovely lavender. But he seemed so proud of the colour. Taehyung didn’t want to spoil it for him.

“I never dyed my hair,” Jang answered with a roll of his eyes. And then he had the audacity to _shush_ Taehyung as he called someone. Even more so, he wandered away to do his call.

With Taehyung’s phone.

And all he got was a big slam of the dressing room door in his face. But still, a laugh bubbled in his throat as he tugged on the locked handle. Doesn’t matter. He could hear little snippets of his covert conversation.

“Okay, thanks...No, no, you were just the last person he called. When? I don’t know. A couple hours ago I think...He didn’t have an emergency contact...Yeah, I really appreciate it. I’m sure he will too once he’s sobered up a bit...Mhm...Bye.” Jang unlocked the door, shoving Taehyung as he pushed it open again.

“Who did you call? It better not have been my dad. He’ll...he’ll...” Suddenly, Taehyung couldn’t go on. What if Jang really did call his dad? He would see Taehyung like this and he’d be so disappointed. He wouldn’t want him as a son anymore. He couldn’t take that.

And then he was sobbing on Jang’s shoulder and he had no idea why. Everything just hurt, and it grew as layer upon layer of misery added to itself, and all Taehyung could do was cry, Jang awkwardly stroking the shimmering fabric of his top.

“I got you a ride home, Taehyung,” Jang explained slowly, tilting his chin so he could look at him. “I didn’t call your dad. I called a friend. Is that okay?”

Taehyung gulped, then nodded.

“Good. Let’s go wait out front, then.”

He picked up Taehyung’s bag and walked him to the door, ignoring or pushing aside any men that
tried to reach for him. They stood in silence outside; Shivers skated through Jang’s body but Taehyung felt nothing, the blood rushing to his cheeks keeping him warm enough.

About ten minutes of this passed. And then a black Hyundai Genesis pulled up alongside the curb. Jang squeezed Taehyung’s shoulder before going to knock on the window, and for a moment, he was terrified his manager had decided to leave him after all. He rushed up to his side, peering in when the tinted window rolled down.

Even under the influence of god knows how many drinks and something that was most likely cocaine, Taehyung would recognise that face anywhere.

“Jeonggukkie!” he exclaimed in delight, tears drying on his cheeks.

Jeongguk looked at him kinda funny, bunny teeth worrying his bottom lip, eyes narrowed, but Taehyung didn’t know why. He reached across the console and pushed the passenger door open.

“Get in.” He spoke through gritted teeth.

Oh. He seemed mad.

Nonetheless, Taehyung waved to Jang and slid into the passenger seat. A few moments passed before he registered they were driving now, and Jeongguk still hadn’t said anything. A black hoodie had been tossed on his lap, one Taehyung delighted in tying the sleeves of with his anxious, jittery hands.

The lights looked pretty as they streaked by through the window, though, and Taehyung was content enough to watch these when the hoodie no longer held any intrigue for him. But when they came to an abrupt stop, there weren’t any more streaks to watch. Just bright red, green, and yellow lights glaring down from overhead.

Taehyung glanced surreptitiously at Jeongguk, whose knuckles were white from how tight he clenched the wheel. He stared straight ahead with enough precision to burn a hole in the windshield.

“Are you mad at me?”

Jeongguk ignored him.

“You are mad at me,” he concluded.

Annoyingly enough, Jeongguk continued to remain silent.

“Jeonggukkie,” Taehyung whined, grasping his bicep.

“Don’t,” he said shortly. One word was better than none.

“Don’t what?”

Jeongguk jerked his arm, shaking Taehyung off. “Don’t touch me.”

“Why not?” Taehyung pouted, grabbing him again. He would touch Jeongguk if he wanted to.

“I said, don’t.”

“What?” He slid a hand up Jeongguk’s firm bicep. “Does it bother you?”
“Yes,” Jeongguk hissed, swatting him away. “Just sit there and shut up for once. I know it’s hard for you, but try and give it a shot.”

Taehyung glared at the blurry license plate of the car in front of them. “You’re kinda mean, Jeongguk.”

“Can’t imagine why,” he muttered under his breath. As if Taehyung wouldn’t hear. He could hear just fine, thank you.

“You know, I don’t-”

How was that sentence supposed to end?

Resigned, Jeongguk prompted, “You don’t what?”

Taehyung frowned. “I don’t remember.”

A sigh escaped Jeongguk. “Just close your eyes. I’ll tell you when we’re back at your dorm.”

“Will you kiss me awake, Prince Charming?” Taehyung giggled at his own joke.

“No.”

They were moving again; Taehyung could tell by the lights.

“Isn’t it pretty, hyung?” He pointed at the ribbons of color racing across the window, blending together and building a beautiful circus before his eyes. “Look at the lights.”

Jeongguk glanced his way before refocusing on the road. “It is pretty.”

“Liar. You didn’t even look long enough to see them.”

“I wasn’t talking about the lights.”

Taehyung didn’t know what this meant, and he didn’t have any interest in asking more questions. Tediou s. His own hands had become fascinating to him, and he held them up to the window, enjoying their reflection in the dark glass. He curled his fingers, and twined them together, just to see the way his reflection changed.

Abruptly, he reached for Jeongguk. “Let me see your hands.”

“I’m driving, Tae.” Jeongguk inhaled sharply, as if he’d caught himself making a mistake. “Taehyung.”

“And I want to look at your fingers.”

Taehyung leaned over, tugging Jeongguk’s right hand from the wheel. He ripped it from Taehyung’s grip, shooting him a furious look.

“For fuck’s sake! I’m trying to drive!”

His eyes went wide, bottom lip jutting out in his best pout. “Please, hyung?”

Jeongguk’s angry eyes didn’t leave the road as he caved, laying his hand on the console. Delighted, Taehyung held his hand between both of his own, admiring his long ivory fingers and
purpling bruises on his knuckles.

“Did you punch someone?” He brushed his thumb over one of Jeongguk’s knuckles as he spoke.

“No.”

“Then why are you purple?”

He liked purple.

“I hit a wall.”

Taehyung giggled. “That was kind of a dumb thing to do.” He pressed against one of the bruises, captivated by Jeongguk’s hiss of pain and the way his other fingers clenched. Still, he didn’t take his hand away.

“You’re one to talk. You’re the reason I punched the wall.”

Taehyung looked up, head tilted as he took in Jeongguk’s taut jaw and narrowed eyes. His frustratingly sexy long hair fell over his face, casting angry shadows, but he didn’t have a free hand to brush it back with. Figuring being nice couldn’t hurt, Taehyung did it for him, tucking a lock of raven hair behind his ear.

“Did I make you mad earlier, too?”

“Yes.”

His brow furrowed in confusion; he didn’t remember doing anything bad.

“How?”

Jeongguk shook his head, destroying Taehyung’s efforts to fix his hair for him. Rude. “It’s not worth talking about with you like this. You’ll find out tomorrow, anyways.”

“I wanna know,” he insisted stubbornly. “Otherwise I can’t say sorry.”

“People saw us at the cafe earlier and they started spreading rumours. That’s all.”

His confusion only grew. Earlier felt a bit blurry to him, unable to retrieve much of the specifics, but he thought he knew what Jeongguk was talking about.

“Why would you punch a wall over that? It was a little cheek kiss. Everyone deserves little cheek kisses. Even angry bunnies who hate being second best.”

He gave himself a tiny high-five for that one.

“Because we’re not friends, Taehyung. I don’t like you, and I don’t really want to be associated with you. Especially not through ‘little cheek kisses.’”

Taehyung knew they weren’t friends. That didn’t mean they were strangers. Jeongguk knew him better than anyone. And it hurt every time he forgot that, because even if he didn’t care anymore, it still mattered to Taehyung. He wouldn’t spend so much time trying to forget as easily as Jeongguk had if it didn’t matter.

“But you’re here. You picked up the phone when Jang-ssi called. Why?”
That was perhaps the most coherent thing he’d said all night. Saying it brought on the headache that had been lingering on the edge of his conscious.

“Because clearly you haven’t realised this by now, but I come every time you call. I’m going to be there every time you need me to be, whether I want to or not.”

Taehyung took this information in, but didn’t know how to process it.

“Oh.”

“Yeah,” Jeongguk repeated with a bitterness to rival his own. “Oh.”

“Why?”

Jeongguk went silent for a moment. Just as Taehyung began to think he’d decided to ignore him again, he said, “I don’t know. You’re just...it’s you. I can’t get away from you. Even when I hate you. Even when you do everything you can to piss me off. Even when you lie, and you sleep with my friends, and you pick fights with me over the dumbest shit. I could cut myself off and distance myself, but even after all these years, I haven’t. And I don’t know why. I hate being around you. I hate seeing you. I hate talking to you. But I still do it. Maybe I’m just a masochist, I don’t know.”

Taehyung had no idea what to say. Everything he said was too similar, too much like...like what? It just sounded familiar. And painful. Resonating somewhere hidden, buried and forgotten, in his chest. Besides, any words he could muster would’ve just sounded insincere and incoherent.

Instead, he laced his fingers with Jeongguk’s and squeezed his hand.

“I’m sorry.”

It’s all he could say. He didn’t say it often. But he’d said it a lot today.

Jeongguk allowed him to hold his hand for a minute. Taehyung hadn’t realised they were parked until he saw Jeongguk’s beautiful conflicted doe eyes looking at him. Just him. Gazing into his own eyes as if he could find all his answers there, and something in the depths of Jeongguk’s dark irises pierced through the haze surrounding him, needling his heart with pinpricks of a poison, or maybe a remedy.

His hands were moving on their own accord, running up Jeongguk’s arms to cup his face. And still, Jeongguk didn’t push him away.

“I’m going to kiss you,” Taehyung whispered, drawing his thumb across the pink pout of Jeongguk’s lips.

“I know.”

As Taehyung leaned across the console, Jeongguk’s hand fell to his waist almost in resignation. But the moment Taehyung’s lips pressed against his, every ounce of hesitation vanished. He gripped tight, holding Taehyung like he was afraid he would disappear. But where else would he want to go when Jeongguk felt like bliss? When he tasted like his favourite vanilla cake, and when the push and pull of his mouth was so heartbreakingly familiar? When Jeongguk knew every inch of his lips, knew the little tricks that got to him like no one else could?

He saw the lights when he kissed Jeongguk, too. Colours beyond his wildest imagination, springing to life behind the dark velvet lids of his eyes, coaxing golds, reds, pinks, and blues from his lips through every exchange of shaky breaths, spit, and unspoken emotion. So bright, bright
enough to hurt. But so irresistibly pretty.

Jeongguk’s precious teeth, the ones other kids always teased him about when they were younger, dragged against Taehyung’s bottom lip as he went to pull away from him. But Taehyung wasn’t done. Jeongguk couldn’t just give him this and then take it away again. He stretched more from his seat, knee digging into the gear shift as he clung to Jeongguk’s neck and kissed him fervently, tongue seeking out the sweetness that seemed to be entirely him. Jeongguk relented, tugging him closer by the ribbons on his lingerie, allowing Taehyung to devour him until it became too much.

He broke away, only to kiss a trail from Taehyung’s lips, along his jaw, and down his neck. A pleasured sigh escaped Taehyung as he felt Jeongguk’s tongue laving over his skin before teeth grazed against his throat. Taehyung threaded Jeongguk’s silky hair between his fingers for support as he sucked a red bruise into his skin. His breaths started coming in short pants as Jeongguk continued to mark him, littering hickeys every place he could reach.

Eventually, Taehyung missed the slide of his lips against his own and tugged him up, reconnecting them. Jeongguk was firmer now, not letting Taehyung just have him any way he pleased. He nipped Taehyung’s bottom lip, parting them so he could have access. His hands fell from behind Jeongguk’s neck to his biceps, gripping the hard muscle beneath his fingertips. A hand knotted in his hair, and Jeongguk pulled him back, gazing at him with a dark lust he knew must match his own. Taehyung tilted his chin up to meet Jeongguk’s burning gaze, anticipation coursing through him.

“This is wrong,” he murmured. “You’re not thinking straight.”

Taehyung tried to suppress his giggle, but it got out nonetheless. “Am I ever?”

Jeongguk shook his head. The heat vanished just as quickly as it came. “C’mon. Bed time.”

And before Taehyung could protest, Jeongguk had left the car and come around the passenger side, holding the door open for him. His duffel bag somehow ended up over his shoulder.

Taehyung crossed his exposed arms, refusing to budge. Why should he? He was very content right where he was.

“Please, Tae-Taehyung. Get out of the car.”

“No. You’re just gonna disappear the second I’m out, so I just won’t move. You’re gonna shut me out again and pretend you hate me when I know you don’t. I’m the only person you’ve ever loved, Jeongguk. And I hate it when you shut me out. And I know you hate it, too.”

He knew he was repeating himself, knew that the words he strung together were almost right, but not quite. But he also knew from Jeongguk’s stunned expression that he got his point across.

Still, Jeongguk just shook his head again, as if he were trying to rid himself of the accusation. Instead of asking once more, he wrapped his arms around Taehyung’s waist and lifted him out of the car.

He was flying. The wind of the witching hour whipped at his hair, the polluted orange glow of street lamps painting a ghostly, surreal fog over the night, and all he knew were Jeongguk’s strong arms around him and the way the cold air stripped him of breath, the threat of suffocating more exhilarating than any high.

What Taehyung wouldn’t give to go out like this.
Before he knew it, warm air rushed into his lungs and his feet landed on solid ground. They stood in the main hall of his dorm. The shade of the overhead lights looked a little pinker than usual, but he decided not to voice this out loud. He didn’t want Jeongguk to notice.

“What room?”

Jeongguk kept his words short, avoiding so much as a glance at Taehyung.

“What room for what? There’s a tv in the basement. Uh...vending machines through that door. Yugyeom put an entire filleted fish in one once. At the end of that hall down there, kids usually try to break in and fuck. It’s a vacant room, and it’s got a sweet double bed. I wish I had a double bed. Imagine all that space, Jeonggukkie. Oh, and there’s a room we use for game night. It has an air hockey table.”

“Your room.”

“Oh.” Taehyung frowned, thinking for a moment. “I know the floor. Um...number is...well, it’s floor four and I think there’s a two in the number.”

Jeongguk sighed. “You’ve got to be kidding me. You can remember every other room in the damn hall, but not your own?” Taehyung just shrugged, already finding the situation kind of funny and made grabby hands at Jeongguk. “What do you want?”

“Carry me.”

With another sigh, Jeongguk once again pulled Taehyung into his arms and lifted him into the air. A delighted squeal escaped him, and he locked his legs around Jeongguk’s waist, clinging onto his neck. He tried to keep his stilettos from digging into Jeongguk’s back.

“Elevator?”

Taehyung pointed down the way they’d just come. Jeongguk rolled his eyes and walked in that direction, calling the lift.

When the doors slid open, someone already stood inside. The moment they exited, they stopped and stared.

“Tae?” Minho asked in disbelief, eyes wide.

“Hi.”

Jeongguk’s grip around him tightened. “What’s his room number?” he inquired politely. Oh, good thinking. He would know.

Minho took a minute to overcome his shock, but eventually stammered, “N-number twelve. Fourth floor.”

“Thanks. Pardon us.” He spoke smoothly, passing Minho and entering the lift. As they rode between floors, Taehyung nuzzled Jeongguk’s neck, enjoying his floral scent. He pressed his lips to his skin, mouthing at his throat, and Jeongguk didn’t tell him to stop until they were outside of a room that probably read number twelve if Taehyung cared to focus long enough. “Okay, okay, that’s enough.” Jeongguk tugged on his hair to get him to pay attention. “Key?”

“Um…” His eyebrows drew together in thought. And then excitement washed over him. “Oh! Oh! I remember! That little pocket inside the main pocket...it’s…” He grabbed the bag swinging from
Jeongguk’s shoulder, unzipping the top and fishing around until his fingertips grazed against metal. Triumphant, he pulled the brass key out and tried to fit it in the lock, but his depth perception was a little off. Jeongguk gently pried the key from his fingers and managed to unlock the door, still holding Taehyung.

They made it inside. Taehyung’s room looked pretty, awash with light from the blue and white holiday lights he had strung up. He hadn’t meant to leave them on while he was at work. Oops.

Jeongguk set him down carefully on his white fluffy comforter, looking at him with an odd expression on his face.

“Are you gonna leave me?” Taehyung asked, voice small. He didn’t want him to leave. He felt safe with him. Warm and happy. He felt like he could smile when he was with Jeongguk.

Jeongguk glanced around, took a deep breath, then exhaled.

“No.”

He sat down next to Taehyung on the bed and patted his left leg. “Lift.” Taehyung did as he was told, and watched in fascination as Jeongguk set to work undoing the straps of his nude sequined stiletto. He did the same for the second one, and dropped them both on the ground unceremoniously. Next, he crawled behind Taehyung on the bed to unbutton the collar holding his golden top up. Taehyung made no move to cover his exposed chest, but almost cried out when Jeongguk left the bed. He didn’t go far, though, only to Taehyung’s closet, grabbing a black t-shirt and sweatpants.

“You think you can change?” Jeongguk asked, returning to him.

Taehyung nodded, but refused the shirt being handed to him, instead tugging on Jeongguk’s.

Jeongguk cocked his head in confusion. He always looked so cute when he was confused. He always had.

“What?”

“Your shirt, Jeonggukkie. I like it.”

Jeongguk glanced down at his black long sleeve, almost identical to the shirt he’d offered. A soft chuckle escaped him as Taehyung kept tugging. The first sound he’d made all night that hadn’t been brought on from irritation.

“Okay. You can have it.”

He pulled his shirt over his head, and Taehyung couldn’t restrain himself. He inhaled sharply, reaching out to trace Jeongguk’s ivory chest and stomach, his defined abs, sculpted from years of dedication to the sport he loved.

Jeongguk caught his hand, lowering it back down to his side. “C’mon, let’s get you into something comfortable. Stand up for me.”

Taehyung got to his feet, albeit a little unsteadily. Jeongguk helped him get his shirt over his head. The soft black cotton fell to his midthigh and smelled so much like Jeongguk it made his chest ache. Then, Jeongguk tugged the rest of his satin lingerie down his legs and off onto the floor, coaxing him to sit and sliding the sweatpants on in the outfit’s place.
“You want me to find your makeup wipes for you?” he asked gently.

Taehyung shook his head, pulling on Jeongguk’s arm. “Too sleepy. I’ll do it later.”

With a nod, Jeongguk kicked off his shoes and allowed Taehyung to pull him into bed, arms wrapped around him, protecting Taehyung from himself.

A content sigh escaped him as he curled into Jeongguk, nose pressed against his warm skin. His head was really starting to hurt now, but he’d worry about that later, too. Right now, all he wanted was this. Jeongguk, and his scent, and the blue and white lights winking with familiarity overhead.

Chapter End Notes

...
Yes, I'm posting several days early. No, my beta is not allowed to know. She'll yell at me.

Anyways! Title from Zella Day's East of Eden

Two days had passed, and Jeongguk was still getting Twitter notifications and texts every three seconds from people he didn’t know, but apparently knew him, wondering what happened between him and Taehyung on Saturday. Like it was any of their fucking business. Not only had people gotten pictures of them at the cafe, but Minho didn't have enough sense to keep his mouth shut, and soon news of them together at Taehyung’s dorm spread all over the place. And yeah, sure, he hadn’t left until he knew for sure Taehyung was sleeping soundly. But that’s because he didn’t trust Taehyung not to throw himself out the window or something the second Jeongguk was gone. The guy acted like a mess under normal circumstances, but drunk and high he became a whole different ordeal.

But...although he’d never admit it out loud, getting that phone call Saturday night had been scary. Jeongguk could barely understand what the manager guy was trying to tell him, or even who he claimed to be, but he mentioned Taehyung and the address of a pretty famous strip club, so Jeongguk figured there must be trouble. He felt terrified, thinking that maybe Taehyung had gotten hurt nearby and stumbled over that way. Not that he cared if anything really happened to him. He just didn’t want to be held responsible.

It wasn’t until he got there and saw Taehyung standing outside with a guy who was clearly a manager of the club, wearing a skimpy satin gold top and seven-inch high heels, face prettied up with even more makeup than usual, did it all click into place.

Taehyung was a stripper.

In all honesty, Jeongguk felt sort of astounded that none of them had figured it out, most of all Seokjin. After all, Taehyung worked ridiculous night hours, flirted with everyone around like he was practising for something, and danced with far more seduction than necessary. All this time, Taehyung hadn’t been lying. He truly didn’t realise what he was doing, because it just came naturally at this point. And it made sense why he’d been happy at the cafe when Jeongguk called him out on it. Because he’d been trying to paint a specific picture of himself. So of course he’d been thrilled to hear his efforts were paying off.

But he’d broken everything that night.

It wasn’t even Taehyung’s fault. He had been drunk, high, and already naturally impulsive. Jeongguk stood as the only person to blame. He hadn’t been any of those things. He had been sober, and usually he thought things through carefully.

How could he think, though, when Taehyung, with his blown pupils and pretty red lips, gazed at him with more trust and familiarity than he had in years? He’d tried to keep his distance, setting boundaries between them on the car ride back to Taehyung’s dorm, but of course it didn’t work.
Because Taehyung still managed to trick him into pouring his heart out, since Taehyung knew that’s when he could be the most easily manipulated. Still, Jeongguk couldn’t blame him. Yes, he’d been angry because of the rumours, but he still let Taehyung kiss him. Even though Jeongguk probably couldn’t count the number of people Taehyung has kissed in the past month on all ten fingers, he still let Taehyung kiss him.

And he could spend hours psychoanalysing himself, trying to rationalise just why he’d hand himself over so willingly to the person he hated more than anyone. But he already knew the answer. He’d told Taehyung himself, praying he wouldn’t remember when morning came.

However, what hurt the most had been everything that happened after they kissed. Taehyung, despite being barely cognisant, had still managed to pry out Jeongguk’s deepest secret, his deepest fear, and use it against him. The words wouldn’t stop ringing in his ears, no matter how many attempts he made to block them out.

*I’m the only person you’ve ever loved, Jeongguk. And I hate it when you shut me out. And I know you hate it, too.*

And because Jeongguk was a weak man with a weak resolve and a weak, traitorous heart, he’d carried Taehyung to his room, surrendered his shirt, and lay with him until he drifted off to sleep and morning had begun dawning through Taehyung’s tiny window.

Of course, Taehyung hadn’t contacted him since. How predictable. Jeongguk couldn’t be sure how much of it he remembered. But even if he didn’t remember any of it, he had to know by now. Everyone else on campus knew, after all.

Seokjin was the first to actually bring it up with him in person as they waited around for their Philosophy lecture to start. Taehyung still hadn’t shown, and Jeongguk doubted he would.

“So…I know it’s not really any of my business, and you don’t have to tell me anything, but what really happened Saturday night? Everyone’s been talking about it, and I guess I’m just kind of confused…” Seokjin trailed off, looking at Jeongguk before glancing immediately back down at the tabletop.

He sighed, long and loud. He didn’t want to give out Taehyung’s secret; it wasn’t his to share. Obviously, he had a good reason for not telling anyone, and Jeongguk refused to betray him like that. Even if his secret would have made excellent blackmail material.

Besides, Taehyung had his biggest secret. He had for years, and he still hasn’t told anyone. Jeongguk could do the same for him.

Eventually, he simply settled on, “Taehyung got kinda drunk Saturday night and one of the friends he was out with, a guy from work I think, wanted to get him home safe. So he used Taehyung’s phone and called the last person he’d talked to, which happened to be me. I came and picked him up, and I drove him home. I made sure he got in his dorm okay and then I left. I wasn’t really interested in hanging around, for obvious reasons.”

“Oh…” Seokjin nodded, a hint of relief tinging his voice. “Sorry, people just made it seem like it was a bigger deal than it was, I guess.”

“The joys of millenial kids, right?” Jeongguk snorted. “I didn’t make any moves on your boyfriend, if that’s what you’re worried about, hyung. In case you haven’t noticed, I literally can’t stand him.”
What the fuck?

Since when did he lie to Seokjin? They were best friends. He shouldn’t let Kim Taehyung, of all people, get in between that. Even if he definitely made moves on him Saturday night. Or Sunday morning, depending on which way you spun it. Shit. He still wasn’t quite sure why he picked up the phone in the first place.

“He’s not my boyfriend,” Seokjin muttered. “And it wouldn’t kill you to try and get along.”

Jeongguk thought back to the conversation they’d had Saturday morning. Taehyung had wanted them to get along, too. He’d even apologised.

A little, at least.

In the end, he just shrugged. “We’ll see.”

Just then, the lecture hall door burst open and in sauntered none other than Kim Taehyung, glowing as usual like nothing happened, and like he wasn’t two minutes away from being late. As if the rest of them were all running on his fucking schedule. He moved with the grace of a panther, which he absolutely didn’t have Saturday night, and slunk through the rows until he was standing right in front of them.

“Would you mind scooting over, Jeon? I wanna give Seokjinnie morning kisses.”

When he stood this close, Jeongguk could see the dark circles around his eyes that he’d tried to hide with layers of golden concealer, and the hints of Jeongguk’s hickeys on his throat and collar that were equally poorly hidden. Taehyung had probably gone out again last night. Now the question stands: was he working, or just partying?

Because Taehyung was a stripper. He couldn’t get the thought to leave his head; he just kept repeating it over and over on loop.

Taehyung was a stripper.

Kim Taehyung.

His childhood best friend, high school crush, and worst enemy.

Kim Taehyung was a stripper.

“Hello?” Taehyung snapped his pretty fingers directly underneath Jeongguk’s nose. “Earth to Jeon Jeongguk. Look, I know there’s not a whole lot going on up there, but for fuck’s sake, Jeon, try and be a little more polite.”

This jolted Jeongguk right out of his reverie.

Glaring with as much venom as he could muster, he responded, “Find your own fucking seat, Kim. I’m so not in the mood to deal with your bullshit.”

So much for progress. Apparently Taehyung had decided to throw their apologies out the window and double back with renewed efforts to be the most irritating person on the planet. It made him wonder how much he really remembered.

“Jeongguk!” Seokjin prompted him, sounding surprisingly pissed. “Don’t be a dick.”

“Don’t bother, Seokjinnie,” Taehyung cooed, slipping past Jeongguk to card his fingers through
Seokjin’s hair. “He’s not very pleased with me at the moment. I can’t imagine why.” He placed a kiss on the top of Seokjin’s head before continuing, “I’m gonna go sit back there. Besides, Sungjae is waving at me. You wanna do something after class? My next is Gender Performance, and it’s not until one.”

A flirtatious smile tugged at Seokjin’s lips.

“Only if that something is you.”

Despite how unflattering it would be, Jeongguk might throw up right there in his Philosophy lecture. Perhaps the smell would be enough to drive Taehyung right back out the door.

But Taehyung just giggled, leaning down to whisper something in Seokjin’s ear. God, he hated it when Taehyung whispered, spinning sweet, silky lies in the ears of his victims.

Jeongguk had never been more thankful that their professor chose that moment to sweep into the room, announcing the start of class.

One thing was for certain, though. He was not looking forward to tonight’s practice.

~*~*~

“So, um…” Taehyung began, watching everyone poke at their sushi with idle disinterest. Hoseok, Jimin, and Yoongi had all met up for lunch, and invited him to join after he ran into the group at the nearby shopping plaza. Since he was here for a specific reason, he didn’t have enough money to eat, but sat with them nonetheless. He had decided to purchase a new pair of heels after Seokjin found his nude stilettos and fucked him until he cried in them. He figured he owed it to the pre-med student to spice it up with a more enticing pair, and hopefully, the shoes would be an investment not just for his sex life, but his job as well.

It was kinda funny just how well he could mix the two.

“Spit it out,” Yoongi grumbled, rolling his eyes. Out of all of Jeongguk’s friends, he was Taehyung’s favourite. Besides Seokjin, of course. He was adorable, but brutally honest, and had a way of making Taehyung feel inferior that he quite enjoyed. Similar to Bogum in that sense, but without the same price tag of guilt attached.

Jimin chuckled, taking a sip of his iced tea. “Give him a minute, hyung. The thoughts rarely make it from the head to the mouth with this one. Usually, the mouth gets there first.”

“Hey!” Taehyung objected, throwing a balled-up napkin at him. “It’s stupid anyways. Forget about it.”

Hoseok arched his eyebrows, a knowing expression on his face. “This is about whatever went down Saturday, isn’t it?”

Ugh, Saturday. His head pounded just thinking about it.

Taehyung shifted in his seat guiltily. “Mayhaps. Or mayhaps it’s something else entirely. Or a little bit of both.”

All three of them were watching him eagerly now. He knew it had to be intriguing if even Yoongi tuned in.
“Alright, so, imagine, hypothetically, that there’s this guy—”

“I hate this already. Please continue.” Jimin leaned in, clearly way too invested in wherever this was going.

“So there’s this guy. And you hypothetically like that guy a lot. And his dick game is really strong—”

Yoongi let out a disappointed sigh. “So this isn’t about Jeongguk.”

Taehyung shot him a look. “Are you saying that Jeon’s dick game isn’t strong? How would you know?”

He received an equally as pointed look. “The question is, how would you know?”

Now Taehyung was the one lost in his confusion. “I wouldn’t.”

Yoongi plucked up a piece of tuna nigiri. “My point exactly. This isn’t about Jeongguk.”

“Oh.” Yeah, sure, Yoongi was great and all, but he was weird, too. How he blended so seamlessly into Jimin and Hoseok’s dynamic would remain beyond him. His mind worked in mysterious ways.

“Okay, anyways. You like this guy. You mess around sometimes. And there are times where you’re like ‘Oh, maybe this could be something more.’ But then every time he brings it up, you kinda dodge the question and move on to something else. What does that mean?”

Jimin tilted his head, thinking for a moment. “Well, why do you dodge the question?”

Taehyung shrugged. “It just doesn’t feel right. There’s nothing there, you know? Well, I mean, there’s obviously something. Like yeah, we could date, and that’d be fine. But it wouldn’t go anywhere. So why waste the time?”

“Then, there’s your answer,” Hoseok replied as if it were the easiest thing in the world. “It means you don’t like him enough to want to try dating him, duh.”

“I take it this is about Seokjin?” Yoongi inquired. He didn’t seem mad that Taehyung felt conflicted about his relationship with his best friend. Just curious.

Taehyung nodded, figuring there was no point in pretending any differently.

“From what I understand about your guys’ relationship from his end of things, he wouldn’t mind taking that extra step. So if that’s something you really don’t want, you’ve gotta tell him. Otherwise you’re leading him on, and that’s not fair to him.”

He took a deep breath, processing Yoongi’s words. “You’re right, hyung. I can’t just keep using him. I really like him. I mean as a person. I want to keep him as a friend. I don’t care if we sleep together or not. He’s a good person, and I don’t want to lose him.”

Yoongi nodded, surprise in his feline eyes. “Huh. You know, you’re not half as bad as Jeongguk makes you out to be, Taehyung-ah.”

A bitter chuckle escaped him. He didn’t particularly want to think about Jeongguk right now. Not with everything going around. Still, he needed answers. “Thanks.”

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but Jeongguk’s kind of an idiot.”

“Say it louder for the people in the back,” Jimin chimed in.
“Be nice, Jiminie,” Hoseok frowned, swatting him. Yoongi glanced at them as they devolved into a mess of play fighting, and Taehyung didn’t miss the fondness in his eyes. Interesting.

“So, speaking of Jeon…” The lead-in was tentative at best, and he wondered if he should really talk about this with Yoongi. They barely knew each other, and he was far closer to the basketball star than to Taehyung.

Yoongi raised an eyebrow. “I’m not here to take sides. You can ask me whatever you want, it’s not getting back to him. Same goes for his shit, too, just so you know.”

His words put Taehyung at ease. Maybe he really could trust Yoongi.

“Alright. Basically, he’s mad at me. And I need him to get un-mad-at-me so I can pull off tonight’s practice.”

Hoseok cocked his head, listening in. “Isn’t he always mad at you?”

“Yeah,” Jimin agreed. “Isn’t that sort of your guys’ thing?”

Taehyung bristled. “No. We don’t have a ‘thing.’ And I tried to make a lot of progress on Saturday about the whole ‘being-mad-at-me’ aspect of our relationship, and he completely ruined it.”

“How exactly did he ruin it?” Yoongi asked.

Well, shit. Taehyung had backed himself into a corner now. The details of Saturday night were fuzzy at best, but he knew that Jeongguk knew about his job because he’d picked him up outside Sin, or so his hazy memories and his manager told him. And he remembered Jeongguk specifically stating that he was mad at him because of the stunt he’d pulled in the cafe to get Bogum’s attention. Which had totally backfired as well, and they still hadn’t spoken since then. Whatever. Screw Bogum.

Everything after that conversation came up as a complete blur, though. From what he’d gathered between Twitter and Minho, Jeongguk had gotten Taehyung back in his dorm room and then left. There was some carrying mixed in there too, somewhere, but Taehyung had no idea where. He’d also woken up with a dozen hickeys, but he doubted Jeongguk had anything to do with that.

It certainly wouldn’t be the first time he let a patron mark him up all pretty. But still, it concerned him a little. That, among other details.

“He just...just trust me, okay? We made up Saturday morning and then I kinda did something that, in hindsight, might have pissed him off a bit, and then he decided to completely retract his apology and start acting like an ass again. And it’s not like I care what he thinks of me, but for my lesson to work, I need him to at least pretend like he can tolerate me for a second.”

Jimin squeezed his shoulder in comfort. “Have you considered just talking to him?”

Taehyung scoffed. “Of course I considered it. But then he didn’t try to talk to me again after it happened, and when I got to Philosophy this morning, he was glaring at me the second I walked in the room. I don’t even know what I did to make him so angry.”

Although, that wasn’t entirely true. He did sort of attack Jeongguk as soon as he saw him. But he couldn’t help it with the way he glared at him so shamelessly. How else was he supposed to react? He still felt weird and sort of misplaced after waking up at three in the afternoon on Sunday wearing a shirt that obviously wasn’t his, skin all marked up, while his phone blew up with notifications saying he’d been seen going in his dorm with Jeongguk.
Wait.

*What if we slept together?*

*Fuck.*

It would make sense. The shirt that smelled like him, the way Jeongguk had gone radio silent, his foggy, half-formed memories that all had to do with him, the reason why he would even go up to Taehyung’s room in the first place.

He rarely invited a person in for anything else.

“Uh, out of curiosity, does he get around much?”

That didn’t come out nearly as innocent as he planned.

Hoseok choked on his salmon roll and Jimin spit out half his tea. Yoongi even set down his chopsticks, taken aback.

“Not really? I mean, he has casual hookups and shit, but not very often. He focuses on his studies and basketball. Why do you ask?”

Taehyung felt awkward now. Could he have been one of those casual hookups?

“No reason. Anyways, Jimin, I was looking around for shoes earlier and I found this store I think you’d love. We can check it out later if you want.”

Luckily, the trio allowed his sudden change of topic to pass. Soon they were wrapping up their meal, and Taehyung decided to head back to his dorm, shopping bag in hand.

Once inside, Jeongguk’s shirt glaring almost as vehemently as its owner at him from his bed, he decided to say screw it and reached out first.

```
Me

i need you to do me a favour
```

He left his phone on the nightstand, deciding to take a shower while he waited for Jeongguk to text him back. Hopefully, he would hurry up and respond fast. Taehyung had class in less than twenty minutes.

When he got out of the shower, he was happier than he should’ve been to see a notification on his lockscreen.

```
Juancock

ugh god. what now
```
Me
you’re always such a ray of sunshine,
you know that?

Juancock
still not in the mood. what do you want

Me
two things actually

Juancock
wow needy much

Me
ignoring that

Me
i need you to pretend like we’re chill tonight at practice

Juancock
for the magic of friendship lesson
right?

Taehyung rolled his eyes. One day, he was going to invent bottled headaches so Jeongguk could understand the intense pain talking to him left others with.

Me
not what i’m calling it but

yeah

**Juancock**

what’s in it for me

**Me**

idfk? gratitude?

**Juancock**

meh.

He was ready to tear his hair out. Why did Jeongguk have to be the most difficult person on the planet?

**Me**

let’s just say i’ll owe you

okay?

**Juancock**

yeah alright. second thing?

Well someone jumped on that a little too quick for comfort.

**Me**

what happened saturday night?

He’d already gotten halfway to the Performing Arts center before Jeongguk responded.
Juancock
you know that favour you owe me?

Me
umm...the one we discussed literally ten minutes ago?

Me
yes i fucking remember idiot

Juancock
wonderful.

Juancock
i’d like to cash it in. do me a favour and don’t ask about saturday night. thanks :)

Taehyung was utterly thrown at this point. What did that mean? What was he supposed to take from that? Why didn’t Jeongguk just mock him, say nothing happened, and move on? What a stupid thing to use his free favour on. Unless something actually happened.

Me
lmao alright then. pleasure doing business with you

Whatever. Two could play this game.

~*~*~

Jeongguk purposely waited outside the gym for Namjoon, Yoongi, and Seokjin to arrive because he did not feel like being the first person inside. He knew Taehyung was already in there waiting
for them, no doubt getting ready to serve up another week’s worth of humiliation.

What he didn’t expect to see was Namjoon and Seokjin holding hands as they climbed the concrete steps together, laughing and smiling like lovestruck idiots.

He almost commented on this plot development, but caught Yoongi’s eye and noticed the small shake of his head the senior gave him.

Got it. Keep things subtle so as not to scare them off.

“Where were you this afternoon?” he asked Yoongi, making sure not to attract the attention of Namjoon and Seokjin. “I thought we were gonna try and get some practice in. We’ve got a game tomorrow, you know.”

Yoongi’s eyes widened in surprise. “Oh shit, sorry. I totally forgot. I went and got sushi with Jimin and Hoseok. Taehyung ended up joining us, too.”

Jeongguk couldn’t explain why he felt a sudden spark of anger in his chest. Probably because he didn’t like being blown off by another one of his best friends for the pixie princess gang. Actually, he had nothing against Yoongi hanging out with Jimin and Hoseok. They were all pretty cute together, if he was being completely honest. He just didn’t get why Taehyung had to be there.

“Oh. That must’ve been fun,” is all he ended up saying. His voice sounded hollow, even to him.

“Yeah, it was. Hoseok and Jimin are always fun, and Taehyung wasn’t half bad, either. It was nice to actually talk to him like civil human beings for once. Kid has a lot going on in his head.”

Jeongguk had no idea what Taehyung could possibly have going on that would impress Yoongi. As far as he knew, all Taehyung thought about were dance routines, agonising lessons for the basketball team, and who he planned on hooking up with next. Oh, and apparently the best way to give a lap dance, or whatever twenty year old gay strippers thought about.

He was saved from having to ask, however, by the arrival of the rest of the team. A couple of the guys tried to press him about Saturday’s events, but he brushed them off as they made their way inside.

Taehyung, as expected, sat perched on one of the metal benches waiting for them. Jeongguk tried not to be intimidated by his casual predatory stance or impenetrable confidence. He wore a black t-shirt and sweats, and kept his hair out of his face with a red bandana. He looked frustratingly good, and it didn’t help that Jeongguk could still see his hickeys all over Taehyung’s throat.

The brief moment of appreciation disappeared the second Taehyung opened his mouth, speaking as loudly and obviously as humanly possible.

“Ah, Jeonggukkie-hyung! There you are!” Taehyung grabbed something out of his bag. “Here’s your shirt back. Thanks for letting me hold onto it Saturday night.”

Jeongguk reflexively caught the balled-up black long sleeve Taehyung tossed his way. An awed silence fell over the basketball team, and Jeongguk’s vision went red.

He was going to make Taehyung pay.

His lips curled into a dangerous smile, and he tossed the shirt back, relishing as Taehyung had to stretch up to catch it.
“Why don’t you keep it, Taehyung-ah? After all, you seemed to like it so much. Besides, it looks better on you.”

Taehyung’s eyes flashed, and he had to bite back a smug smirk. Until Taehyung shrugged, and pulled Jeongguk’s shirt over his head.

“I think you’re right, hyung. It does look better on me. Most things do.”

Jeongguk was going to punch him. Right now. He didn’t care anymore.

Luckily for the gym floor and Taehyung’s jaw, Namjoon’s hands landed on his shoulders, dragging him back into line.

“Don’t look now, but Bogum’s about to burst,” he muttered in Jeongguk’s ear.

And sure enough, Bogum’s hands were balled into fists at his side, and he kept shooting both Taehyung and Jeongguk daggers, his usually sweet, pleasant expression morphed into something vengeful. In fact, his reaction almost made suffering through Taehyung worth it.

Almost.

“Alright, listen up.” Taehyung clapped his hands together twice, trying to get everyone’s attention as if he didn’t already have it. “So, I heard you guys lost again Friday night. And yeah, that’s a bummer, but no use in dwelling on it. You’ve got tomorrow’s away game to think about. So, instead, we’re gonna work on improving the problem that keeps getting in the way of your success. Sound good?”

Yugyeom cocked his head. “What problem would that be?”

Taehyung blinked, as if it should be obvious. “The fact that some of you hate each other’s guts, and allow a stupid feud to consume the team...duh.”

Every player stood dumbfounded, to say the least. Except Jeongguk. He knew this was coming.

Bogum took a bold step forward. “You do realise you’re kind of the center of that feud, right?”

Taehyung narrowed his eyes. The look he gave Bogum bordered on hostile. Did something happen between them?

“I’m well aware, actually. Thanks for the heads up, though.” He turned to the rest of the team. “Alright, who here hates me? C’mon, be honest. I don’t have time to deal with cowards.”

The stupidest things gave Jeongguk very much unwanted butterflies. Where the hell were those coming from? Why?

Yoonoh’s, Mingyu’s, Yugyeom’s, and Jeonghan’s hands all went into the air. Predictable.


He’d sort of expected his name to get dragged into this, so the question didn’t really bother him. Bogum’s hand was the first to go up, followed by Minho, Sungjae, and Youngjae. Again, the results he would have guessed.

Taehyung nodded. “Kay, cool. Now cut that shit out right now, because I’ll have none of it on the court.” He marched over to Jeongguk and snatched his hand, interlacing their fingers and holding them up for everyone to see. “Jeongguk and I are fine. So get over it, and don’t let it interfere with
your playing ever again. Communicate. Pass to each other. Trust each other. Otherwise, you’re never going to win a game. Is that clear?”

They were not fine.

But Jeongguk nodded, trying to go along with Taehyung for the sake of the team. He had a point, even if Jeongguk hated to admit it. They needed to feel like they could rely on each other. So if holding hands with Taehyung was what it took to build their team, then so be it.

Hopefully his hand wasn’t too sweaty.

“Wait, when did you guys make up?” Yugyeom asked, confusion etched on his face.

“Saturday,” Jeongguk answered passively. He owed Yugyeom more than that, but this was neither the place nor the time for that discussion. Yugyeom knew all of it, every ugly detail of history between him and Taehyung, and their conversation would take a little more than two minutes courtside.

Bogum threw Taehyung a filthy look. “You two had quite the day Saturday, didn’t you? First the kiss in the cafe, followed by your little speech in the car, then the whole going to your dorm together thing, and now apparently Jeongguk left his shirt there, too. Kind of makes a guy wonder what goes on.”

When he put it like that, it did sound kind of suspicious. Then again, it hadn’t been an entirely innocent affair. But what happened in Bogum’s car? What did Taehyung say?

Taehyung lifted a shoulder nonchalantly. “What goes on is none of your business. Especially not here. This space is for movement, and we’ve wasted way too much time on words. So let’s get to it, yeah?”

Half an hour later, sweat poured down the team’s necks in rivulets, and every single one of them were at a complete loss for words. The routine had looked simple enough when Taehyung showed them the recording he’d done with the dance team. But the basketball players soon found out there was nothing simple about it. Worse, they had to rely entirely on the people around them because there were so many partner and group formations, Jeongguk didn’t know where his body ended and another guy’s began. And the only time he wanted to think that statement would be in a gay orgy, which, unfortunately, he had yet to experience.

“Okay, stop.”

He couldn’t tell if the little shakes coming from Taehyung were from laughter or tears.

“You guys are...no. Okay. Actually, there’s some good stuff happening here. I’m not going to discredit that. It’s just...Minho, you’ve gotta touch Yugyeom to form the bar for Sungjae to slide under. And Seokjin, sweetie, I need you to, y’know, pick up your feet a little.”

Seokjin flushed with embarrassment. None of them were phenomenal dancers since they didn’t have any training, but Seokjin was having a particularly difficult time. Still, Taehyung shouldn’t unfairly single him out like that. Fortunately, Namjoon squeezed his shoulder in comfort, and Seokjin’s embarrassment seemed to fade a bit.

“Remind me how this is going to help us win this Friday?” Jeongguk called out, frustrated.

Jeongguk glanced at the tall man in front of him, who was scowling with barely contained malice.

“I don’t believe you,” he confessed.

Taehyung glided across the floor, placing a finger under Bogum’s chin and looking him directly in the eyes. “You’re not going to bite. Are you, hyung?”

Bogum took one look back at Jeongguk before returning to Taehyung, a defeated sigh escaping him. “No. I’m not.” Taehyung beamed, and moved back to the sideline. “Not today, at least,” Bogum muttered the second he had gone.

Another hour, though, and they were starting to get the hang of it. Jeongguk didn’t glare at Bogum every time he took two steps in his direction, Seokjin wasn’t tripping over his own feet nearly as much, and overall, they got through the first half of the routine with minimal mistakes.

Only half an hour remained of practice when Taehyung turned off the music.

A smile graced his face, filled with more genuine joy than Jeongguk had seen in a while.

He shouldn’t like seeing it as much as he did. Stupid Taehyung with his stupid bright smile that made him look like a half-decent human being. Clearly, looks could be deceiving.

“That was really good! Like, incredibly rapid progress. I’m really proud of what you’ve accomplished here. I want you to take this last little bit of time and just play a scrimmage. See if anything’s changed. Oh, and I’m picking teams. Let’s see...Chanyeol, Yoongi, Minho, Jeongguk, and Bogum will start the first team. Sungjae sub in for them. Jeonghan, Yugeom, Seokjin, Namjoon, and Yoonoh will start the second. Mingyu, sub for them. Youngjae, you can sub for whoever you want. I’ll call when I want you to rotate.”

As they were playing, Jeongguk had to admit, Taehyung was pretty smart. He’d mixed them evenly, and significantly more fairly than they would’ve separated themselves. There were little scraps here and there, especially between himself and Bogum, and Yoongi and Minho, but they worked through it eventually. By the time he called for them to stop, Jeongguk felt hot all over, shirt sticking to his back, but basking in their victory. They’d beat Namjoon’s team by four points. Not a wide margin, but satisfying nonetheless.

Taehyung sat cross-legged on the bench, and they all gathered around him like he was some sort of messiah, imparting wisdom only he had access to.

“Thanks for indulging me, guys,” he started, smile still in place. “I know some of this stuff is hard to grasp right now, but it’ll make sense the more weeks go by. I’m not sure when Coach Yun wants us to stop, so for now, keep counting on Monday practices. This last game of the week is a home game, and I’m excited to see how you do. We’ll be there, making sure the cheerleaders know they picked the wrong sport to sponsor this year. Imagine sitting on the sidelines of the football games, freezing your ass off.” Taehyung shook his head in disgust. “Anyways, that’s all for today. Have a good rest of your night!”

Even though they were dismissed, most of his teammates lingered around, chatting with each other and Taehyung, and just going over practice. Jeongguk got caught up in a debate with Minho and Yoongi over the legality of Yonsei’s last win when Taehyung tugged on his sleeve.

“Could I talk to you for a second?”

Jeongguk arched an eyebrow in surprise, but nodded, excusing himself from the conversation.
"The rest of you guys start heading out, I need the space cleared in five."

The players grumbled but made their way over to the doors. Bogum lingered for a moment though, pausing to ask, "Any reason Jeon isn’t getting his ass exiled, too?"

Jeongguk rolled his eyes, turning on him. "Relax, big boy. We all know I’m getting my ass chewed out for something, so just scurry along."

Bogum’s gaze flicked between him and Taehyung, who stood stoically, not giving anything away, before he shrugged.

"Yeah, probably. I’ll text you later, Tae."

"Sure," is all the dance captain responded. The minute he was gone, Taehyung led Jeongguk back over to the bench and practically forced him to sit, crossing his arms.

Immediately, he knew he was in trouble. He had been joking with Bogum, but still the words, "Oh god, what did I do now?" spilled out of his mouth.

Glaring, Taehyung dragged Jeongguk’s black shirt over his head and yanked the collar of his own t-shirt down, exposing every last mark on his neck. "Any idea where these came from?"

Jeongguk felt his cheeks heat up, but pushed the unwelcome intoxicating memories of Taehyung’s skin beneath his mouth aside. "I’d assume from your last hookup. Maybe you should ask Seokjin."

"I woke up with them on Sunday. I didn’t see Seokjin at all on Saturday. The last person I saw was you."

"You had them when I picked you up," Jeongguk lied through his teeth. Taehyung stiffened at that. "And where, exactly, did you pick me up?"

Jeongguk tried to tread carefully. He wasn’t sure how much Taehyung remembered. "Outside of a club. You were with some guy."

"...A strip club?" The way Taehyung avoided eye contact with him said it all.

He nodded. "Yeah."

"And the guy...what did he look like? A little shorter than me? But burlier?" He sounded almost anxious.

Jeongguk thought back, trying to remember the manager with him. "Yeah," he repeated. Taehyung sighed in relief. "Okay, that’s good."

Deciding to try his luck, Jeongguk said, "Look, I know we’re not friends, and I don’t want to talk about it in detail, but I was pretty worried about you that night. The guy who called me, the one you were standing with, all he said was that you were drunk and you’d taken some drugs and you were too out of it to get yourself home."

Taehyung stared at him, silent.

He was making this so much harder than it had to be.

"So basically what I’m trying to say is that I know that scene isn’t pretty, and the crowd isn’t
exactly safe, so if you ever need a ride again, I’ll be around.”

“Oh.” The sound came out small, delicate. So very un-Taehyung. “I- I um...thanks, I guess.”

“Don’t mention it. We’re even now.”

Taehyung’s eyebrows shot up with intrigue. “We are?”

“Well, yeah. You know about my family and I know you’re a stripper. We’re even.”

Flushing a pretty pink colour, Taehyung snapped, “That does not make us even. And if you so much as breathe a word to anyone, I’ll-”

“Relax,” Jeongguk chuckled. “Why would I tell anyone when I can keep that little bit of information all to myself?” Taehyung remained stubbornly quiet, just to get in his space a little since there’s nothing he liked better than a flustered and seething Taehyung, and added, “I bet you’re good at it, too. Everyone’s eyes on you as you toy with their bodies and minds. All that attention…”

Taehyung’s eyes snapped up to meet his, a coquettish smirk in place. “As a matter of fact, Jeon, I am good at it. And I’m flattered you’ve spent so much time imagining the way I move.”

Why was it that every time he tried to mess with Taehyung, it came back around to slap him in the face?

But Jeongguk just shrugged, attempting to play it off. “I can appreciate a good ass when I see one. I mean, it’s a shame it’s yours, but I’m not petty unlike some people.”

Yeah, not his most scathing insult.

“Mhm, not petty at all,” Taehyung snorted. Then he paused before venturing, “I kissed you, didn’t I? In your car, I think…”

Jeongguk succumbed to a moment of stunned silence. There went all his hard work.

“Would you be mad if I said yes?”

Taehyung frowned at the opposite wall. “Mad at you? Not really. Mad at myself, though? A little bit.”

That wasn’t the answer Jeongguk had expected to hear. “Why would you be mad at yourself? You weren’t sober. I was.”

Did he really just admit to that?

Taehyung scratched at the metal bench awkwardly. “Well, because I’m trying to do this whole forgiveness thing with you. And you already think I’m a slut. So making out in your car when I’m drunk isn’t exactly helping my case.”

“Wait, we’re still doing the forgiveness thing?”

“I’m trying to.”

“But…” Jeongguk furrowed his brow, side-glancing at Taehyung. “What was this morning about, then?”
Taehyung returned his look, answering blatantly, “I was mad at you.”

Sorry, but Jeongguk distinctly remembered being the one who was mad.

“Why?”

“Because you sort of left me hanging.” His deep voice sounded tense, frustrated. “I woke up mid-afternoon on Sunday with barely any recollection of the night before, hicckeys all over my neck, your shirt on my body, and a billion notifications blowing up my phone about us, and you didn’t even bother to text. So yeah, I was a little pissed off.”

Jeongguk narrowed his eyes, annoyed by Taehyung’s attitude. “I was waiting for you to text me. I didn’t know what you remembered, so I wasn’t going to make you uncomfortable by suddenly acting like your best friend or some other ridiculous bullshit the next day.”

Taehyung considered this before abruptly asking, “Did we sleep together?”

Astonished, Jeongguk exclaimed, “No! Oh, god no, ew.”

“Wow, rude. You know, half the guys on campus would kill to have the privilege of-”

“Yes, Tae- Kim, I get it. Your ass is expensive and highly sought after. But no. We didn’t.”

Taehyung nodded, but still didn’t seem content. “Alright, so what did we do? How did I end up with your shirt?”

Jeongguk stalled. “Those are two different questions. And technically, I don’t have to answer either of them. I used my favour, remember?”

Irritated, Taehyung bargained, “I’ll owe you another one. You already admitted we kissed. And if we didn’t sleep together, clearly it wasn’t that bad.”

Weighing his options, Jeongguk finally decided, “Fine. I picked you up from the club. We had a small argument on the drive back.” He added, “You’re really fucking annoying when you’re under the influence, you know that?” for good measure.

A cheeky grin appeared on Taehyung’s face. “Annoying how?”

“As in, you kept touching me, and pouting, and whining, and at one point you took my hand off the wheel, and I really think you wanted us to crash.”

The grin slid into something a little more resentful. “I probably did. I get...well, in Bogum’s words, I get a little destructive sometimes.”

Jeongguk wondered if those words had anything to do with their recent tension. “So I’ve noticed.”

“What else?”

“Um...you asked about my hand. And I told you I punched a wall, which you found really funny for some reason-”

“Well, why’d you punch a wall?” he interrupted.

Jeongguk shook out his hand unconsciously, and was surprised when Taehyung grabbed it, examining his bruised knuckles.
“The pictures of us from the cafe.”

“Oh, yeah, you probably weren’t thrilled about that. Sorry, by the way.”

Jeongguk chuckled, although irritation surrounding their situation lingered in his chest nonetheless. “You apologised then, too. But I think that was for something else.”

Taehyung still hadn’t released his hand, and it was starting to make him nervous. “What?”

“I don’t know. You never specified.”

“And then?”

Jeongguk glanced down at their hands. “And then you kissed me. And I, uh-” He gestured towards the dancer’s throat.

Taehyung’s other hand came up, brushing over the marks on his neck. “You’re kind of territorial,” he noted.

“Well it’s hard not to be when the guy you’re making out with has probably kissed eight other guys in the past week,” he retorted.

“Hey, don’t be mean.” Taehyung frowned, shoving Jeongguk’s hand away. He cocked his head, thinking. “Two.”

“Two what?”

“I’ve kissed two other guys this week. Not eight.” He held up his hands for Jeongguk to see as he counted. “Seokjin and Bae- and a friend of mine.”

Jeongguk wasn’t sure if he wanted to know what kind of friend this guy was. But admittedly, two seemed better than eight.

A cocky smile graced his face as he informed Taehyung, “I’d ask if I was the best but it’s pretty obvious seeing as you can’t remember anything else that happened afterwards.”

Taehyung snorted, looking him up and down, shamelessly sizing him up. “Don’t flatter yourself, Jeon.” His phone vibrated, getting his attention. Whatever text he received made him sigh, but his eyes were fond. “I’ve gotta head out. Jimin needs some help setting up before practice.” He stood up, slinging his bag over his shoulder and glanced back at Jeongguk. “Uh, thanks. For saving my ass Saturday. And for putting up with all the gossip and shit. I’ll see you in Philosophy. We can talk about starting our project.”

Nodding, Jeongguk replied, “Yeah. Sounds good. Um, have fun at practice.”

God, their conversations felt so awkward now.

Taehyung lingered for a second, like he had something else to say, then muttered, “Thanks.” And he was out the gym doors in a breeze of floral perfume.

Jeongguk simply sat there on the bench for a minute, trying to process everything that just happened. So, if he didn’t read the signals completely wrong, they were cool now. Right? Like, not friends. But they could tolerate each other. Even if half the words that came out of Taehyung’s mouth pissed him off to no end. Tonight, it felt more like...casually pissing him off. Which signalled growth. Maybe.
His own phone rang, prompting him out of his thoughts. To his surprise, it was his stepmother.

“Hi, Sae-eomma.”

“Jeongguk-ah,” she greeted him, sounding happy. “How are you?”

He looked around the empty gym and shrugged. “I’m okay. Just finished practice.”

“Oh, I thought you didn’t have Monday practices this season? I remember you were really excited about that.”

She was sweet. Too sweet. Jeongguk spent a long time hating her for it.

“We didn’t, but our coach decided it would be good if the dance captain worked with us a little, and the best days for him are Mondays, so here I am.”

“Ah, I see. I remember my university’s dance team. Of course, I went to school abroad, so things worked a bit differently I’m sure, but the girl who headed it had the worst superiority complex. I hope your captain isn’t the same way.”

Jeongguk fought to suppress a chuckle, but ultimately failed. It was just funny, trying to imagine today’s Kim Taehyung without a superiority complex.

“As long as he doesn’t give you any trouble,” she hummed. “They’re a certain breed, dancers. Wild little things. They move fast through everything, not just step sequences. They’re like tiny supernovas.”

Slightly suspicious, Jeongguk pried, “Sae-eomma, it sounds to me like you had a rather personal experience with a dancer.”

She faked a shocked gasp. “Now, Jeongguk-ah, don’t be getting any ideas. I’ve only ever loved one man in my life, and that’s your father.”

He didn’t mean to let his irritated snort escape. But once it did, there was no taking it back. “He’s not worth your love, and you know it. You deserve better.”

“Don’t say things like that. Your father is a good man. He’s just tired.”

Jeongguk shook his head. “He’s been tired for six years, then.”

His stepmother paused, finally murmuring. “Maybe he has been. Don’t blame him, please. He’s not a warm person. I don’t have to tell you that. But he still loves you and Junsoo so much. Okay?”

Not really. But he still said, “Yeah. Okay...How is he, by the way? Junsoo.”

“He’s good, Jeongguk-ah. You don’t need to worry so much. He’s doing well in school. He made the soccer team. Goalkeeper. He has lots of friends, and we couldn’t be more proud.”

Jeongguk nodded, more to himself really. Even if Junsoo was just his half brother, he loved the kid with all his heart.
“Good, I’m glad. Give him a hug for me when he gets home from hagwon, and tell him he better be there when I come by in a couple weeks.”

She laughed, a pretty tinkling noise, like a small silver bell. “I promise. He’ll be so excited. You’re such a good big brother, and you’re his idol, you know that?”

“Oh no. I’d better fix some behaviours real quick then. Can’t have him knowing I mix my redbull and my coffee. That sort of stuff starts kids down a dark path.”

“You’re right, you’d better quit that right now! You’re going to have a heart attack before you’re thirty!” She sounded genuinely distressed.

“I promise I’ll stop, Sae-eomma. Don’t worry.”

Breathing a sigh of relief, she said, “Good. Don’t scare me like that. I’ll see you next Saturday, Jeongguk-ah. Study hard.”

“I will,” he promised. “See you then.”

He hung up before she could say anything else. He had a lot of conflicting feelings surrounding his step-mother, and still hadn’t sorted through them after all these years. She was a better parent than his father had ever been, or would ever be, but she wasn’t his mom. His mom was gone. Not dead, but dead to him. He loved her more than anything, wanting to be just like her when he grew up. She was beautiful, strong, successful...she meant the world to him. And when his parents inevitably got divorced, she had the opportunity to take Jeongguk with her, and she didn’t even fight for him. She swore he needed a ‘real home,’ saying she couldn’t provide that for him. As if he’d want to stay in the hellhole is father called a home. And then, once she made it clear she wanted nothing to do with Jeongguk, she disappeared. He hadn’t seen her since.

And in came his step-mother, who had apparently existed for years, and the six year old that shared half of his genetics. Six years, his father had his affair going. Maybe longer. And he still chose her over Jeongguk’s mom. That had been the hardest year of his life. Not only had his mom abandoned him, but his best friend disappeared too. Taehyung had been there to hold his hand, making his heart flutter in just the way only he knew how, and then he was suddenly just...gone. Evaporated into thin air, leaving Jeongguk alone with his darkest thoughts and the biggest crisis in his life.

When Taehyung came back several weeks later, the decision had officially been made. Jeongguk was to stay with his father, his father’s soon-to-be-wife, and their new son. He begged to move out, get his own place. He was sixteen. He was old enough. But his father wouldn’t have it, and he had no case to argue for his emancipation upon. All the court saw was a healthy, happy, privileged teenager. No one would be willing to help him fight for anything else.

Especially not Taehyung. He didn’t speak to Jeongguk once. He stuck to Park Jimin’s side, giving him the cold shoulder and putting his best efforts into ignoring him completely. Like he wanted Jeongguk to disappear from his life forever. He had no idea what he did to make Taehyung hate him without even seeing him for weeks. Admittedly, he’d been acting weird for months leading up to that. Always cancelling their...hangouts; coming up with excuses as to why he didn’t answer Jeongguk’s texts; crying when he thought Jeongguk couldn’t see him. Watching their friendship, or whatever they had, crumble away before his eyes had been heartbreaking. And then when Taehyung left, it seemed as if the floodgates had been released and suddenly there would be no saving them. He cut Jeongguk off completely.

So, Jeongguk turned to the only other friends he had. Yugyeom, Seokjin, Yoongi, and Hoseok. He missed Hoseok. A lot, if he was being honest. Even though it’s been two years since Hoseok left
the team, he still looked for his sunny smile sometimes when he showed up to practice. But he’d made his choice. Ultimately, he valued the dance team more. He valued Taehyung more.

His hyungs weren’t even the ones that really tore him and Taehyung apart. It was the guys he hung out with in his own year. His and Yugyeom’s group of friends weren’t the best people, but they offered some semblance of protection and normality to Jeongguk after Taehyung. Even if they treated his ex-best friend like shit. He knew it. They knew it. Taehyung sure as hell knew it. So yeah, maybe he had the retaliation coming. It still wasn’t pretty, and it definitely wasn’t easy to move on from.

Even now, in the empty gym where he’d just had maybe his first real conversation with Taehyung in years, where they weren’t trying to manipulate or hurt one another, it still couldn’t be easy. He couldn’t just move on. It’s not like Taehyung had just magically changed and become a better person. Jeongguk might be rash and a little headstrong, but Taehyung was fucking petty. He would put Jeongguk through hell over and over again for whatever he’d apparently done to him in high school just to make sure he understood that he wasn’t forgiven.

So for now, Jeongguk refused to just move on. He would wait and see how badly Taehyung really wanted him to take him back. If nothing else, it should be interesting to watch.

Content with this decision, Jeongguk collected his things and hurried out the gym doors, surprised when someone called his name.

“Hey, Jeongguk, wait up!” Yugyeom pushed off the wall he had been leaning against, jogging to his side.

“Oh, hey. What’s up?” They rarely waited for each other. If they didn’t walk out together, they’d usually just meet up later that night or the next day.

Yugyeom shrugged. “Nothing. Just figured we haven’t hung out in a while and I’m not ready to be replaced as Jeon Jeongguk’s bestie by a gang of almost-graduates.”

He’d always teased Jeongguk about sticking with his older friends, swearing up and down that they were going to sell him on the dark web one day.

“No one could replace you, man, c’mon. Mine or yours?” Yugyeom lived in the classy dorms on the east side of campus that Taehyung stayed in, since he was pretty well off but didn’t get in on a scholarship like Jeongguk and his hyungs. They had to stay on campus due to their scholarships; Yugyeom stayed because he couldn’t drive and didn’t feel like taking public transport. But he had no idea why Taehyung lived on campus. Those dorms weren’t cheap.

“Mine, obviously. I don’t feel like wading through your pigsty,” Yugyeom snorted, already starting down the steps.

“I cleaned yesterday!” Jeongguk objected, following him nonetheless.

“Your definition of cleaning does not denote the actual meaning of clean, sorry.”

“I put all of my laundry in the basket.”

“Did you wash the laundry?”

Jeongguk hesitated. “I...put it in the basket.”

Yugyeom shook his head. “Someone should hire you a maid.”
“You could,” Jeongguk suggested, although he was easily capable of hiring his own cleaning service if he wanted to. He didn’t. Although…

“Oh no, what’s with that face?” The lamplights lining the sidewalk illuminated the apprehension in Yugyeom’s eyes.

Jeongguk smiled to himself. “You just gave me an idea. Hold on.” He quickly pulled out his phone, opening his messages.

Me

hey.

bitch.

make it fast

bitch.

practice in eight

“He sounds thrilled to hear from you,” Yugyeom pointed out dryly.

Jeongguk glanced up from his phone. “Duh. Obviously I’m the last person he wants to hear from. That’s what makes it so much fun.”

Yugyeom rolled his eyes. “So what’s this favour?”

Still smiling to himself, Jeongguk just replied, “You’ll see.”

Me

this won’t take long :)

bitch.

that is the single most terrifying
text you’ve ever sent me

Me
wow i need to up my
game.

bitch.

jeongguk. later. please.

bitch.

what do you want

Me

so you know my new
favour?

bitch

answer’s still yes

Me

i want to use it

bitch.

okay?? why are you being
so ominous about it???

Me

because

Me

you’re going to do my laundry
for me until the season’s over
Me
yes.

“Oh my god, dude that’s so good.”

Jeongguk pressed a hand, mocking flattery. “I know, I know, thank you.”

Me
you OWE me kim

Me
i told you everything though :(

bitch.
i’d literally rather suck your
dick.

Jeongguk stared at his phone, dumbfounded. As soon as Yugyeom read the message over his shoulder, he burst out laughing.

“Gonna take him up on it?” he teased.
He didn’t even know if Taehyung was being serious or not. Not that he wanted him to be. This was obviously Taehyung making a joke...He should probably check just in case.

Me

...bitch.

consider it. make a choice. you

have two minutes.

“Shit he is serious,” Yugyeom swore. “He really doesn’t want to do your nasty laundry. You should take the deal, man.”

“I- wait, no, I want him to do my laundry. And he called me a bitch. That’s his name.”

Yugyeom shook his head, shoulders still trembling with barely suppressed chuckles. “Why does he owe you so much anyways?”

Trying to think of an answer that didn’t expose Taehyung, Jeongguk eventually settled on, “I did something for him that probably would’ve been really obnoxious to take care of otherwise, so I asked him a favour in return. And then he completely disregarded my first one, so now he owes me a better one.”

“Getting a blowjob is infinitely better than whatever else you were thinking of.”

Jeongguk tried to shake the thought from his head, insisting, “I just want him to do my laundry.”

Yugyeom pursed his lips, musing. “What if he did both?”

Eyes wide, Jeongguk whispered, “You’re a genius.”

Smug grin in place, Yugyeom responded proudly, “I know.”

Me

okay so i talked it over
with yugyeom

bitch.

you did fucking what now.
objective perspectives are important in decision-making!

bitch.
i hate you.

Me
i hate you too dw

Me
anyways

Me
i realised

Me
*/we/ realised

Me
you could do my laundry AND suck my dick. for free too

“Nice one.” Jeongguk’s hand stung from his vigorous high fine.

bitch.
i’m not doing your fucking laundry jeongguk
Jeongguk frowned at his phone. “Already here? In my room?”

“No, dumbass. At practice.”

“Oh.”

“Wait, what did the rest of the text say?” He leaned closer, reading it over and immediately burst into another bout of laughter.

“Hey, it’s not funny!” Jeongguk retorted, offended that Yugyeom apparently thought Taehyung was so fucking witty. “I might die.”

“Y-you’re not gonna die,” he got out.

“I *might.*”

“Okay but seriously,” Yugyeom said once he stopped cackling over Taehyung’s sarcastic response. “What’s going on with you guys?” He tugged open the front doors of his dorm hall, holding it for Jeongguk.

He frowned, heading for the elevator. “Nothing is going on with us. Why?”

Yugyeom pressed a button labelled 4 and shot him a skeptical look. “First the thing last Monday. Then Saturday. Then again today at practice. Not to mention, you literally asked him to suck you off.”

Jeongguk crossed his arms defensively. “I didn’t ask. He offered. We were joking anyways, that’s just how Tae is. Uh, Taehyung, I mean. Or, uh, Kim. Kim Taehyung.”

Fuck, he really sounded like a mess.

“We both know it wasn’t a joke. And that’s exactly what I mean. You haven’t called him Tae in years, but suddenly you’re doing it again.”
He shrugged just as the elevator doors slid open on floor four. A sense of déjà vu washed over him, standing here again two nights later. He tried not to look as they passed room twelve. “We’re just talking more lately, that’s all,” he finally said.

“Dude, he broke your heart. And slanders your name every chance he gets. Why the hell would you be talking again?” Yugyeom unlocked his room and practically shoved Jeongguk inside, impatient for answers.

“We made up,” Jeongguk insisted. “Well...sort of.”

Yugyeom’s brow furrowed. “How did you sort of make up?”

Shrugging again, Jeongguk wandered through the room, plopping down on Yugyeom’s bed. “We talked, I guess,” he eventually said. “On Saturday. He apologised to me. Not for...you know...but for treating me like shit since senior year. And it was so...” He massaged his temple, getting more frustrated the longer he talked. It felt too easy to confide in Yugyeom; he always listened patiently, making even his smallest problems seem worth something. “…so nice!” he finished angrily. “Talking to him felt so fucking good, and that shouldn’t be allowed! It should feel like shit. I should hate hearing the sound of his voice, but I don’t, because I fucking love his voice. I always have. Even when he’s spitting insults at me and mocking me, I can’t hear enough. Maybe that’s why I antagonise him so much. Because I’m just dying for an excuse to hear his voice, for an excuse to talk to him. And it’s so fucking pathetic.”

“That’s not pathetic,” Yugyeom said quietly, sitting beside him. “It’s normal.”

“Normal?” Jeongguk repeated, incredulous. “How the hell is that normal?”

Yugyeom gave him a degradingly sympathetic look. “It’s normal for people in love, Jeongguk.”

A burst of, admittedly a little manic, laughter escaped him. “I hate him. He’s literally the worst person in the world.”

“And yet, you love him.” Yugyeom said it as if it were the simplest thing in the world. “You’ve always loved him. You’ve loved him ever since I’ve known you. It’s always been ‘Taehyung and I did this!’ or, ‘I remember when Taehyungie and I came here!’ or, ‘This is Taehyung’s favourite!’ It’s always been him. Even when you swore to me up and down that you were straight, you admitted things with him felt different. And then we got older, and obviously I knew you were gay as fuck, but you only acknowledged it the first time Taehyung kissed you, and you called me, screaming in my ear.”

Jeongguk stared at his lap, picking lint off his sweatpants. “I was thirteen, okay? It was a big deal.”

Yugyeom rolled his eyes. “What about now? If you kissed now?”

“Joke’s on you, he thought. Already did that.

“I guess it’d still be a big deal,” he mumbled, unable to hide the truth even from himself.

Yugyeom rubbed his shoulder in comfort. “That’s what makes it love.”

Guilt weighed on him, heavy lead pressing down on his chest. He should tell Yugyeom. He had to tell Yugyeom.

“Actually...there’s something I should tell you.”
Arching his eyebrows, Yugyeom said slowly, “Okay…?”

“Taehyung and I didn’t make up Saturday morning. I was furious with him when he left the cafe because he just kissed my cheek to make Bogum mad. I was pissed because he knows how I feel about him, and he used me just to get angry sex or something, I don’t know.”

“Maybe he doesn’t know how you feel about him, Jeongguk. Although still, that was a dick move on his part.”

“He knew,” Jeongguk confirmed. “He told me himself. Said he knows I love him. And he apologised later. We didn’t make up Saturday morning, but we made up Saturday night.”

Yugyeom cocked his head, clearly taken aback. “So the rumours are true?”

Jeongguk sighed. “Which ones? There’s about a billion going around.”

“That you guys slept together.”

Jeongguk scrunched his nose in distaste. “No. That’s not what happened. He got kinda messed up at a club, someone called me to pick him up, I took him home, we made out in my car, and then I took him up to his dorm to cuddle him until he fell asleep.”

Yugyeom inhaled through his teeth. “That’s almost worse, man. That comes with so many feelings attached.”

“Yeah, I know!” Jeongguk burst out, yanking at his hair in frustration. “Trust me,” he said after he took a deep breath. “I know.”

“Was it a big deal, then? When you kissed him?”

Jeongguk thought back to the feeling, remembering every detail. The taste of Taehyung’s cherry lip gloss and vanilla vodka on his tongue, the way his hair smelled like Iso foam (the same stupid shit he’d been fluffing it with for years), how his hands desperately curled into Jeongguk’s shirt, clinging to him like it was the last time.

Like he didn’t want it to be the last time.

“Yeah,” he breathed. “It was.”

Yugyeom only looked at him with pity. “Can you be sure he wasn’t just…I don’t know, Jeongguk, he’s a flirty guy. I don’t want you to take it too seriously and get hurt.”

Jeongguk shook his head. “You didn’t hear the things he said. He almost cried because he was so angry with me for shutting him out. As if he didn’t do it first.”

Yugyeom appeared to mull this over, thinking aloud, “Ever consider you guys aren’t totally on the same page as to what happened?”

“I’m pretty sure we’d be at each other’s throats a lot less if we weren’t on the same page.”

“That doesn’t make any sense, actually.”

“Yes it does.”

“Whatever you say, Guk,” Yugyeom resigned with a tired snort. “Let me know when you figure it out, or if you need help. And for fuck’s sake, turn on my Xbox, we’re not here to have a heart-to-
heart. We’re here to crush some kids on Overwatch.”

“That sounds a thousand times better,” Jeongguk agreed, rolling off of Yugyeom’s bed to do as he asked. His hyungs were nice. But no one got him quite like Yugyeom. No one had been around as long.

Except Taehyung.

Fuck Jeon Jeongguk. Absolutely and utterly fuck Jeon Jeongguk. His body ached all over; his ass, his thighs, his calves, even his arms were sore. And Jeongguk wasn’t even nice enough to buy him cake afterwards.

Whoever invented running really had it out for the human race. Or namely, one Kim Taehyung. Jeongguk was an absolute monster. What kind of hellbeast had he become? Too fast, too muscular, and far too cocky. He’d even had the nerve to laugh at Taehyung from twenty meters away, running backwards for god-knows-what-reason, and generally just rubbing it in his face that he was better than him. He got the fucking message, thanks though.

They’d done two mornings of running, and Taehyung still hadn’t forgiven Jeongguk for the way he woke him up yesterday. Their conversation went a little something like this:

Knock, knock. Knock knock, knock knock knock knock knock knock. The incessant pounding had been going nonstop for the past twenty minutes. Taehyung could only groan, shove his pillow over his head, and try to fall back asleep.

“Kim Taehyung, open the fucking door.”

Although the voice sounded muffled, Taehyung couldn’t pretend like he didn’t know who it belonged to. But why would Jeongguk be knocking at his door at five in the morning?

“Go away!” he shouted hoarsely.

“Open the door!”

“Go fuck yourself, Jeon!” Taehyung rolled over.

“Morning wood’s already been taken care of, sweetheart. Now open this fucking door or I’m breaking it down.”

He was utterly shameless. Didn’t he know there were other residents on this floor? Deciding he didn’t want to get kicked out due to a noise complaint, Taehyung reluctantly hauled himself out of bed and trudged to the door. Jeongguk was still knocking away, caught off guard when Taehyung finally unlocked it and hissed, “What the fuck do you want?”

“Rise and shine,” Jeongguk greeted him oh-so-sweetly. He wore a black Puma hoodie and sweats, leaning casually into Taehyung’s door frame. “It’s running time.”

Taehyung covered his face with his hands. “What the hell did I do to you? What the hell did I do to deserve this?”
“Are you always this vulgar in the morning?”

“It’s not morning!” Taehyung rebuked, furious. “I have been asleep for forty minutes, Jeongguk. Forty. Minutes.”

Jeongguk’s brow furrowed in confusion. “Why?”

Taehyung blinked, disbelief consuming him. “I knew you were stupid, but I didn’t know you had the memory capacity of a blue tang fish.”

“I-I don’t honestly know what that means. What is a...whatever fish you said? I’m not really up to date on my fish index. I passed marine bio with a C-minus.”

Feeling like he might cry, Taehyung managed to get out, “Dory, Jeongguk. You are currently only in league with Dory.”

Jeongguk’s face lit up with recognition. “Oh! Ellen. Got it.”

Yup. He was going to cry.


Jeongguk cracked a smile, although a hint of embarrassment lingered in it. “I like fish. They’re pretty. I’ve always wanted to do like...an underwater vlog or something, I don’t know. Anyways, I realised pretty quickly that taking marine bio did not equal weekly aquarium trips. I was kinda robbed, to be honest, but it took care of my science gen-ed credit so it all worked out in the end, right?”

Taehyung stared at him, deadpan. “I’m going back to bed.” Then slammed the door, and turned to do just that. Except Jeongguk jammed his foot in the crack, cursing with pain as he grasped Taehyung’s black sleeve.

Or maybe it was Jeongguk’s black long sleeve.

Whatever, it was on his body.

He tried swatting at his hand, but Jeongguk wouldn’t budge.

“We’re starting our project today.”

“I thought we were waiting to establish a decent schedule.”

Jeongguk shrugged. “I was getting ready to run this morning and figured it’d be a waste not to come and get you.”

Taehyung continued to combat his grip on him, still gaining no leeway. “I don’t want to,” he whined. “Let me sleep in peace.”

Jeongguk stopped fighting him, and held him in place, analysing him in a way that felt far too critical for this early in the morning. “You were out late working, right?”

“Oh look, he finally recalls his long-lost memory.”

“Don’t be mean. Look, I’m sorry. I kinda forgot that your schedule is messed up.” And when Taehyung finally looked at Jeongguk, he did seem genuinely apologetic. He was watching his
sneaker-clad feet and his grip on Taehyung had loosened.

“I mean... it’s fine...” Taehyung mumbled. “It’s not your fault you forgot. I’d forget too if I could.” He tried to laugh off some of the awkwardness, but it didn’t work.

“Do you...” Jeongguk looked tense, glancing around the room. “Do you enjoy it? Like, there’s gotta be a reason you do it, right?”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Taehyung cut him off shortly. “Let me change, and I’ll meet you downstairs.”

“But I thought-”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m awake now. See you in a few.”

Jeongguk seemed slightly concerned, but clearly he knew better than to argue with Taehyung, and just nodded before heading downstairs.

At least this morning he had the nerve to text Taehyung before showing up at his dorm, but that didn’t make him any more excited to be running. And now he was at the gym for dance practice, although he really had no excuse to be half an hour early. Yet here he was.

He just felt a little... curious, okay?

The basketball team always encroached on his time. It only seemed fair that he could do the same. Still, he’d be an idiot to do so without backup.

Me

alright hoes. who’s down to meet me at the gym?

Me

i’m shit with the audio equipment but i don’t want to bother chungha

diminie

sorry tae. busy feeding my hamster

sunshine-hyung
^i’m helping

Me

mamma didn’t raise no traitors >:(

diminie

you ain’t our mamma

Me

ffs

Me

min yoongi will be there

diminie

wow would you look at that
nibbles got full real quick

sunshine-hyung

damn he really ate that lettuce
up wow

sunshine-hyung

we’ll be there in 5

Me

whores.
The power of Min Yoongi was apparently even stronger than Taehyung had reckoned. Jimin and Hoseok came tearing across the gymnasium parking lot a little under four minutes later, breathless but exhilarated.

“You guys are too easily swayed,” Taehyung snorted. “He’s not even that-”

Both of his friends glared at him with an intensity he didn’t deserve.

“You know what? Nevermind. Let’s just go inside.”

“Smart boy,” Jimin praised him, patting his head.

Ignoring him, he led the way through the doors and gym lobby, but had to pause as he entered onto the glossy wooden floor.

“Damn,” Hoseok whistled. At least someone said it.

The basketball team appeared to be in the middle of an intense game. Since it was Wednesday, Coach Yun wasn’t present, but it didn’t look like they needed him. They’d split into two teams of five, three sitting out. Currently at half was Seokjin, Namjoon, Minho, Youngjae, and Bogum on one side with Jeongguk, Yugyeom, Jeonghan, Yoonoh, and Chanyeol on the other. The rest were clustered around the benches, making bets on the game and screwing around until they got subbed in. Both Jimin and Hoseok, after taking in the view, beelined for the bench where Yoongi sat. All the players looked so...well, let’s just say, Taehyung’s little gay heart was having a hard time.

And he felt absolutely furious about it.

He was furious because he didn’t look at Seokjin first. Of course, his gaze landed on the one and only hellbeast Jeon Jeongguk and his stupid black tank top that did nothing to cover his muscular arms, or even worse, his black shorts that did nothing to hide his heavensent thighs. The slight sheen of sweat coating his exposed ivory skin and the look of concentrated aggression on his face as he guarded Minho did nothing to ease the extreme discomfort Taehyung was being forced to experience.

Unfortunately, Jeongguk must’ve felt Taehyung boring holes into his skull because he sighed loudly, signalling for a timeout.

“We still have half an hour, Kim,” Jeongguk spat, striding over to him. Oh, so they were still playing the last-name-game in public? That’s fine by him. “These past few weeks you’ve been constantly up my ass about using your time, but this is ridiculous.”

Irritated by his never-ceasing entitlement, Taehyung retorted coyly, “I always knew you took it up the ass, Jeon. And sorry to disappoint, but I don’t put that much effort into pissing you off. I’m here to set up our audio, so feel free to carry on with your game. I’m not stopping you.”
Jeongguk glowered at him. “You know as well as I do just how wrong you are.”

Taehyung arched an eyebrow. “About what? About the amount of effort I put into pissing you off, or the insinuation that you-”

A hand flashed out, yanking Taehyung forward by the collar. “Shut the fuck up,” Jeongguk hissed. The action sent shivers through Taehyung.

“Someday,” he whispered into Taehyung’s ear, voice dripping with malice. “I’m going to make you cry. I’m going to make you fucking scream my name just to instill a little goddamn humility in you. And I can guarantee I won’t be the one with something up my ass.”

Taehyung couldn’t help the way he gaped. But he couldn’t let Jeongguk best him, either. So instead, he gripped Jeongguk’s firm bicep and leaned in to breathe, “Is that a promise, hyung?”

It was Jeongguk’s turn to stare, stunned, until he shoved Taehyung away, muttering, “Fuck you, Kim Taehyung.”

“Weren’t you just threatening to?”

He hadn’t realised they’d spoken the last part of their conversation loud enough for the rest of the gathering team to hear until Yugyeom interjected, “I can never tell if you guys are flirting or trying to kill each other.”

“As if I’d waste my time flirting with him,” Taehyung and Jeongguk scoffed simultaneously, then instantly turned to glare at each other.

Feeling slightly offended, Taehyung challenged, “What, am I not your type or something?”

Jeongguk rolled his eyes. “Two things that are big on my not-to-do-list, Kim? A bitchy attitude and sleeping with my friends. And the fact that even though your face is pretty enough, the fucking dick attached to it is sort of a massive turn off.”

Huh. So apparently he wasn’t out to the entire team. Good to know.

The rest of the players had jogged their way over by now. Taehyung was admittedly a little surprised; it usually didn’t take them this long.

Now just performing for his audience, Taehyung fluttered his lashes, pouting. “But I thought we were such good friends now, Jeonggukkie.”

“I said we were fine,” Jeongguk informed him through gritted teeth. He realised too- if they continued fighting, especially in front of the team, all of their hard work would go down the drain. But Jeongguk’s pride always mattered to him more. “I didn’t say we were friends.”

Biting his lip in annoyance, Taehyung agreed, “You’re right. Friends don’t give other friends twelve hick-”

A sweaty hand came up to cover his mouth. Furious, Taehyung pressed his tongue against Jeongguk’s salty skin, relishing the way he recoiled, shouting, “Ew! What the fuck?”

“If you don’t like it, don’t stick your sweaty-ass palm on mouth next time,” Taehyung snarked with a shrug.

“Okay, okay, that’s enough!” Seokjin stepped in. “Taehyung, for the last time, stop baiting him.”
Whirling on him, Taehyung huffed indignantly, “I’m not baiting him. It’s not my fault he’s so sensitive. I mean, anyone who takes every little thing *that* personally is bound to get offended every now and again.”

“Well, you would know, wouldn’t you?” Jeongguk asked, a smug smile on his stupid face.

“Jeongguk, stop retaliating,” Namjoon sighed. “If either of you could just learn to let something go once in a while-”

“I’d let it go if *he’d* let it go,” Taehyung sniffed. “But every time I try to let it go he throws a hissy fit. He never *did* grow out of his tantrum stage.”

He saw Jeongguk roll his eyes out of the corner of his periphery. “Says the primadonna who marches in here every other day with a massive superiority complex and an even bigger ego.”

Yeah, it fucking stung. But Taehyung wasn’t just about to let him know that.

“Well someone’s gotta compete with you and your holier-than-thou bullshit,” Taehyung retorted. “Seriously, Jeon. You’re not a saint. What makes you so much better than the rest of us?”

Jeongguk stared at him, as if he’d never even considered the question, so sure of his own righteousness that anything below him wasn’t worth the spared brain cells.

Taehyung took a step closer to him, remarking coolly, “That’s what I thought, golden boy. Now get the hell out of my face.”

Once again, the dusty cogs in Jeongguk’s head finally started turning and he gripped Taehyung by the shirt as he passed. He was starting to get really fed up with him and his damn hands.

“You want to know what makes me better, Kim?”

“Oh please, great one, enlighten me.”

Jeongguk shook his head. “I thought you were being genuine. I thought you really wanted to make up and start over without all of this bullshit between us. I thought you were changing. Clearly I was wrong. And so utterly naive to think it would happen in the first place. I knew getting involved with you was a bad idea, but I did it anyway because I really thought- no, *hoped* things were going to be different this time. But all that does is make me a wishful thinker, I guess.”

His words were a slap to the face. Taehyung felt his throat closing up; in anger or guilt, he had no idea. Even the snatches of muttering amongst the gathered team, whom Taehyung had largely forgotten about, ceased at that moment.

Raising his chin to meet those defiant doe eyes, Taehyung managed to get out, “I *am* trying. So. Fucking. Hard. But you’re so caught up in playing the martyr that you don’t even realise this isn’t all about you. Get over yourself first, and then come talk to me.”

With that, he marched straight past Jeongguk, ignoring Jimin and Hoseok’s calls of his name. If they really wanted to, they could come after him, but he wasn’t in the mood to hear all about how flawless Min Yoongi looked. He just wanted to spend the next twenty minutes somewhere secluded, alone, until practice started. Then at least he could dance through the emotions threatening to overtake his common sense.

He didn’t even realise he’d made his way into the guy’s locker room until the stench of aerosol deodorant and damp clothes hit his nose. Green metal benches were lined with backpacks that
didn’t quite make it to their assigned homes, and various articles of clothing had been tossed around haphazardly. Their locker room was a stark contrast to the one in Sin, soaking with its floral perfumes and the acrid bite of nail polish remover. Finding the contrast to be an unpleasant, yet welcome change, Taehyung plopped on the tiled floor, leaning his head back to rest against the white wall.

He was so tired of arguing in front of every last person they knew. To be honest, he’d expected Bogum to speak up more. To defend him or antagonise him, either way. But he’d remained mysteriously silent. Clearly, he still felt angry with Taehyung about...whatever he was angry about.

Still, couldn’t Taehyung and Jeongguk just take their arguments somewhere private for once? Then maybe they’d actually talk instead of being at each other’s throats for the sake of maintaining a useless and utterly false image. Because they each had appearances to keep up, obviously. Taehyung: the savage sweetheart, dance captain and notorious heartbreaker. Jeongguk: the headstrong golden boy, unchallenged point-guard since freshman year with a no-bullshit attitude. But would it really be so impossible to drop all that for a minute so they could speak like civil people when they stood in the same room?

They managed just fine when they were alone. Even during their runs the past two mornings. Yes, Taehyung felt utterly disgusted to be running, but Jeongguk was never truly mean about it. He teased him here and there and gave him constructive criticism, but it all came from a place that wasn’t rooted in hatred. It felt nice. But as soon as they had an audience, they slipped back into their roles so seamlessly.

Taehyung was also surprised that Jimin or Hoseok hadn’t come barging in here yet. Not that he really wanted them to, but they always felt the need to try and make everything better for him. They were always the ones to throw him a pity party even when he didn’t deserve one. But apparently the draw of Min Yoongi was stronger, and maybe that wasn’t the worst thing in the world.

And yet, he found something comforting about the cool tiled floor. Taehyung rarely got to be alone with his thoughts. He woke up, went to class, did homework, went to practice, and went to work. There wasn’t much room in between all of that for thinking. But here, in the damp, disorganised guy’s locker room, there seemed to be plenty of room for it.

Which explained why he was pretty damn pissed when someone had the audacity to interrupt his quiet introspection. His back faced the entryway, though, and he could already tell by the quiet footsteps who it was.

“ Took you long enough, Jiminnie. I was beginning to think I might get to wallow alone for once.”

The footsteps stopped. “Not Jimin, sorry.”

Taehyung sighed upon hearing the last voice he wanted to echo through the room. “Then get out. I will admit one Park Jimin and one Jung Hoseok, and that’s it.”

Completely ignoring him, Jeongguk continued, “The guys will be coming back here in a few minutes. Practice is almost over.”

“I’ll leave when I hear them.”

Jeongguk seemed like he was on the verge of going back out to the gym before he asked, “Do you really think sitting in here and hiding from your problems is going to fix everything?”
Taehyung could feel his exhaustion just settling in deeper with every word Jeongguk said. “Don’t. Okay? Just...just don’t. I have Bogum to make me feel like shit right now. I don’t need you, too.”

Finally, Jeongguk came to a decision. Taehyung could hear his footsteps getting closer, the subtle squeak of his shoes, and the weight of his presence as he settled on the floor next to him. He couldn’t bring himself to look.

“I’m not trying to make you feel like shit.” Jeongguk sounded just as tired as him.

As if he had the right.

Taehyung chuckled bitterly. “Sure.”

“You think everyone’s out to get you.”

That’s because everyone is.

“I didn’t want to pick a fight with you, you know,” Taehyung gave up. “But the second I walked through the door, you were on my ass. What else was I supposed to do?”

“It wouldn’t kill you to apologise for once.”

Taehyung rested his head on the white tiles behind him, eyes closed. “I’ve been apologising for the past week and a half, Jeongguk. But it’s hard to be constantly humble and remorseful when you don’t make an effort to change at all.”

He could feel Jeongguk’s little indignant huff beside his ear. “Just because I haven’t run around flaunting how angelic I am, doesn’t mean I’m not trying. I told my friends to stop talking shit about you, for one. And I’ve literally been so nice to you during our runs even when you’re constantly threatening me and cussing me out.”

“Okay, but you’re making me run. I feel like that gives me a little freedom with my words.”

“You asked me to help you,” Jeongguk reminded him yet again.

“I know!” Taehyung exclaimed, frustrated. “And I’m grateful. Really. I am. Look, I’m sorry for the shit I said in the gym. I just...I don’t know. I like getting under your skin. I feel like I have to retaliate every time you say something remotely antagonistic. Habits that old are kind of hard to break.”

“You called me a bottom.” Taehyung could hear Jeongguk’s pout in his voice.

Taehyung snorted. “We all know you switch, Jeon. And seriously, out of everything I said, that’s what upset you the most?”

“No, but it’s the easiest to argue with. Because some of the other shit...well, you’re not wrong. I’m not a...a saint. I’ve never tried to pass myself off as one, though.”

“Then what gives you the right to be so damn high and mighty all the time?” Taehyung asked, genuinely curious.

“Who are you to judge that?” Jeongguk countered.

Taehyung exhaled loudly. “Someone who’s never pretended to be any better than they are. I can’t. I’m constantly under a microscope. All the time. It never ends. Every mistake I make, every embarrassing thing I do, people see it. People want to see me fail. And this year, they’re getting
“Maybe…” Jeongguk paused, as if he were thinking. Then he scooted a little closer, suggesting, “Maybe people aren’t paying as much attention as you think they are. Maybe you just need to realise that…well, not everyone cares so much, Taehyung. And I’m not saying it to be mean. I just think you could take a lot of that pressure off yourself if you really wanted to.”

Taehyung shook his head. Jeongguk didn’t get it, but Taehyung couldn’t expect him to. “Thanks, Sigmund Freud.”

“Taehyung, I’m not trying to-”

“Oh, so I’m Taehyung in here, but out there I’m just one of thousands of Kims. Why? Why is it that the second we’re not surrounded by your friends, you’re suddenly trying to be my best friend again? Why do you do that?”

The words tumbled out, rushed and furious. He just wanted Jeongguk to make up his mind. Either accept his reconciliation attempts or get out of his life. He couldn’t have both.

“I don’t want to be your best friend,” Jeongguk clarified rather harshly.

“Alright. Kindly fuck off, then.”

“You can’t expect me to suddenly lo- like you all over again, Taehyung! It’s been too fucking long. Don’t you get that?”

Taehyung snapped his gaze to the side, finally looking at Jeongguk. He couldn’t help it, not after hearing that slip. His hands were balled into fists on his knees, chocolate eyes wide and hurt as his pouty lips tugged down in frustration. He always forgot just how fragile Jeongguk could be underneath that hard exterior he tried so hard to maintain.

“Then, I need you to pick,” Taehyung said quietly. He was so sick of giving the people in his life ultimatums but he couldn’t function under friends with one foot in the door and one out. “Try and work through this with me or let me go. I’m not trying to be a bitch, Jeongguk, but I need you to understand. I have too much going on to constantly do this with you. It’s going to tear me apart. So…so just pick.”

He already knew what Jeongguk would say. There was no way in hell he’d stick around, not when they had maybe a week of a tentative friendship compared to five years of heartbreak and hatred. Yet for some reason, his throat burned at the thought of Jeongguk cutting him off for good this time.

Jeongguk rested his head in his hand on his knee, tilting to look at Taehyung. He was quiet for a long time. Just looking at him and thinking. Was he trying to torture him by drawing it out? It couldn’t be that difficult of a decision to make; why study his face and pretend like he planned on saying anything different?

“Let’s do it then. I don’t…I don’t know how to work it out, but I’m willing to try. If you are, at least.”

Taehyung didn’t realise he’d started crying until Jeongguk’s doe eyes went big in alarm.

“Shit- I’m, um-” Jeongguk looked around wildly, as if he would find the solution to Taehyung’s tears in one of his teammates gym socks.
“Forget it,” Taehyung half-sniffed, half-laughed. He brushed a finger across his cheek, collecting the watery tracks trailing down his face. “Sorry. I don’t usually- I don’t know, actually.”

The look Jeongguk gave him felt familiar. Tentative, shy. “You always were an easy crier.”

“Shut up,” Taehyung muttered, but a faint smile touched his lips. “Besides, you liked it when I cried.”

“I did not!” Jeongguk responded indignantly.

“Yes you did, because I let you kiss my tears away. You were never that sad to see me cry.”

Voicing the memory out loud, he could see it. Standing under the warm kitchen lights in Taehyung’s little ranch house just outside of Busan, his failed pre-calculus exam crumpled beneath his fingers as Jeongguk reassured him that math was just an invention devised by the worldwide education board to waste their time.

He only stopped when he realised Taehyung was still crying, and instead took to cupping his face, kissing the tears off his cheeks until they were replaced by Taehyung’s small giggles as he largely forgot all about his exam.

Thinking about it, about what they used to have, just caused more tears to well up in his eyes. He missed Jeongguk so much. Even having him here right next to him, it wasn’t the same as it used to be. It would probably never be the same again.

“I was always sad when you were sad. I never liked seeing you cry.” He reached out a hesitant hand, gathering a tear from Taehyung’s cheek. “I still don’t like seeing you cry,” he said, voice small.

Taehyung couldn’t think with Jeongguk touching him with so much tenderness. How could something feel so foreign while striking such a familiar chord? His breath hitched in his throat under Jeongguk’s gaze, but he couldn’t bring himself to look away, even when he knew his eyes were probably pink and watery, tracks skating down his face.

“Why are you still crying?” Jeongguk sounded scared, intimidated by Taehyung’s tears.

“I-” Taehyung stuttered. He didn’t even know what to say. “I-I don’t know. I just- just missed you, I guess.” He tried to draw a shaky breath, distance himself, but it wasn’t working.

“We’ve literally been going to the same university for three years.” Jeongguk laughed, a gentle sound Taehyung didn’t deserve.

“I’m well aware. But it hasn’t...hasn’t been us.” Taehyung’s eyes fell to the floor, wiping his face again. Why was he still crying?

Jeongguk took one look at Taehyung’s tear-stained face as he looked back up at him and sighed. “Hold still,” he mumbled before taking Taehyung’s cheeks between his hands.

“What are you do-”

He didn’t get the chance to finish his sentence before Jeongguk’s lips landed on his cheek, then his other cheek, then his forehead and nose. His lips were so soft, so careful. By the third cheek kiss, Taehyung couldn’t even recall having a question. When Jeongguk pulled back, maybe a minute
later, Taehyung just stared at him in shock.

Jeongguk blinked. “You stopped crying, so that’s-”

“Shut up,” Taehyung repeated, yanking Jeongguk forward by his tank top, pressing his lips against Jeongguk’s. He tasted salty with Taehyung’s tears, but he didn’t care. Because to him, Jeongguk would always taste like home. Like fresh strawberries and banana milk on summer days. Like hot cocoa from the cafe by their school and powdered snow from their last skirmish on winter days. Like smuggled soju at a friend’s party, and chips they’d snuck into the library during one particularly brutal study session. Like the salt of Taehyung’s tears.

We could’ve had something beautiful, Taehyung thought as Jeongguk gripped his waist, tugging him closer. But despite all these years of hate-kindled flames, their kiss was slow, patient, drinking in the newly returned sensation of being against each other once more. Even when Jeongguk pulled Taehyung’s bottom lip between his teeth, parting his lips for his tongue, he moved with a relaxed sensuality, as if they had all the time in the world.

Kissing Jeongguk felt therapeutic, as every bit as introspective as sitting down to journal a self-reflection. Taehyung had grown so painfully used to the rapid, fervent kisses that led up to nothing more than rushed sex, or kisses stolen with Baekhyun to coax bills from their clients’ wallets. But Jeongguk kissed him like he had nothing he’d rather be doing. It didn’t have to lead anywhere. He wasn’t trying to achieve anything. He was just kissing Taehyung for the sake of kissing him, and that brought an element of vulnerability out of him that he’d never expected to see from himself.

Feeling dangerously close to tears again, Taehyung fought them off by looping his arms around Jeongguk’s neck, eliminating any semblance of space left between them. He sank into the closeness gratefully, wanting nothing more than to erase the years of insults and sharp words separating them.

When they eventually broke apart, they took a moment to just rest their foreheads together, catching their breath. But as soon as they weren’t kissing, all his feelings of anxiety and humiliation rushed back to him, threatening to suffocate him under their ever-impending weight.

“I hate you,” Taehyung whispered, eyes closed.

“I know. I hate you too.”

And Taehyung believed him. Jeongguk’s voice wouldn’t break like that as he kissed him again if it weren’t true.

It was the sound of approaching voices, of high-fives and squeaking shoes against tile that had them springing apart, shoving each other away. Taehyung stood panting with his back against the wall while Jeongguk leaned on the row of lockers across from him in a similar state.

Namjoon and Seokjin were the first people in the room, stopping dead in their tracks when they saw the pair.

“Oh, you guys are still in here…” Seokjin said, awkwardly rubbing his neck.

“Where else would we have gone?” Jeongguk asked, even though he still sounded somewhat breathless. “Taehyung still has practice and the alarm goes off if you open the back door.”

He didn’t like the way Namjoon was eyeing them, curious gaze flicking between both him and Jeongguk, putting together dangerous pieces.
“So, you’re cool now?” the center asked, even though he seemed as if he wouldn’t believe their answer.

Jeongguk glanced at Taehyung. Always looking to him to make the tough decisions.

“Yeah,” Taehyung answered with a shrug. “We’re fine.”

“Yep,” Jeongguk affirmed. If anything was going to give them away, it was going to be Jeongguk. “Good. Fine. Whatever.”

Taehyung seriously considered slapping some sense of indiscretion into him.

Seokjin’s gaze fell on him, steady and questioning, but Taehyung wasn’t quite ready to spin a tale of what had transpired between him and Jeongguk, so he upon hearing the rest of the players approach, he muttered, “And that’s my cue. See ya.”

Jeongguk’s mouth opened like he wanted to say something, but he didn’t need to.

“Got it,” Taehyung nodded. “I’ll text you later. Enjoy the rest of your evening, guys.” Without another word, he brushed past them, ignoring Seokjin’s quiet, “Wait,” and left the locker room.

The guilt was going to consume him, and it’s what he deserved after pulling something like that. Him and Seokjin...they were good. Everything about their relationship was good. Except that it wasn’t much of a relationship, and he doubted either of them really wanted it to be anything more. Maybe Seokjin thought he wanted more, but Taehyung knew he’d never be able to commit to him. They were too different. They wanted different things from life, and neither of them were willing to change to fit the other. They shouldn’t have to change.

But still, how could he not feel guilty when he just made out with his main hookup’s best friend in the locker room? Taehyung thought he’d be done with problems like this when he graduated high school, yet here he was, freaking out over such a cliche. Of course, it hurt more because of the context. He’d known Jeongguk for fourteen years longer than he’d known Seokjin, had memories and feelings associated with him that he’d never be able to replicate with anyone else. But that didn’t give Taehyung the right to treat Seokjin like he was dispensable. He’d have to talk to him about it eventually. Just...not now. Not after all of that. Not when dance practice started in five minutes.

As he stepped back out into the gym, he was instantly mobbed. Jimin rushed over to him with Hoseok not far behind, fretting, “Oh my goodness, Taetae! Are you okay? You just stormed off and I wanted to go after you but both Hoseokie-hyung and Yoongi-hyung said to wait, and I didn’t know what I was supposed to be waiting for and then Jeongguk got in a fight with some of his friends and went after you and I was like, ‘Oh I see what I was waiting for now,’ but then you guys were in there so long and I—”

“Jimin, let him breathe.” Hoseok gently coaxed him back, then turned his attention to Taehyung. “Seriously, though, what happened? One minute you guys were ready to kill each other in front of the entire basketball team and the next he’s chasing after you, and you come out of the locker room looking like you just spent ten minutes sobbing on his shoulder.”

“I don’t...can we talk about it later?” Taehyung asked, pleading with his eyes.

Hoseok rubbed his shoulder, comforting him. “Of course.”

Those who hadn’t made it to the locker room yet were huddled by the benches, throwing Taehyung a variety of looks. Some were sympathetic, some concerned, some strangely angry.
From people he wouldn’t expect. Minho was frowning at him and Bogum was already halfway out the doors without even bothering to go change. Yugyeom was watching him too, almost analytically.

For just one minute, Taehyung didn’t want to be the center of attention.

Dancers were already pushing through the doors, smiles on their faces as they laughed and joked with friends. Lisa waved at him, and he returned the gesture with as much enthusiasm as he could muster. Taemin and Kai caught sight of them, jogging over.

“Hey, captain,” Taemin teased him. Then his face dropped as he got closer. “Oh, damn. Are you okay? You look...well, kinda like shit.”

Taehyung viciously scrubbed his cheeks. “I’m fine.” He forced out an awkward chuckle. “I don’t know why everyone keeps asking me that.”

“Oh, well, if you need anything, we’re here.” Taemin offered him a tentative smile, clapping his forearm.

Of course, the players in the locker room chose that moment to emerge. Jeongguk, Seokjin, and Namjoon were instantly swarmed by the dance team, shameless flirting coming their way from every direction. Taehyung really couldn’t blame his teammates.

But rather than the undeniable attractiveness of the players who just emerged, Taehyung was picking up on something else. Body language. Awkward, out of place body language. Namjoon had his arm around Seokjin’s shoulders. Should he feel jealous about it? He didn’t; in fact, he liked the way they looked together. Namjoon’s rough masculinity with Seokjin’s elegant regality. They made an appealing pair.

Jeongguk walked a little ways behind them. He made a few attempts at conversation but Namjoon vehemently ignored him in favour of joking around with Seokjin, Chungha, and Kai. Seokjin’s eyes were a little red, jaw clenched, but he made his best effort to contribute to whatever they were discussing. Jeongguk eventually gave up and just lingered on the side of the exchange, expression passive. But Taehyung knew that face. That was Jeongguk’s special blend of annoyed-anxious. It made him wonder what went on in the locker room after he left. Then he glanced up.

Shit.

Jeongguk caught him staring and arched an eyebrow in question. Taehyung could feel his cheeks heating up and he just shook his head.

“What private telepathic conversation are you two having?” Jimin butted in. At least he had the sense to keep his voice down.

Tearing his attention away from Jeongguk, Taehyung replied, “Nothing important. Come on.” He turned fully away from that side of the gym, unable to withstand the temptation to peek from where he stood. Raising his voice, he called, “Dancers, listen up!” Every eye in the room snapped to him. He would never be able to get used to it. “We’ve already cut into…” he checked his phone. “...nine minutes of our time! This is our second to last practice before we give this routine on Friday, so let’s try and make the most of it. Get into places. I want Lisa to lead warmups today.”

Surprise flashed across Lisa’s face, but she nodded. “Three lines, if you would please!”

“Do you ever lead warmups?” someone asked far too close to his ear.
Not giving Jeongguk the satisfaction of gaining his full attention, Taehyung kept his eyes on his team. “Occasionally.”

Why was he talking with him as if nothing had just happened?

“Is that considered, like, grunt work in dancing?”

Taehyung’s eyes narrowed, but he maintained his focus as Lisa called out counts. “Are you saying I wouldn’t take on shit like that?”

An exasperated sigh sounded from behind him. “Again, not trying to pick a fight. Just curious. I’m trying to draw similarities, you know? Like, if leading warmups is the same as fetching the ball cart. I’d like to think our interests have something in common.”

“It’s not the same,” Taehyung responded shortly. “Leading warmups is sort of an honour. It means the captain trusts you, and thinks you’re capable of kicking off practice. And it helps us get a good idea of who to elect as captain next year.”

“Huh. So how many times did you lead warmups last year?”

Taehyung shrugged. “I don’t know. A lot. Mostly because Momo just didn’t feel like it, Hoseok intimidated people, and Jimin didn’t want to raise his voice.”

Jeongguk made another sound, like something wasn’t adding up. “Did you want the captaincy, then?”

Finally, Taehyung glanced back at him. “What do you think?”

“Well, duh. Who wouldn’t?”

He huffed a bitter laugh. “A lot of us, apparently.”

Furrowing his brow, Jeongguk asked, “What do you mean?”

“I mean, I never wanted it. I voted for Hoseok. Quite a few of us did. But, I guess more people elected me, probably just because I had to be so present that year to make up for my absence freshman year. I participated in everything, headed as many events as I could, spent hours helping Momo choreograph because I felt so bad about missing out on all of it before. I wanted to be dedicated, but I didn’t think that made me a leader. I’m not a leader. It’s not who I am. It’s not something I’d ever strive for.” He realised he was venting now, but couldn’t stop. “I hate it. I love it too, but I hate it. I hate that everyone looks to me because I know nothing I do is going to be good enough to live up to their expectations. But I love getting the chance to work with a team composed of such incredible people. I never thought something like this would fall to me, you know? So when the results got in, I just went to Hoseok’s and cried because I wanted it to be him so badly. But he didn’t want it either. He’d made it clear throughout the year, but I’d never taken him seriously about it until that night. He made me call Momo back to the studio and actually accept the captaincy, and then, yeah. Here I am.”

Jeongguk raised his head, meeting his gaze. The innocent confusion buried in his irises still managed to tug at Taehyung’s heartstrings. “I...I never knew that.”

“Yeah. I know. You thought I blackmailed my way into it, as if I’d ever do that Hoseok. Or Taemin, for that matter. As if I’d ever want it that badly.”

Taehyung wasn’t sure why his voice came out so acidic, but he hated how utterly wrong all of
Jeongguk’s opinions of him were, and they had just gotten worse as the years passed. He relished proving him wrong, even if he felt guilty about rubbing it in.

He had a feeling Jeongguk had more he wanted to say, but Taehyung continued before more irreparable words could escape either of them. “I have to step in now. I’ll see you in Philosophy on Friday.”

A careful hand closed around his wrist as he went to step onto the court. Perplexed, Taehyung glanced back.

“Promise you’ll text me before then,” Jeongguk asked softly, seemingly afraid he’d scare Taehyung off.

“I-” He swallowed and took a deep breath. “Yeah, okay. I’ll text you when practice is over.”

Jeongguk’s smile could light up the world.

“Sweet. See you later.”

He released Taehyung’s wrist and sauntered casually over to his friends as if nothing had happened. They weren’t even paying attention to them, luckily, caught up in whatever Namjoon and Seokjin were doing. Thank goodness.

“You’re grinning like a dork,” Jimin called from his place in line.

Snapping his attention to his team, Taehyung retorted, “Twenty jumping jacks, Park.”

“You bitch,” Jimin grumbled, glaring at him as he took his calisthenic punishment. “Why the hell did we make you captain again?”

“Because you love me,” Taehyung reminded him with a smug smile. “Thanks Lisa, let’s get started now. We’ve got to make sure this routine hits its peak on Friday.”

Chapter End Notes

i hope you enjoyed! i made sure that this chapter was a proper length this time. still nothing compared to my usual 40k but if i did that for this fic, we’d run out of chapters real fast.

twitter for people who are interested in that. thanks for reading!
“...which is why masculinity is often portrayed in film by a specific set of nearly unattainable structures, all of which have been maintained and unchanged in the industry since its beginning. Actors cast in these roles often emotionally compromise themselves to fit the mold of who they’re expected to be in auditions. A ruggedness, a detached attitude, and the inability to comprehend the experiences of the female lead are common traits adhered to most, if not all popularised masculine roles. We’ll continue this discussion on Monday. Over the weekend, please annotate Neale’s essay, ‘Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on Men and Mainstream Cinema,’ and be sure to highlight any contentions you’d like to address for further analysis with the entire class. You are dismissed.”

Taehyung’s Gender Performance professor exited soon after that, leaving the lecture hall full of third and fourth year students eager to leave and begin their weekend. He already knew where most of them were headed. The game began in an hour, after all, and for him that meant he still needed to run back to his dorm, get changed, head over to the stadium, and warm up his dancers.

A tap landed on his shoulder. Startled, Taehyung whipped around, letting out a sigh when he realised it was just Seulgi.

“You seem tense,” she joked, although there was a hint of concern in her voice. “Sorry if I scared you.”

Taehyung shook his head. “No, I’m good. Sorry. Just thinking about the game.”

She gave him a kind smile, confidence in her pretty, unique eyes. “Don’t even worry, captain. Our routine is fantastic, it’s my favourite one you’ve put together.”

“I had a lot of help. Hoseok’s really good at choreographing, so we do most of them together.”

“What are you going to do when he graduates and then it’s just you?”

Taehyung blinked. “Well, I doubt it will be my responsibility next year.”

Seulgi laughed. “As if we wouldn’t re-elect you. We already won the annual autumn competition under your leadership, which was the one competition that evaded us last year under Momo. You’re doing really good things for the team, Taehyung, even if you don’t see it.”

Never sure of how to handle compliments, Taehyung dipped his head gratefully. “Um, thanks. I guess we’ll see how the winter season goes.” Luckily, he was spared from saying anything else by the ringing of his phone. The caller ID read ‘Appa.’ He snatched it off the table and got to his feet, saying, “Sorry, I’ve gotta take this. I’ll see you in a few.”

“Yup, see ya!” she waved and was out the door in seconds, the last of the stream of students, leaving him in the otherwise vacant lecture hall.
He pressed the green confirm button. “Hey.”

“Oh, it worked! I don’t remember you ever picking up your phone at six o’clock on a Friday.”

“I prefer talking now than at four in the morning,” Taehyung responded with a chuckle. “What’s up?”

“I just wanted to wish you luck. You’ve got a game tonight, right?”

Shouldering his bag, he headed for the door. “Yep. I mean, the basketball team needs more luck than we do. It’s not a competition for us.”

“It’s been a bit of a rough season for them, hasn’t it?”

“You could say that. Hopefully, tonight will be the turning point. I don’t want to watch them lose again.”

“You sound a lot more invested in the outcome than you did this time around last year.”

Sometimes, his dad was a little too observant.

“We get to perform more if they win, which is good for me as captain, I guess. Especially if they make it to semifinals because then we get to travel with them. I’m just surprised, because they won six out of eight of their preseason games, so it’s weird to see it go downhill like this…” Hesitantly, he added, “I have a lot of friends on the team, too, so obviously I don’t like seeing them lose.”

“That makes sense,” his dad agreed. “It’d get pretty hard to watch after a while.” And then a teasing note entered his voice, one Taehyung didn’t trust.

“Appa!” Taehyung exclaimed. “No!”

He could hear his dad’s laughter. “Are you sure? Because you sounded a little defensive there.”

Flushing as he crossed the campus, a cool breeze tugging at his sweater, Taehyung mumbled, “It’s complicated.”

“I’m not very good with romance, but I’ll try my best if you want to talk about it,” his dad offered.

Taehyung was beyond fortunate to have him. His dad had never once treated him differently because of his sexuality, or shied away from discussing Taehyung’s life even if he didn’t completely understand it. He made himself really easy to confide in, and didn’t mind getting details he probably didn’t need but couldn’t escape because Taehyung had a tendency to overshare. They were open with each other. He made an effort to talk with him about everything, and he didn’t care who Taehyung loved as long as he really loved them. Unlike Jeongguk, Taehyung was lucky. Very lucky.

“I just…it’s hard lately, I don’t know,” Taehyung replied vaguely, returning a wave from a guy in his Jazz class. “There’s this guy that I like and kinda, well, we spend a lot of time together and we have for a while. He’s really sweet, and genuinely likes me…”

“Who’s the other guy?” his dad inquired.

Taehyung gaped at the sidewalk in front of him. “How did you know?”

“When have you ever once gone after guys who are really sweet and genuinely like you?”
“Hey, don’t be mean,” Taehyung frowned. “It could happen.”

“Send me a postcard when it does,” his dad snorted in disbelief. “C’mon, who is he?”

Taehyung wasn’t sure how much he could say. His dad knew Jeongguk. Really well. Well enough that if Taehyung named even an obscure gesture of Jeongguk’s, his dad could probably guess.

“I- well, you ever reconnect with someone you knew for a long time, but like...everything is different now?”

Yeah, real subtle Taehyung.

“Are you and Jeongguk talking again?” His dad sounded surprised, but wary.

“A little,” he replied meekly.

“He broke your heart,” he reminded Taehyung.

“I know, but I’ve been wondering...maybe he didn’t mean to...”

A sigh came across the line just as Taehyung’s building came into view. “You do what’s going to make you happy, Taehyung. That’s all I ask. And if you think that even after fourteen years, your happiness lies in the hands of Jeon Jeongguk, then pursue that. But remember that life isn’t as short as you think it is, okay? You’ve got time to figure these things out. Plenty of it.”

“I will. I don’t even know what I’m expecting. Probably nothing. At least, nothing good. Thanks for the advice.”

“Of course. I’ll always be here if you need more. Even teenage drama is more exciting than sitting alone in this house all day.”

“I’m twenty,” he said with a roll of his eyes.

“You’re a teenager until you’re twenty-five,” his dad replied easily. “Nice try, though.”

“That’s not even how age works.”

“Don’t you have a game to get to?” He warded off Taehyung’s impending logic.

Calling down the lift, Taehyung responded, “Yes, I’m on my way now.”

“Good, I might see if I can get it on the television. Sometimes they air it on cable, sometimes they don’t. We’ll see.”

“Alright. I’ll call you sometime next week. Love you.”

“Good luck! Love you, too.”

Taehyung hung up and hurried to his room, gathering all of his stuff together. At least he didn’t work on Fridays, although sometimes he wished he did. He wanted to devote some time to think over everything his dad had said, but he had places to be right now.

He was changed, out the door, and driving over to the stadium in record time, exchanging polite smiles and nods with whoever he passed on his way inside. The pep band was already warming up, the trills of horns and thrums of percussion filling the room, sparking and fizzling with the energy of the crowd already settling into their seats. The basketball team hadn’t stepped foot on the court.
yet; they were in the locker rooms receiving a good pep talk no doubt. But most of Taehyung’s team had gathered at the foot of the stands, bags and jackets strewn around the benches and out of the way. His coach motioned him over, hands placed impatiently on her hips.

“Where’s your jersey?” she greeted him, friendly as ever, as he jogged over.

Resisting the urge to glance down at his plain black shirt, Taehyung shrugged. “I don’t have one.”

Coach Hwang raised her eyebrows, clearly unimpressed. “You’ve had one every game for the past two years, Taehyung-ssi. Were all of Park Bogum’s taken?”

“I...no.”

He hadn’t asked Bogum this week, well aware of the center’s current disdain for him.

“We’re not on great terms right now,” he supplied vaguely.

“Didn’t you wear Kim Seokjin’s last home game?”

“I- well, yes. Similar situation.”

He hadn’t reached out to Seokjin either because things felt strangely tense between them lately. This morning in Philosophy, he barely said hello to Taehyung, just giving him a halfhearted wave and returning to his conversation with Jeongguk.

“What about Choi Minho?”

Frustrated, Taehyung snapped, “I’ll text someone, okay? I’m sorry. It just sort of slipped my mind this week.”

Coach Hwang narrowed her eyes at his attitude but stepped back, already turning her attention away. “As long as it’s done in the next half hour, I don’t really care how it happens. It’s one thing if the new recruits can’t get one. It’s another if our varsity line doesn’t have them. Especially our captain.”

Taehyung glanced at the members who made up the varsity line; Hoseok, Jimin, Chungha, Lisa, Taemin, Kai, and Seulgi were all sporting jerseys. If only Yoongi had a third one to spare.

With a resigned sigh, he pulled his phone back out. The only basketball player he’d been in somewhat decent contact with recently was Jeongguk; in fact, they’ve been texting pretty frequently since Wednesday night. Not about anything in particular, just random memes, bits and pieces of life, and a general skating around everything that had happened between them. Knowing he was signing himself up for trouble, Taehyung sent him another tentative text.

**Me**

hey i know you’re probably busy rn but do you have a spare jersey on you?
Shame crept up his neck from even asking the question, especially from Jeon Jeongguk of all people. Taehyung almost hoped he wouldn’t text back, too caught up in achieving his pre-game headspace that he’d turned his phone off.

His hope didn’t last long.

Juancock

are you really asking me

for a jersey

Me

no asshole

Me

i’m asking you for a

million won.

Me

yes i’m asking you for

a jersey.

Realising that sarcasm probably wasn’t going to help him, he quickly retracted the statement.

Me

sorry. it’s just weird if

i don’t have one and

hwang’s on my ass

about it

Juancock

come back here. i’ve got
Relief flooded through him. He’d have to write Jeongguk a thank-you card, even if it killed him.

Me
you’re a lifesaver.
i’ll be there in a sec

Juancock
yeah whatever. just
hurry

Immensely grateful, Taehyung gave a quick notice to Coach Hwang of where he was going, then speed-walked across the court to the locker rooms, ignoring the curious looks he got as he went. He could just catch the tail-end of Coach Yun’s speech as he tread carefully through the fluorescent-lit hallway.

“...and I know these past few weeks haven’t been easy, only two away wins under our belt, but all I ask is that you get out there and do your best. I’ve been watching you guys play for years. Most of you have grown up right before my eyes. You’re all phenomenal players, and what happens out there should reflect that, even if the scoreboard isn’t as objective as it should be. You’re going to play a fantastic game against Sangmyung, I can feel it. So let’s get out there and show them what we’re made of, yeah? You’ve got five minutes, then I want you on the court for warmups.”

Coach Yun finished his speech and turned to leave, caught off guard by Taehyung’s presence.

“Oh, hey Taehyung-ssi,” he greeted him. “Are you here to make a speech of your own regarding the extra lessons?”

That wasn’t at all what he came here for, but now there were thirteen pairs of expectant eyes on him, every player watching intently from his place in the locker room.

Taehyung offered a small smile as he reminded them, “It’s all about balance, guys. Remember, you have the power to psyche them out just as much as they have to do the same to you. Showcase yourselves during warmups, but don’t give too much away. Be mindful of your movement; only place your feet down when you’re sure of where you’re going. But don’t get too stuck in your head, either. And for goodness sake, rely on each other. This team is composed of some of the most talented guys I’ve ever met. So use that to your advantage. All of you bring something unique and valuable to the team. Remember what those things are and use them. I have a really good feeling about this game, and we’ll be there cheering you on.” He turned to the basketball coach. “That’s all from me.”

“Thanks, Taehyung-ssi. I’ll see you out there.”
Coach Yun exiting and the players gave him a round of applause, more genuinely excited than he would’ve expected. Minho cheered loudly, Seokjin gave him his first real smile since Wednesday, Yoongi shot him an approving thumbs-up, Bogum’s eyes held a trace of kindness, and Jeongguk leaned against the bank of lockers with his arms crossed, just observing him. He shouldn’t have as strong an effect on Taehyung as he did, but he’d always looked incredible right before a game and today was no different. Muscular, toned arms and legs on display, determination set so strong on his beautiful features. He’d changed so much since they were kids; almost all of his softness had disappeared, replaced by a roughness that Taehyung wasn’t familiar with, but craved to know. Especially when he focused it on him, and solely him.

“Hey,” Taehyung said softly, approaching him.

“Hey,” Jeongguk replied. He seemed tense as he forked over the extra jersey thrown over his shoulder. “Here. If people ask questions, please just tell them the truth. Don’t make it into another scandal.”

Slipping the shirt labelled Jeon, 05 over his head, Taehyung pouted. “When have I ever made a scandal over anything?”

“Everything you do is a scandal,” Jeongguk responded with a shake of his head. And as if it were the easiest thing in the world, he reached out and adjusted the jersey, smoothing it over Taehyung’s frame and fixing the collar. He had to suppress a shiver as Jeongguk’s hands ran over his chest and shoulders. “There, that should do it.”

Feeling bold, Taehyung inquired, “Do I look okay?”

“You look…” Jeongguk’s gaze wandered over him and Taehyung watched his Adam’s apple bob as he swallowed. “…fine. Just fine.”

Disappointed, Taehyung pressed, “Is that all? I thought maybe if I was wearing your jersey, I’d magically be irresistible or something.”

Jeongguk reached out once more, tugging the strap up on his arm a little further. “You don’t have to worry about that.”

“Oh, and why’s that?”

“I’ll see you on the court,” Jeongguk evaded him with an eye roll, already heading for the exit.

“Wait, Jeongguk!” Taehyung called after him, gaining the attention of the players left in the locker room. Curiosity winning out, Jeongguk turned around.

“What?”

With a smirk, Taehyung brushed past him, whispering in his ear, “Good luck, golden boy.”

He was back out on the court before Jeongguk could respond, making his way over to his team. Coach Hwang nodded in approval when she saw his change in attire.

“Glad to see someone pulled through for you,” she commented. “Remind me to thank Jeon Jeongguk after the game.”

“Yes, Coach,” Taehyung responded with a dip of his head. Sometimes he wished his coach acted more like the basketball team’s: personable, approachable, passionate. But Coach Hwang was cold, hands-off, and preferred to simply supervise whatever Taehyung chose to do than step in herself.
She rarely made it to games, let alone practices. But at least she was always there if Taehyung needed something.

“You’re kidding!” he heard Jimin exclaim from where he stood, stretching with Hoseok. “Are you really wearing Jeon’s jersey?”

“It’s a one-time thing,” Taehyung responded, irritated. “Don’t make a big deal out of it.”

“Sorry.” Hoseok chuckled. “But it’s kind of breaking news.”

“It’s really not,” Taehyung muttered. “I didn’t have one and he did, so here we are. Still doesn’t make us friends. Besides, both of you have been wearing Yoongi’s for weeks now, yet I’ve seen no change in that relationship status.”

“Hey, we’re working on it,” Jimin frowned, more hurt than Taehyung had expected him to be. “We go out all the time, he replies to our petty subtweets, and the other day we all held hands at the cinema. What more do you want from us? What else screams relationship?”

“Yeah, not all of us are still wet for a guy we’ve known most of our lives. We’ve gotta build the relationship from the ground up; we didn’t get the perk of just knowing everything about him off the tops of our heads,” Hoseok chimed in, smirking at Taehyung’s obvious discomfort.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Trying to ignore them, he tucked his phone into his bag on the bench.

But of course, they weren’t having any of that. Jimin tugged him back, spinning him around to face them and teasing, “Would you like us to spell it out for you?” Fear coursed through Taehyung as he rallied the team. “Alright, dancers, listen up! We’re doing this cheer style!”

They had no idea what was coming, but every dancer on the floor turned their attention to Jimin.

“Jimin, no!” Taehyung hissed.

“Give me a J!”

“J!”

“Give me an EO!”

“EO!”

“Stop right this second!”

No one paid any attention to him.

“Give me an N!”

“N!”

Taehyung grabbed his arms and shook him. “Jimin! Stop!”

His friend just batted him off, too intent on completing his cheer now that he’d started it.

“What does that spell?”

“Jeon!”
“Give me another J!”

“J!”

“Another EO!”

“Jimin, I swear to god—”

“Give me an NG!”

“NG!”

Taehyung had never felt so inclined to strangle his best friend.

“What does that spell!”

“Jeong!”

Hoseok must’ve realised Taehyung was about a second away from murder, and stopped his participation to come restrain him. He struggled against Hoseok’s grip, arms crossed by Hoseok’s in front of his chest.

“Give me a Guk!”

“Guk!”

“Altogether?”

“JEON JEONGGUK!” they roared. Even parts of the stands erupted in cheers, catching onto their energy and who they were cheering for.

Everyone at this game knew Jeongguk.

And of course he chose that exact fucking moment to step onto the court, astonishment plain on his face as the entire stadium yelled his name. Taehyung wanted to curl into a ball and never be seen again, but the basketball star’s eyes landed on him first. Quickly, he jogged over to where the dancers were. Excited whispers and ooh’s came from all around Taehyung. Deciding to look busy, he hurried to dig around in his bag again, except Hoseok thwarted this plan by maintaining his hold on him.

“Let me go you traitor,” Taehyung demanded.

Hoseok didn’t move an inch. “I don’t think so.” Taehyung wanted to slap the smug grin off his face, but Jeongguk was approaching now and he had to keep cool.

“Taehyung?” he asked hesitantly, still looking around like he’d never set foot in the stadium. “Oh, hey Hoseok.”

“’Sup golden boy,” he nodded. “Oh, did you want him?”

Taehyung tried to convey the telepathic plea of Free me with his eyes.

Jeongguk shrugged. “I mean, I guess so.”

“Asshole,” Taehyung muttered, rubbing his arms when Hoseok released him.
“Why do you insult me every time I help you?” Jeongguk wondered, but Taehyung didn’t miss the humour in his eyes.

“Because it’s good for you,” he sniffed. “Especially after an entire stadium just screamed your name. Someone’s gotta keep your ego in check.”

Jeongguk laughed as his wandering gaze ceased, focusing solely on Taehyung. “I appreciate it. What was that all about, anyway?”

“Um…” he stalled, unsure of how to explain what just happened. Unfortunately, Jimin beat him to it.

“Taehyung was being an idiot, like usual, and we needed to spell something out for him to clear it up!” He sounded far too cheerful about the entire ordeal.

Jeongguk’s brow furrowed in confusion. “And that thing...was my name?”

Taehyung felt just about ready to bury himself alive. If only someone would hand him a shovel.

“Yup!”

Now a self-satisfaction entered Jeongguk’s demeanor that he didn’t like. He fluffed the back of his long hair, smiling to himself. “Interesting.”

“Don’t you have a game to play?” Taehyung snapped. “Coach Yun would chew your ass out if he saw you over here.”

“Yeah, I know. One sec,” Jeongguk said. Before Taehyung could flee, his hands were on him again, smoothing out the wrinkles in his jersey from where Hoseok had grabbed him.

“Stop touching me,” Taehyung grumbled, swatting him.

“It’s my jersey,” Jeongguk retorted. “I’ll touch you if I want to.”

“Wearing your shirt doesn’t make me your property.”

He redoubled his efforts to get Jeongguk’s hands off of him, but the basketball player caught his wrists, remarking nonchalantly, “I disagree.”

Taehyung froze, staring at him. Why was his heart beating so fast? Finally, he mustered enough courage to ask, “What the hell is with you today?”

Jeongguk shrugged, letting him go. “It’s game day.”

As if that explained anything.

“Jeon! Stop flirting with the dancers and start shooting some hoops! I want to see a ninety-five percent success rate, or I’m benching you for the first quarter!” Coach Yun called from the players’ benches.

Not missing a beat, Jeongguk shouted back, “You can’t shoot forty-seven and a half baskets, Coach! That’s not how that works!”

Those in the audience who overheard their exchange filled the stands with muffled laughter, and even Taehyung had to suppress a chuckle.
“I guess you really can do math,” he joked, referencing their conversation last Saturday.

“You’re such a dick. Of course I can do math.” Jeongguk glanced over to his teammates, already in the key. “I’ve gotta go. Namjoon’s going to murder me.”

“You deserve it,” Taehyung snorted. “Now shoo. I’ve got a team to warm up.”

Jeongguk gave him a fond smile, already heading past the sideline. “You’re gonna kill it during half-time. I’ll be watching.”

Taehyung felt a blush threatening to paint his cheeks. He’d missed this friendship thing between them. “Thanks,” he mumbled. “Bring this one home for us, yeah? I don’t want our stadium to be the only place we get to dance this season.”

“Got it. We’ll win just for you,” Jeongguk teased. And then he was racing out onto the court, and Taehyung became a spectator just like everyone else.

The game passed by as a blur of cheers, chants, passes, baskets, and dances. He spent most of the game watching the SNU team net more points than they had this entire season, if the preseason games were included. All Taehyung could remember clearly was their performance, a rather classy Hayley Kiyoko and Kehlani mashup if he did say so himself. He felt more self-conscious than usual, as if more pairs of eyes were watching him. But they’d executed the routine flawlessly, and he couldn’t be prouder of his team.

And now they’d reached the end of the fourth quarter, and the stands erupted for the team’s third win of the official season. Even the dancers were cheering and screaming for the basketball team. Kai tossed Taehyung in the air, catching him as he came out of a double turn, Jimin entered celebratory splits, Hoseok freestyled to the band’s fight song, Seulgi and Lisa were doing cartwheels...it was absolute chaos, but in the best way.

When the final buzzer went off, the score stood 68 to 49. The players jogged off the court grinning and exchanging high-fives, happily sending off the Sangmyung team. Coach Yun and their coach shook hands, and then the players headed for the locker room.

“Bring it in real quick,” Coach Hwang called. Curious, Taehyung joined the dancers gathered around her. “I know I don’t say it often, but I’m really proud of you guys.” Her hawklike gaze settled on each and every one of them in turn, a kindness there he’d never really witnessed before. “I hope the basketball team continues on this path so we can dance at nationals again, but that’s not all we’ve got to look forward to. The winter competition is coming up fast. I know September’s went off without a hitch but I want to make sure we’re confident and check every technical box. Taehyung-ssi and Hoseok-ssi are already working on choreography, and I’ll start consulting with them next week. Other than that, I just...” She took a deep breath, looking around at all of them with her hands on her hips. “I’m just proud of you guys. Don’t drink too much tonight, please. I want you sharp on Monday. Have a good weekend.” Clasping her hands, she dipped her head and left the dancers alone.

What he didn’t expect was to receive a text a minute later.

Juancock
can you come meet me back
here for a sec?

He probably wanted his jersey back, although Taehyung had planned on washing it for him. Nonetheless, he typed a quick response and crossed the court. Echoes filled the hall as he passed through the entrance, players all reliving their best moments from the game.

“And did you see the way Namjoon caught that rebound? He just booked it for the other end of the court right after, scoring the second his toes touched the three-point line,” Seokjin loudly gushed.

“It wasn’t that cool,” Namjoon mumbled self-consciously, but he shined under the compliment.

“It was,” Seokjin insisted. As soon as Taehyung passed through the doors, he sent him a cheerful wave. “Hey, Taetae! Your guys’ performance was incredible, I couldn’t take my eyes off of you.”

The comment held a different sort of weight than usual; friendly, not flirty. Taehyung realised he’d begun to prefer it that way.

“Thanks, hyung,” he responded with a smile, looking around. No sign of the point guard. “Have you seen Jeongguk?”

“I think he went to take his hair down,” Namjoon said, gesturing around the corner of the locker room.

“Got it, thanks.” Following his instructions, Taehyung rounded the tiled column and found himself in the washroom area, stalls lining one wall, sinks lining the other. Jeongguk stood in front of a mirror, intent on undoing the messy bun he’d hastily tangled his hair into earlier, bottom lip caught between his teeth in concentration. It irritated him to no end, how cute he could be. “Need some help?” Taehyung remarked, leaning against the column.

Jeongguk ignored him, continuing to tug aimlessly at the tie in his hair before finally giving up. He was fighting a losing battle, anyway. “Yes, please,” he surrendered in frustration.

“Look at me,” Taehyung commanded, already in front of him. “Head down.” Jeongguk presented his rat’s nest of raven locks and Taehyung set to work, trying to accommodate Jeongguk’s hisses and grunts of pain. “Sorry, sorry!” he apologised repeatedly. After what felt like hours, Taehyung eventually untangled the band from his hair and dropped it on the edge of the sink. “Well, that took forever. I’d be surprised if anyone’s left in the stands after that.”

“Sorry,” Jeongguk mussed his hair sheepishly.

Taehyung shrugged. “You won the game, so really, who am I to complain about your hair?” He caught sight of them in the mirror, skin glowing under the harsh fluorescent lighting. “Oh, yeah. I was gonna wash your jersey before I gave it back, but if you’re eager to take it, you can.” He started tugging the shirt over his head, but Jeongguk stopped him.

“Don’t worry about it. We’re wearing the white ones for both of next week’s away games, so you can just hold onto it for when we play here. I shouldn’t need red unless we make it to playoffs.” Jeongguk pulled the hem of the jersey back down, righting it on Taehyung. “Who knows?” He gave Taehyung a once-over that had him fending off a blush. “Maybe when you wear it, it’s my good luck charm.”
Taehyung ruffled his own hair, self-consciously mimicking Jeongguk. “You know, I think I like you a lot better on game days. Especially right after you win.”

Jeongguk flashed him a grin, crinkling his nose in exactly the bunny-like way that Taehyung remembered. “What can I say? I like winning. Usually puts me in a good mood.”

“Yes, I’m well aware,” Taehyung snorted. “I’ve suffered many a loss at Mario Kart on your behalf just to put you in a good mood.”

The atmosphere felt tense, but not in an unpleasant way. So many unsaid words still lingered between them, exacerbated now after their kiss on Wednesday, which both of them had yet to acknowledge. But Taehyung couldn’t help but think about it, standing so close to him. He could see every ounce of faint perspiration coating his brow, every shadowed dip of his collarbones, every cheerful glimmer in his dark eyes.

He was yanked out of his careful observation by Jeongguk’s accusatory gasp of, “Wait, did you let me win all those times?”

Taehyung lifted a noncommittal shoulder. “Only some of them.”

Jeongguk looked like he’d been lied to his whole life, eyes wide and crestfallen until they narrowed in anger. “You owe me a rematch, Kim.”

“You owe me a first name basis,” Taehyung retorted. The divide created by their surnames was starting to irritate him. Jeongguk only called him Taehyung these days when he wanted something or he forgot to establish that barrier.

“Fine. You owe me a rematch, Taehyung.”

Such a small adjustment, yet it sent him spiralling into a sensation he hadn’t prepared for.

Still, he managed to play it off. “Fine,” he responded with another shrug. “Date and location. Prepare to get your ass kicked.”

Jeongguk attempted to mirror Taehyung’s nonchalance, lips pursed in fake-thought. “What nights do you have off?”

Oh, right. Jeongguk knew about his job. The thought still worried him.

“Fridays, obviously.”

Jeongguk stared at him. “Duh, and?”

Taehyung returned his gaze, arching an eyebrow. “And? That’s it. I work six nights a week.”

“You’re going to die,” Jeongguk informed him flatly. “You’re going to work yourself to death, and then what? Who will benefit from that?”

“Hopefully whoever ends up in control of my bank account,” Taehyung muttered. “Or whatever sex offender turned serial killer murders me and picks up my wallet.”

Jeongguk blinked. “That’s not...Tae, that’s not reassuring. Like, at all. I can’t imagine anything less reassuring, actually.”

Taehyung tried not to give away Jeongguk’s slip with his name, already marveling at how far they’d come. But a few weeks didn’t fix everything.
“Since when do you care?”

He didn’t expect the hurt that flashed across Jeongguk’s face. “I’ve always cared.”

A huff of disbelief escaped him. “Uh huh. Sure. Hating me for five years is so goddamn compassionate of you.”

Jeongguk’s brow furrowed in a frown. “You think I’d put that much effort into hating you if I didn’t care? Obviously it wasn’t easy for me. But you always made me feel like I had to.”

“I made you feel like you had to hate me?” Taehyung repeated for clarity, not believing what he heard.

“Well since you were basically by my side for fourteen years, disappeared into thin air, and then cut me off completely, yeah. It felt like you wanted me to hate you.”

Taehyung wasn’t prepared to have this conversation, but the way Jeongguk told it didn’t exactly add up for him.

“I didn’t just disappear out of nowhere,” Taehyung argued vehemently. “You’re the one that had acted so fucking distant all year. I felt like you just wanted me around to make out with and piss off your dad.”

Jeongguk gaped at him. “I never once just kept you around to use you. You know I wouldn’t do that.”

“It sure as hell felt like it,” Taehyung replied, a bitter taste on his tongue.

“I was having a really tough time that year,” Jeongguk defended himself, voice growing quiet. “So I’m sorry if I was a little distant. But that doesn’t change the fact that I literally didn’t see you for a month and then suddenly you wanted nothing to do with me.”

It was Taehyung’s turn to stare in confusion. “I didn’t know you were going through something. You never told me.”

Jeongguk shifted uncomfortably. “I didn’t want to burden you. You had a lot on your plate with your mom’s sickness. I’ve been meaning to ask...is she doing better?”

A sharp pain shot through Taehyung’s heart. All of a sudden he felt dizzy, lost, like he was just barely keeping his neck above the onslaught of water threatening to drown him. “I...no,” he managed to get out. “She...she’s gone. She passed away that year. That’s why I left for so long.”

“Oh my god, Taehyung…”

Taehyung remained silent and examined the floor, not trusting himself to confide in Jeongguk without breaking down.

“I’m so sorry,” Jeongguk whispered. “I didn’t know.”

He could see Jeongguk reaching for him, but shied away from his touch, curling in on himself.

“It’s not your fault.” Even to him, he sounded broken. “I didn’t tell you.” Trying to rid himself of the grief still clinging to every part of his core, Taehyung asked, “You said you were having a rough year, too. What did you mean?”

Jeongguk looked like he didn’t want to let it go; either that, or he didn’t want to tell Taehyung what
he had been talking about.

“I don’t...it’s nothing. Nothing that big.”

But Taehyung couldn’t miss his pain, the way his jaw clenched and his fists tried to stuff themselves in pockets that weren’t there. The downside to having conversations like this in a basketball jersey and shorts.

“Clearly it is,” Taehyung pressed as gently as he could. “And now it’s not fair. You know what was going on with me.”

Jeongguk braced himself against the sink. “I- okay.” He took a deep breath. “Basically my parents were getting divorced that year, I found out about my dad’s affair and that they had a kid, and my mom told me she wanted nothing to do with me. So yeah...that was my year.”

Taehyung had always had his...problems with Jeongguk’s dad. But his mom was an incredible woman. She was kind, intelligent, beautiful, and she loved her son more than anything. His heart ached for the pain Jeongguk must’ve been experiencing. Must still be experiencing.

“That’s a lot, Jeongguk. That’s not nothing. I just...I can’t imagine her saying she wants nothing to do with you…”

“Well, that’s essentially what she said. She told me that I couldn’t go with her because she couldn’t give me a home. She said I had to stay with my dad even though she knows I hate him. And...and that I had to be good to his new wife and son no matter what. The next day, she was gone and they were moving in. She didn’t even say goodbye.”

Taehyung hesitantly reached out, placing his hand over Jeongguk’s. “I know it hurts, and you probably don’t want to hear it, especially from me, but I think she was doing what she believed to be the best thing for you. I mean, think about it. She had been a stay-at-home mom for years, so she didn’t have a stable job. She had to get a new place to live, which isn’t cheap, even for one person. But your dad...I don’t like him any more than you do, but materialistically speaking, he has everything to provide for you. And even when he’s being the world’s biggest asshole, he’s never failed to do that. You always have good food and a place to sleep, right? And...and money. You don’t have to worry about anything. And I’m sure in your mom’s eyes, that’s what was best for you.”

But only despair lingered in Jeongguk’s eyes. “Then why didn’t she want to keep in contact with me? That was the hardest part. You and my mom both suddenly deciding I wasn’t enough for you and cutting me off. If she cared, if either of you cared, you would’ve reached out.”

Tears pricked at Taehyung’s eyes, but he didn’t want to cry in front of Jeongguk again, so he did his best to shove them down, burying them in the lump in his throat. “I can’t speak for you mom, but I didn’t mean to cut you off. I was just so...distraught, you know? Jimin was the only person who knew what happened, and that’s only because his mom was my mom’s nurse. S-so I felt safe around him. I didn’t have to explain myself to him. I didn’t want to be around anyone else because it all felt like too much. Too much noise, too much laughter, too much happiness. I couldn’t take it. But then by the time I started feeling...feeling like I could at least try living again...you were gone. Right in front of me but so utterly unattainable. You had new friends. Friends that treated me like shit. Friends that just added to the pile of worthlessness building in my chest. I hated them. I hated them so much, Jeongguk. And you knew that.” His tone took on a frantic, hurt quality but he couldn’t help it. He’d been holding all of it inside for years. “You let them say so much hurtful shit to me. Y-you just stood by...even when Jaeyong broke my fucking nose. You didn’t say anything. So yeah, fine. I got angry. I stopped just laying down and taking your shit. I stopped trying with
you because you never once accepted a single peace offering I extended. But that doesn’t mean that I didn’t care. I never stopped caring.”

Jeongguk tore his hand from under Taehyung’s, instead engulfing him in a tight embrace. His strong arms wrapped around him, pressing Taehyung’s nose to his shoulder and simply holding him. He was so much bigger now than in Taehyung’s memories, no longer the pale, scrawny kid that haunted him and made his heart ache.

“I’m so sorry,” he whispered. “I was just scared. Terrified. I hate being alone, you know that. I-I hated watching them hurt you, but I couldn’t say anything. No...I wouldn’t say anything because I didn’t want to lose anyone else. But I was wrong. You kept...I know you kept trying to make up with me. And I refused to let you in again. I’m sorry,” he repeated, voice raw with emotion. “I’m so sorry.” With Jeongguk’s hands stroking slow circles along his back, Taehyung felt whole for the first time in years.

He knew he was getting Jeongguk’s shoulder wet with tears, and he should say something healing back, but all he could think was:

“You’re all sweaty.”

Jeongguk let out a shaky laugh against him. “And you smell like a perfume shop. Deal with it.”

“I.”

“Is this the part where you tell me you hate me again?”

Taehyung knotted his hands in Jeongguk’s jersey, burrowing his nose closer to his familiar musky scent that clung to him as he mumbled, “...Maybe.”

Jeongguk gripped Taehyung’s sides, pulling him back just enough to look at him. “Well, I don’t hate you.” And he believed him. He believed the optimism shining in his inky irises and the hope in the small quirk of his lips.

“I don’t-”

“Oh! Um, sorry...” an awkward voice interrupted them. Startled, Taehyung pushed Jeongguk away from him, realising for the first time that someone else had entered the room.

“Hey, Lisa,” Taehyung greeted her, trying to sound as unbothered as possible. “How’d you get back here?”

She offered him a tentative smile, tucking a lock of blonde hair behind her ear. She kept her other hand behind her back, as if she were hiding something. “I just sorta slipped in. Um...actually, I wanted to talk to you, Jeongguk.”

Jeongguk seemed surprised, but inquired politely enough, “What’s up?”

Lisa looked more flustered than usual, stuttering and examining her feet quite a bit. “Taemin’s throwing a party tonight at his place to celebrate your first win and he wanted to make sure you knew you’re invited.”

His smile was patient as he informed her, “I knew, thanks though.”

“T-that’s not all.”

Did she not realise they were kind of in the middle of something?
“Oh? What is it?”

Lisa rushed to get the words out. “Well, some of the girls and I got together and baked cupcakes after class for y- for the team. So um...here.” She hurriedly pressed the red plate that she’d been holding behind her back into Jeongguk’s arms.

Taken aback, he accepted them. The cupcakes appeared to be red velvet, and were decorated with little basketballs, hoops, and players numbers. The gesture was cute.

So why did it annoy the fuck out of him?

“Thanks!” Jeongguk exclaimed, grinning like an idiot.

If anything made that boy happy, it was free food.

“Did you make sure to give some to the entire team?” Taehyung asked innocently. He had a right as Lisa’s captain to make sure she treated every player equally.

Lisa blushed. “I- yeah. Those are for the whole team.”

Jeongguk’s smile grew even bigger at the thought of sharing. “Thank you,” he repeated happily.

“No problem. Do you have Taemin’s address?”

Frowning, Jeongguk answered, “Actually, now that I think about it, I don’t think I do.”

“I can text it to you if you want,” Lisa offered.

“I know his address,” Taehyung interrupted.

Lisa’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “Oh, okay. It’s just...you never go to parties, so I figured Jeongguk should probably have it just in case.”

Jeongguk chuckled. “Besides, you forget everything. There’s no way I’m trusting you to remember an address.” He held his phone out for Lisa. “I’ll save your number and then you can text it to me, yeah?”

Irritation simmered in Taehyung’s stomach, but he kept his mouth shut. The last thing he needed was to ruin their newly restored friendship by lashing out at someone simply trying to be nice.

“Sweet,” Jeongguk said as she handed his phone back to him. “I’ve gotta shower and change, but I’ll be there after.”

Lisa’s eyes sparkled when she looked at him. Taehyung had never felt such a strong urge to vomit in front of someone else. “Okay. I’ll see you there.”

And finally she turned around and left. She was just lucky no one lingered around to kick her out of the guy’s locker room.

“Want a cupcake?” Jeongguk gestured to the plate with his free hand.

Taehyung did his best not to glare at the desserts. “I’m good, thanks.”

Jeongguk pouted. “But you love cake.”

“I’m not hungry.”
“Okay.” Jeongguk seemed to sense his change in mood. “Are you coming to the party, then? I know Lisa said you usually don’t…”

Taehyung shrugged. “She’s right. It’s my one night off, and I already spend too much time surrounded by desperate drunk people all looking for an excuse to bang. I think I’ll pass.”

“I think you should come.”

“And why’s that?”

Jeongguk fiddled with the lid on the plate, spinning it around. “I think you stop yourself from having fun, Taehyung. It’d be good for you to just relax and let go for a few hours.”

Taehyung arched a skeptical eyebrow. “Do you remember what happened the last time I let go? I mean, admittedly I did it because I was angry with Bogum, but still. We ended up making out in your car and you had to carry me to bed.”

“Taemin throws parties at least once a week. I think his place has extra space if you really need to crash there,” Jeongguk reasoned. “C’mon, it’ll be fun. Please.”

He knew he was going to regret caving into those pleading puppy dog eyes.

“Fine,” he relented. “But I need to clean myself up a little first.”

“We can head over together,” Jeongguk said, lighting up with excitement upon hearing Taehyung’s agreement. He really was cute when he wasn’t mad at him. That much hadn’t changed since they were kids.

“I mean…I guess so.” He didn’t want to cave too easily. “But it always takes you forever to get ready.”

“I’ve gotten better over the years,” Jeongguk defended himself. “Ten thousand won I’m done before you.”

Taehyung rolled his eyes. “If I had ten thousand won to spare, I wouldn’t be going to a party tonight just to get free food.”

Jeongguk’s eyes widened, as if he’d never even considered the idea of struggling to pay for basic needs. Which, in hindsight, he probably hadn’t. And then a harsh determination entered his gaze. “Guess I’m buying you dinner first, then,” he said with a shrug. Then he paused, teasing, “And I thought you weren’t hungry.”

“I’m not hungry for cupcakes made by horny girls.”

“So, I can buy you dinner, is what I’m getting from this.”

Shaking his head, Taehyung made for the exit, hearing Jeongguk’s footsteps follow close behind him. “I only let guys buy me dinner if they plan on fucking me afterwards,” Taehyung informed him over his shoulder.

“What a package deal for me, then,” Jeongguk replied cheerfully.

“I hate you.”

“I know.”
“When you said you were going to take me to dinner, I didn’t think you meant you’d buy me
dinner for an entire week,” Taehyung complained, setting down his takeout containers in
Jeongguk’s backseat.

In Jeongguk’s opinion, six boxes weren’t nearly enough to last him the whole week, but he had a
feeling Taehyung would disagree.

“I’m being proactive,” he vouched for himself. “If I buy you a bunch of food now, you won’t need
any more for a while.”

Taehyung shot him one of his signature looks as he slipped into the passenger seat of Jeongguk’s
Genesis. “Thanks for the charity and all but I’m a stripper, not homeless.”

“Food is for everyone.” Jeongguk tried his best to keep his eyes on the road, but it was
admittedly a little more difficult than he’d expected with Taehyung sitting in his passenger seat
looking gorgeous as usual in a shimmery pink long sleeve with a matching beaded necklace and
sinful white jeans. Except now it didn’t seem so ridiculous to want him. Did he want him? Was it
too early to even consider it? Probably. It would break both of their hearts to try anything now,
after so many years.

They were pretending like everything was normal. Like Taehyung didn’t just tell Jeongguk his
mom had passed away without Jeongguk even realising it. Like Jeongguk hadn’t confessed how
unloved and unwanted Taehyung and his own mom had made him feel for so long. Like they
hadn’t spent the past five years hating each other.

Now that he had him back, though, he realised just how empty his life had felt without Taehyung.
Before, Jeongguk had just been going through the motions, trying to find anything that brought him
even a fraction of the happiness that Taehyung had. But over the years, he’d found that nothing
compared. It just got easier to shut him out and act like he didn’t need him.

The drive to Taemin’s apartment was short, since nearly everyone who lived off campus had to
live close by. Most of the athletes stayed in the dorms simply because they spent so much time at
practice, so commutes were inconvenient. Jeongguk had no choice but to stay on campus due to his
scholarship, but the majority of his friends had moved into apartments and shared houses.

“Hey, quick question.” He decided to ask before they got out of the car. Taehyung’s hand paused
on the door handle.

“What’s up?”

Jeongguk paused, trying to think of the best way to phrase his question. “I- well, I was just thinking
about rooming and how I’m on campus because of my scholarship and I guess it made me curious,
but you don’t have to answer.”

Taehyung cocked his head in intrigue. “Well that’s not vague and mysterious in the slightest. What
is it?”

“How’d you settle on going to SNU?”

“You mean how am I paying to go to SNU,” Taehyung corrected him, still able to see right through
Jeongguk.
“I...yeah, I guess.”

“Tuition isn’t ridiculously expensive,” Taehyung pointed out. “For my major, it’s about four million won per semester. I can make that much in a couple of good nights. Hell, I made a million in one night a week or two ago.”

Jeongguk couldn’t help but envision it, Taehyung dressed in ribbons and silk, shedding his clothes as he danced for men willing to pay him tens of thousands of won just for a few minutes of his time.

“And you can...you can make that much without sleeping with them?”

Taehyung chuckled. “They don’t even have to touch me if I don’t want them to. Given, you generally make more if you put out more. That night was mostly all from one guy. But like, the night you picked me up…” A blush crept up Taehyung’s cheeks, painting them a pretty pink colour. “Let’s just say a patron is more likely to get extra from me earlier in the month.”

Little was left to the imagination with that statement. “Why?”

With a shrug, Taehyung brushed him off. “Doesn’t matter. Let’s go, I don’t want to linger outside any more.”

They were going to need a lot more work to get back to the level of honesty they used to have between them, but Jeongguk was willing to put it in. “Alright.” Jeongguk checked his phone as they entered the building’s lobby. “Lisa’s text said it’s floor-”


Jeongguk glanced at him, confused by the annoyance in his tone. “Yeah. So you do remember.”

“I told you I did. There was no need to go handing out your phone number.”

“I figured it’d be nice to have her number anyways in case we got lost or something.”

“Whatever.”

Taehyung’s attitude didn’t make any sense. “What’s your problem?” Jeongguk asked as they rode the elevator up.

He leaned into the corner of the back wall, arms crossed. “I don’t have a problem.”

“You sound like you do.”

“I don’t.”

“You’re pouting,” Jeongguk insisted. “You always sulk off to the side and pout whenever you’re mad.”

Taehyung glared at the accusation. “I do not.”

“You’re doing it right now.”

“Since when are you and Seokjin-hyung the same person?”

He loved Seokjin. He was one of Jeongguk’s best friends. So why did the comparison piss him off?
The lift chimed just as Jeongguk replied as airily as he could, “What do you mean?”

Taehyung brushed past him, already heading down the hall. Jeongguk had to hurry to catch up. “I mean, I’ve had this conversation with both of you and you’re both wrong.”

“Clearly not, if both of us said it.”

“I think you’re both just blind,” Taehyung countered, knocking on a door marked with a brass 9. Music could be heard pounding on the other side, loud voices struggling to be heard through the mess of bass and synth.

Jeongguk didn’t think it would open, but he stood corrected.

“Hey!” Taemin greeted them, then his eyes went wide. “Oh, shit! Taehyung! Hey! You look great! What the hell are you doing out here?” He grinned, marvelling at the fact that Taehyung existed somewhere outside of dance practice.

“I was bribed into coming,” Taehyung joked. “I’ll go pretty much anywhere if someone buys me dinner first.”

“Makes sense-” As if he noticed Jeongguk for the first time, Taemin’s jaw dropped. “Fuck. Wait. What? Jeon Jeongguk and Kim Taehyung arriving to a party together? What parallel universe bullshit is this?”

It really was kind of strange to think about. If you’d told last month’s Jeongguk that he’d be going out to dinner and hitting up parties with Kim Taehyung, he would’ve asked the same question. But today’s Jeongguk just laughed, saying, “We’re friends now, remember?”

“Well, yeah, but I didn’t believe it. I don’t think anyone did. Especially after your fight on Wednesday.”

“It was a little fight,” Taehyung objected. “We’ve had worse.”

“Remember that time you stole my entire Iron Man action figure collection?” Jeongguk reminded him.

Taehyung gasped. “Oh my god, you cried for hours. I felt so bad, I couldn’t be mad at you anymore. In my defense, though, you broke my camera.”

“I just wanted to borrow it! I even took pictures of you-”

“And then when you went to show me, you realised the lens was cracked and it wouldn’t turn on anymore,” Taehyung finished the story.

Taemin stared at them in astonishment. “Did you guys know each other when you were like, seven?”

“Well, we met when we were four but we didn’t like each other until we were seven,” Jeongguk supplied. “But that story happened when we were fifteen.”

“Fourteen,” Taehyung interjected.

“No. Fifteen.”

“Fourteen.”
“Fifteen. I remember because you had orange hair.”

“Yeah, I had orange hair when I was fourteen. It was purple the next year.”

Jeongguk frowned, trying to remember. He could’ve sworn they were fifteen. But now as he thought about it, he could clearly picture Taehyung and his bottle of hair bleach and boxed purple dye whining for Jeongguk to get the back of his head as he coloured it over his kitchen sink. They were definitely fifteen then, but in all the pictures of Taehyung he’d taken right before he broke his camera, he had orange hair.

“...Fine. Maybe I was fifteen.”

Taehyung grinned triumphantly. “Told you.”

Taemin was still gapping at them like they were a foreign species, but seemed to come to, shaking his head as if to wake himself. “Well, uh, come on in.” He held the door open wide, admitting them into the spacious dark room, illuminated only by the neon lights he’d strung up along the ceiling and the multi-coloured glow pulsing from the stereo system.

EDM poured from the stereo, university students occupied every available bit of space, crammed body to body and practically shouting just to get a word across in their little groups, bottles and cans in everyone’s hands. The party appeared to be in full swing, since they took a little while in arriving. Luckily, Jeongguk spotted exactly who he was looking for and beelined to where his friends lingered by the bar separating them from the kitchen, plopping down the case of soju they’d picked up on their way over.

“There you are,” Seokjin sighed in relief. “I was just going to call-” He cut off abruptly, focusing to the side of Jeongguk. “Oh. Hey, Tae.”

Taehyung gave him a small wave. “Hey.”

The only time Jeongguk had felt more awkward than this was the last time he invited Taehyung over to his house.

“So, you go to parties now?” Seokjin inquired. Jeongguk could hear the strain in his voice.

Taehyung shrugged. “I didn’t have anything better to do.”

Well, thanks.

Seokjin forced a laugh. “You always say you’re busy Friday nights. I’ve invited you a thousand times.”

Taehyung appeared to notice the rising tension, and set to working his magic, a skill Jeongguk had always both admired and hated. “I’m sorry, hyung,” he frowned with wide, hurt eyes, tugging down his bottom lip. “I usually am. I would’ve loved to go with you all those times. I’m just always either caught up with work or I’m so tired. You know how exhausted I get. But I guess tonight’s win energised me, and I’m feeling better than usual.”

Seokjin nodded in understanding. He set his empty bottle on the bar and reached for Taehyung, taking his hands in his own and tugging him closer. Jeongguk could only watch in taut silence as Seokjin murmured, “You look really pretty tonight, you know.”

Blinking in surprise, Taehyung responded, “I- um, thanks. Thank you. C-can we talk, actually?”
“Of course. Is everything okay?”

“Well, I just-”

“Here you go.” Jeongguk had never been more thankful for Namjoon’s bad timing as he appeared in front of them, passing Seokjin another bottle of beer.

Seokjin couldn’t make up his mind between gratitude and irritation at being interrupted, but he accepted the drink nonetheless. “Thanks, Namjoon-ah. What were you saying, Taehyung?”

Taehyung did the thing he always did when he was uncomfortable, rubbing his shoulder. “I was just saying that I think-”

“Jeongguk! Namjoon! Seokjin!” Yugyeom yelled across the room. “Come help set up the beer pong table!”

Thankful for any excuse to exit right the fuck out of this conversation, Jeongguk shouted back an eager, “Coming!” and corralled his friends. “C’mon, let’s go help Yugyeom.” He didn’t even think as he hooked Taehyung’s arm through his own, just trying to make sure he didn’t lose him in the crowd. If he did, maybe he would’ve noticed Taehyung’s blatant shock, or the way he curled his arm a little tighter than necessary around Jeongguk’s.

“Hey, Taehyung,” Yugyeom greeted him without even batting an eye, tossing him a sack of red solo cups. “Line those up, will you?”

“Yeah, sure.” Within moments, his side of the table was covered in a perfect triangle of cups, Taehyung’s hands moving faster than Jeongguk would’ve even thought to ask if he needed help.

“I thought you didn’t go to parties,” Jeongguk teased.

Taehyung set the last cup down. “I don’t usually. Doesn’t mean I’ve never been. Besides, we used to do game night upstairs at the club. Obviously, we didn’t have to participate since management can’t technically make us do anything, but it was good tips. Dress slutty and carry drinks. Wasn’t a bad gig. Sometimes a guy would slip me a few thousand to hang out on his arm for the night while he gambled and played stupid drinking games. They shut it down, though, after the club kept getting threatened with lawsuits for gambling debts. I was kinda bummed, to be honest. It was a nice break from the mess downstairs.”

“Aren’t you a little worried about bringing it up here?”

Taehyung glanced around, snickering, “As if they’re going to remember anything that happens tonight. Seokjin’s already on his fourth bottle of amber, you can tell by his cheeks, they flush red like that midway through the third, and he’s been eyeing the hard stuff since we got here.

Yugyeom’s cute, but he’s an idiot, and I guarantee he started mixing shitty cocktails when he came over early to help Taemin set up. Namjoon never listens to anything I say, so there’s no concern there. By the way, where’s Yoongi-hyung?”

Sometimes, Taehyung’s sharp perception astounded him, and he had to take a minute to process his question. “Uh, he said something about hanging with the pixie princess gang- shit, I mean-”

“Is that really what you call us?” Taehyung’s hand slotted on his hip as he glared at him daringly.

Jeongguk licked his suddenly dry lips, trying to come up with a believable response. “Um, no?”

“Liar,” Taehyung snorted.
“Alright, rules!” Yugyeom called out, sparing Jeongguk from Taehyung’s biting vengeance. “Opposite team gets to ask you a question before you shoot. If you answer it fully, you get to shoot twice. If you don’t answer it, the opposite team gets your second shot. Two to a team. Bouncing is not for bitches. Or it is, and I’m a bitch, so I’ll be accepting bounces. No elbows past the table. Sound fair?”

“So you want us to out ourselves and get drunk faster,” Jeongguk summarised for him.

“Pretty much. You’re on my team, golden boy,” Yugyem decided, dragging him around to the other side of the table.

Taehyung practically shoved Seokjin and Namjoon together. “You two have fun. I’m gonna sit out and root for team Namjin.” With that, he perched on the countertop to oversee their game, swinging his legs back and forth.

“Namjin, huh?” Seokjin repeated, a slight smile on his face.

“Yup. Now play, c’mon, I want something exciting to commentate on.”

Namjoon rolled his eyes, tossing Yugyeom a ping-pong ball. “Alright, Jeongguk.”

“Oh god, what?”

Namjoon had secrets he could destroy him with if he chose. Not the same kind of secrets as Taehyung, but incriminating ones nonetheless.

“You ever miss bottoming?”

Jeongguk flushed a bright red. “Dude!” he hissed, gesturing to the room full of people who had no idea about his sexual preferences. “Shut the fuck up!”

Namjoon rolled his eyes. “No one is listening except us five.”

“Wait, I was right!” Taehyung exclaimed triumphantly.

“You were not right,” Jeongguk retorted.

You didn’t answer the question.

“No!” he finally relented, upon realising that Namjoon’s observation was correct; the only eyes on him were his friends’. “The answer is no! No I do not!”

“You sure? I wouldn’t blame you. Namjoon probably knows how to use his dick,” Yugyeom snickered, taking their first shot. It landed dead-center, and Jeongguk watched in satisfaction as Namjoon chugged its contents.

“You and Namjoon used to sleep together?” Seokjin inquired, astonishment plain on his face.

“We finally know how you got scouted,” Taehyung interjected, smiling smugly as if he’d just solved the world’s biggest mystery.

“That had nothing to do with it,” Jeongguk muttered.

“He’s right, this was after I helped scout him,” Namjoon agreed. He had no shame. But his words brought back vivid memories of steam-filled locker rooms and Namjoon’s large, careful hands, guiding him through motions he was, as a freshman, still rather unfamiliar with.
Yugyeom knocked a ball on Jeongguk’s head, getting his attention. With the idea of making Namjoon suffer in mind, he shot, knocking out a cup on the right side of their pyramid, and watching as it bounced into another.

“Drink up, bitch,” Jeongguk said pleasantly.

They continued for a few more turns, and probably found out way too much about each other. Everything felt different with Taehyung there, all of their antics, and jokes, and snide side-comments. But not different in a bad way. Different like...normal. If that made any sense. He added a balance to their group Jeongguk felt like they’d been missing. He was loud, opinionated, flirtatious, and hilarious, and he helped set the overall comfortable, warm mood of the evening.

At some point, Taehyung lost a bet with him and had to start drinking half of the cups on their side meant for Jeongguk, so they were all mildly drunk by the time Seokjin called for the second re-rack of the game. A crowd had gathered around them, all interested in who would be playing the next round, because this one was getting pretty intense. Those watching started to ask Taehyung questions, too, and if he took them, he would decide who shot. It was a little too much power for the diva in Jeongguk’s opinion, but it made for an interesting spin on the game.

“Yugyeom!” Seokjin called. “Did I or did I not have the misfortune to walk in on you and Youngjae making out in the stairwell of my apartment building yesterday?”

Jeongguk turned to him, gasping, “You made out with Youngjae and didn’t tell me?”

“I’ve been fucking Youngjae for a month without telling you,” he shrugged, shooting his shot. But he must’ve been more embarrassed than he looked because it hit the rim and bounced off onto the table. Sounds of disappointment came from their spectators.

“Dude, whatever happened to bros before hoes?” Jeongguk wiped his eyes as if he were hurt before taking their second shot and sinking it in one of Namjoon and Seokjin’s remaining cups. With a groan, Seokjin downed the drink and tossed the cup to Taehyung, who had taken to stacking their empty cups neatly on the counter.

“Speaking of hoes,” Yugyeom segued, cleanly avoiding Jeongguk’s question. “Are you two hooking up now?” he asked, pointing between Namjoon and Seokjin.

They glanced at each other, Namjoon suggestively, Seokjin guiltily. A few laughs were garnered from the sight. Then, Seokjin turned his guilty gaze on Taehyung who just shrugged. “I don’t care. I figured we were sorta moving on to other people. After all, Namjoon knows how to use his dick, right Jeongguk?”

God, he was going to regret letting Taehyung open his big mouth in the morning, but for now, it felt kind of nice, alleviating all of the pressure on his shoulders.

Laughing at him, Seokjin’s shot landed in the cup directly in front of Jeongguk. Irritated, he snatched up the cup and marched over to Taehyung, jamming it against his lips. “Drink, you little-”

“Oh-ah, be nice,” Taehyung chided melodically, downing the cup’s contents and adding it to his stack. “Oh, that was the first one I’ve had that hasn’t tasted like horse piss.” He glanced over Jeongguk’s shoulder. “Thanks, Seokjinnie!” Then his gaze flickered back to Jeongguk, dark and playful. “You wanna try it?”

He arched an eyebrow, heart pounding. “And how exactly do you expect me to do that? Cup’s empty and I don’t know what the hell was in it.”
Taehyung’s fingers curled in the collar of Jeongguk’s baggy black sweater, tugging him close to stand between his legs, hands moving up to cup his jaw.

“Tell me what you think it tastes like, I can’t place it.”

And before Jeongguk had time to gather his thoughts or shove him away, Taehyung’s lips were on his, fervent, insistent, as if he’d never kiss anyone again. A selfish part of him hoped that were true, if only to be the last one who got to feel Taehyung against him like this, the intoxicating push and pull of Taehyung’s teeth on his lip and his tongue in Taehyung’s mouth, trying to taste every last drop of the alcohol that enthralled him so much he had to share it.

His hands came up to Taehyung’s hips, holding him in place on the counter while Taehyung’s fingers twisted and twined in his hair, tugging just to feel Jeongguk pant against him.

He only became aware of the deafening catcalls when Taehyung pulled back. Jeongguk glanced behind him in surprise; everyone’s eyes were on them. He should be more concerned than he was, but between the alcohol and the fuzzy feeling in his head kissing Taehyung left him with, he shrugged it off for now. Besides, everyone knew Taehyung threw himself on people without restraint. Jeongguk was just one of his lucky victims.

Lounging cat-like back on the counter, mischievous smirk on his face, Taehyung hummed, “So, what do you think it was?”

“I-” he took a deep breath, composing himself. “I think you’re crazy. It was literally just vodka and sprite.”

“How,” Taehyung mused. “Good to know. Now get back to your game, for fuck’s sake, you’re taking up everybody else’s time.”

“You’re insufferable, you know that?” Jeongguk casually threw over his shoulder, walking back over to the table like nothing happened.

“It’s one of my best qualities!” Taehyung called back cheerfully.

Yugyeom was grinning like a smug dork. “Did you really-”

“Shut up.”

“Told you it was love,” Yugyeom teased, quietly rubbing it in.

“Being kissed against my will is not love.”

“Oh yeah, because you totally looked like you were hating every second of it.”

“Shut up,” Jeongguk insisted for the third time that night, simply because he didn’t have any other defense.

They went a few more times, until there were only two cups left on each side. Chanyeol decided to pose a question to Taehyung.

“Hey, Taetae!”

“Yeah?” He tugged his leg up, sitting cross-legged on the counter now. How he managed to look pretty even underneath Taemin’s shitty neons and strobes was beyond him.

“Who are you most likely to accidentally sleep with?”
“Whoever breathes near him long enough,” Jeongguk answered loudly for him.

Taehyung stuck his tongue out at him. “Fuck you.” Then, he turned back to Chanyeol, shrugging. “Probably Jeongguk. It almost happened last weekend.”

Annoyed, he snapped, “It did not.”

“It did, too.”

“You blackmailed me into cuddling you, that’s nowhere near sleeping together.”

“That’s like, two layers of clothes removed.”

“Besides,” Jeongguk cut over him. “If we were to sleep together, it wouldn’t be an accident.”

Taehyung blinked, feline eyes going wide. “O-oh…”

Jeongguk smirked, satisfied after finally being the one to make him flustered. If he was going to beouted at this stupid party, he was going to do it on his own terms. “So, who’s shooting, Taehyung-ah?”

Taehyung bit his lip, flushing it a bright red as he considered.

“Tae…” Seokjin vied for his favour, gesturing between himself and Namjoon. “C’mon, we can win this.”

“You both have two cups and only one shot,” Taehyung pointed out. “You’re doing one last round regardless.”

“Unless we bounce it,” Yugyeom reasoned. “C’mon, Tae, do it for the D.”

Jeongguk smacked his arm. “I’m not sleeping with him!”

“You’re not?” Taehyung asked as if he were hurt, bottom lip out in full pout mode.

Now Jeongguk was confused about what he wanted. And how clearly he should voice his wants. “I...maybe?”

Clearly that wasn’t good enough for Taehyung, who scrunched his nose and decided, “Team Namjin gets the shot.”

Namjoon and Seokjin high-fived, hands linking together beneath the table where they thought the rest of them couldn’t see.

“C’mon, Tae, that’s not fair,” Jeongguk whined.

Taehyung sniffed, crossing his arms delicately. “Shoulda thought about that before you decided you weren’t fucking me later. I told you what happens when guys buy me dinner.”

“I’m going to un-buy you dinner,” Jeongguk huffed, crossing his arms to watch them take their shot. Fortunately for him and Yugyeom, Seokjin made it in one cup but narrowly avoided bouncing in the other.

“You can’t un-buy someone dinner.”

“Food’s still in my car, yes I can.”
“Could you two stop bickering so we can get another question from the crowd? It’s only fair since we only got one shot,” Namjoon reasoned, getting them to shut up, albeit reluctantly.

Taemin piped up, asking, “Taehyung! Most embarrassing thing you’ve ever caught Jeongguk doing?”

The grin Taehyung shot him was nothing short of devious. He regretted telling Taemin about their past together.

“Don’t you dare,” Jeongguk warned.

Taehyung just smiled sweetly, pretending to think. “Hm, I suppose it would be that time-”

“Taehyung.”

“-that I caught you-”

Jeongguk’s hand clenched around the ping-pong ball he was holding. “Kim Taehyung.”

“-way back in freshman year of high school-”

“I’m going to throw this at you.”

“-way back when Jeonggukkie was a wee little fifteen year old- ow, shit! What the fuck?”

Taehyung massaged his scalp where Jeongguk had hit him neatly with the ping-pong ball. His eyes narrowed in on him. “Bitch. As I was saying, I caught Jeongguk jacking off to Iron Man 2.”

“And then you gave me a handjob,” Jeongguk retorted with the idea of getting back at him. Of course it didn’t work out like that.

Taehyung beamed proudly. “And then I gave you handjob.”

“Damn, you two go way back,” Chanyeol whistled, impressed. Huh, so no one had decided to give him shit for it. Interesting. Maybe the environment of his university had been safer than he thought.

“I never knew.”

“Too far back,” Jeongguk muttered. Carefully, he took aim, focusing on the cup slightly to the left of Seokjin’s hand, and tossed the ball. A clean arc. It landed directly in the cup, bouncing out and into the next. “Fuck yeah! Suck my dick, Namjoon!” Yugyeom threw his hands in the air, colliding with Jeongguk in an intense double high five.

“Why do only I have to suck your dick?” Namjoon grumbled. “Seokjin-hyung lost, too.”

“Damn, nice win, Jeongguk!” a girl’s voice cut over the chatter of the crowd. Lisa picked her way over to him, two cups of something sloshing dangerously in her hands. She looked good, dressed in a sequined silver crop top and black skirt.

“Oh, hey! Thanks, Lisa,” he greeted her.

She beamed, a bright smile the reached her wide dark eyes. “Sorry it took me so long to track you down, a few of us ran out to get more booze. Drink?”

“Depends.” After their beer pong game, which was barely composed of beer, he felt a little wary for his stomach and head. “I’ve been drinking god knows what all night. What’s in it?”

She glanced at the cup, admitting, “I have no idea. Coconut rum, maybe?”
Jeongguk laughed, accepting the cup. “I’ll take it. Thanks.”

“No problem!” Lisa tucked a lock of blonde hair behind her ear. She’d always been sweet; they had Screenwriting together, since she wanted to go into it professionally, and partnered a few times on projects. She was really easy to talk to, and they had a similar sense of humour, so they found themselves together a lot. “Gonna stick around for the next game?” she inquired, gesturing to the table.

“Nah, I’d rather get drunk on my own terms.” Jeongguk turned, shouting, “Replace me for the next game, Yugyeom!”

“You’re ditching me now? After all we’ve been through? After the victory we shared?” Yugyeom shouted back.

“Yes!”

Yugyeom shook his head. “You’re one to talk about bros before hoes, but I hope you have fun, man!”

Jeongguk didn’t quite know what that had to do with anything but tipped his cup Yugyeom’s direction nonetheless.

“Oh, I tried one of your cupcakes on the drive over here!” Jeongguk informed Lisa. “They were fucking delicious, I don’t know if I’m willing to give them up to the rest of the team.”

Lisa hid her laugh behind her cup. “You can keep them if you want. Your secret is safe with me.”

“Five minutes into this party together, and we’re already conspiring?”

“Looks like it.”

“Taehyung had one, too, by the way. He won’t say it directly, but he loved them.”

Lisa leaned against the wall, remarking, “The only times he speaks directly are when he’s teaching us new choreography. Otherwise, it’s always all word games with him. He’d be a master manipulator.”

Jeongguk shrugged. “He doesn’t do it on purpose. His brain just works differently than ours. He’s really smart, but I think he forgets it sometimes, and thinks everyone else is keeping up just fine. You’ve just gotta remind him gently that not everyone is a genius. I’ve done it enough times.”

“You know, I thought you hated each other.”

Jeongguk took a sip of what did, in fact, taste like coconut rum. Mixed with lemonade, maybe? “I thought we did, too. I don’t know. It’s been complicated lately.”

Lisa tugged on his arm, saying, “Well, let’s not think about anything too complicated. I want to dance, and I’ve heard you’re kinda killer.”

Chuckling, Jeongguk replied, “I don’t know if I’m that good, but I’m always down for something fun. Let me just check in with someone, and then I’ll meet you there, yeah?”

“Sounds good,” Lisa wiggled her fingers at him over her shoulder as she headed for the area Taemin had centered the speakers and lights around, already brimming with people. “But don’t keep me waiting too long, Jeon.”
“Wouldn’t dream of it,” he called after her.

As soon as she disappeared into the crowd, Jeongguk surveyed the room for Taehyung. He’d apparently departed from the countertop, and he didn’t see him anywhere else. Spotting Minho, Jeongguk made his way over to him.

“Hey, Minho.”

Surprised, he glanced away from his conversation, dark brows raised. “What’s up?”

“Have you seen Taehyung?”

His intrigue morphed into irritation, but Jeongguk really didn’t have enough fucks to give when it came to Taehyung’s harem.

“I’ve seen him, yeah. Recently?”

Tapping his foot impatiently, Jeongguk said, “Yes, recently.”

Minho glanced behind him, sighing. “I saw him duck into the bathroom a minute ago. Seemed like he was in a hurry.”

Knowing Taehyung, he already started to grow apprehensive. “Did he go with someone?”

Minho rolled his eyes. “He’s not hooking up in the bathroom. You and I both know he has more class than that.” Upon seeing Jeongguk’s skeptical expression, he added, “He was alone.”

“Thanks,” Jeongguk said, patting him on the shoulder. He vaguely remembered where Taemin’s bathroom was from the last time he’d been here, heading in the direction of the hallway. Light only seeped out from under one door, so Jeongguk assumed that was the one and knocked twice. “Taehyung?”

The door swung open slowly. Taehyung stood at the mirror, an eyeshadow brush in hand. “What’s up?”

Confusion filled his already muddled brain. “What’s up with you? Why are you doing your makeup again?”

Taehyung turned his attention back to the mirror. “Got called into work. Need to make myself pretty.”

Realising Taehyung probably didn’t want people listening in, Jeongguk stepped inside and shut the door behind him. “But it’s your night off.” He could still hear the music.

“And? The club loses money if we don’t have a full rotation of dancers. And I’m in no place to turn down extra shifts.”

“Tae, you work six nights a week. Isn’t there anyone else they can call?”

Taehyung shook his head, switching his eyeshadow brush out for an eyeliner pencil. “Jang-ssi requested me. Means they’re desperate for cash tonight. I don’t mind.”

Jang was the manager that spoke to him on the phone, if he remembered correctly. Despite his annoyance with the situation, Jeongguk couldn’t help but be impressed. “You being there is enough to make them that much more money?”
Taehyung flashed him a smirk. “Of course. Guys travel to see me, Gukkie. You wouldn’t believe the number of guys that think I’m gonna blow them if they tell me how far they drove to see the famous.”

He cut himself off abruptly, turning red as he focused on his reflection.

Jeongguk gasped. “Were you about to drop your stripper name?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Sounded like you were.”

“I wasn’t.”

“Show me.” The words escaped his mouth before he could filter them. Clearly, too much coconut rum.

Taehyung arched an eyebrow, watching him through the mirror. “Show you what?”

Well, as the great teachers of the millennium said, no backsies.

“Show me how you dance.”

Attending to his lashes now, Taehyung checked for confirmation, “You want me to give you a lap dance? Here?”

“Yep.”

“Yep,” Taehyung repeated with a snort. “Charming.”

“I try. You don’t have to strip. That’s not what I’m curious about. Just...I want to see you dance.”

Taehyung sniffed in offense. “I don’t think I’ve ever had a guy tell me not to strip.”

“We’re good at firsts.”

“Yeah,” Taehyung laughed. “I guess we are.”

Jeongguk locked the door and sat on the --thankfully wide-- edge of the bathtub, spinning Taehyung by his hips to face him.

“Oh,” Taehyung said, caught off guard as he grabbed Jeongguk’s shoulder for support. “Eager, aren’t we?”

But Jeongguk noticed him cap his mascara, setting it on the sink ledge.

“Just curious. I mean, you talk about how good you are. I want to see it for myself.”

Taehyung laughed, trailing his fingertips up and down Jeongguk’s bicep. “Fine. Just so you know, you’re not getting the full experience. Taemin’s bathroom doesn’t really have the right ambience to do me justice, but I won’t use that as an excuse.”

“Right, you would never,” Jeongguk hummed his agreement. He let his gaze wander, slightly intimidated by having Taehyung so close and the boldness of his request.

Taehyung tapped underneath his chin. “Eyes on me, golden boy. Don’t you dare look anywhere
He had said the same thing to Seokjin only a month ago; the words felt entirely different when meant for him. Jeongguk nodded, focusing on Taehyung.

Taehyung cocked his ear, catching the beat of the music blaring outside the door. And then he slowly began swaying his hips, carrying the movement all the way through his shoulders. The hand that wasn’t resting temptingly on Jeongguk’s arm came up to toy with his own hair, tossing his curls into a wild mess.

Post-sex hair.

Taehyung knew how to make his hair look exactly like post-sex hair.

He took a step closer to Jeongguk, impossibly light on his feet, and purred, “You don’t mind if I touch you, right?”

Did it matter? He’d been touching him for the past two minutes.

“Not at all,” he finally managed to say.

“Good.” Taehyung ran his hand from Jeongguk’s bicep down his arm. “You’ve gotten so strong, Jeonggu克,” he breathed, still moving in time with the music. He turned, tugging Jeongguk’s hand with him. “I don’t usually let my patrons touch me for free but I’m willing to make an exception.”

Jeongguk’s hand fell into place on Taehyung’s waist, and without missing a beat, he brought the other one up too. He’d already admitted it out loud, but Taehyung had a frustratingly nice ass, and the view he was getting now was unbeatable. Those white jeans hugged the curves of his hips, accentuated by the way he swayed his body, slowly transforming into a movement akin to grinding. Taehyung rolled his hips in Jeongguk’s grasp, similar to the move he’d taught the basketball team but far more seductive.

Unable to help himself, Jeongguk squeezed his waist, tugging him back a little closer to him. Taehyung dropped his hips, bouncing off his lap without really touching him. Jeongguk ran his hands up Taehyung’s sides, exploring, getting his fingers on as much of him as he could.

Taehyung sensed his lack of restraint, dragging along his chest before turning back to him. “This might get a little up close and personal,” he murmured, twirling a lock of Jeongguk’s hair.

Jeongguk brought him even closer, knocking their knees together.

“That’s fine with me.”

“Whatever you say, golden boy.”

How did he manage to stay so calm and composed as he squeezed Jeongguk’s shoulder, bringing his knees up onto the ledge to straddle him? He could feel the heat of his body, but he somehow kept his weight off of him, giving the allusion that he was light as a feather as he swayed. Jeongguk couldn’t look anywhere but Taehyung now, even if he wanted to. There mischief filled his eyes, but an undeniable allure lingered there as well. The more he touched Jeongguk, the more he seemed to get into it. He rolled his neck, eyes fluttering shut as he sighed, low and deep.

Beautiful.
His movements were sensual, unpredictable, but calculated. Taehyung knew exactly what he was doing. He was like a siren, luring men in and casting them out without a care. And Jeongguk had willingly offered himself up as the evening’s first victim.

Taehyung’s hands came up to caress his neck, cradle his jaw, before knotting in his hair. A small groan escaped Jeongguk from the unexpected roughness of his touch. His fingers trailed along Taehyung’s spine, unconsciously bunching the soft fabric of his pink top, tugging the hem out of his jeans. When Jeongguk accidentally made contact with Taehyung’s skin, he inhaled sharply. His hips rolled lower and harder than before, dragging against the front of Jeongguk’s black jeans. He hissed involuntarily at the friction, tightening his hold on Taehyung.

“You think she could dance like this for you?” Taehyung whispered in his ear, leaving the faintest bite at the shell.

“W-who?” Jeongguk couldn’t think straight, head spinning as Taehyung’s movements became hotter and fiercer, picking up speed, body still so flawlessly fluid.

“Lisa.” Her name came out smooth as chocolate, but Taehyung’s tongue lapped at his neck before he sucked Jeongguk’s skin between his teeth. Jeongguk’s hands flew to his hips, shoving his shirt up to grip his bare skin while he marked him. “Weren’t you going to meet her?” He flicked his tongue out, catching Jeongguk’s breath. “Didn’t she say she wanted to dance with you?” he mouthed against his throat. Vibrations thrummed through him at the cadence and pitch of his voice. Deep. Dangerous.

This question had nothing but wrong answers.

“Eavesdropping’s rude, Taehyung-ah.” There was a tremble in Jeongguk’s voice but he took it in stride, fingers hooking in the loops of Taehyung’s jeans.

Taehyung purred against him, teeth grazing his neck again. “Sorry, hyung. Couldn’t help it.”

Jeongguk couldn’t explain why, but every time Taehyung called him hyung, desire pierced through his body, low and warm in his stomach. Maybe it was because Taehyung always refused to acknowledge him as older until he needed to be bailed out of trouble, putting the blame on Jeongguk for not properly looking out for him. It’s been that way since they were kids, and he still pulled it these days as a trump card in arguments because he knew it made Jeongguk weak.

Which might explain why Jeongguk splayed his hand across his soft stomach and bunched the thin fabric of Taehyung’s shirt up to expose his chest completely.

“Bite.”

Taehyung’s eyes darkened at the request, straightening up to take his shirt between his teeth. Now Jeongguk had a full view of his slim golden torso, broken only by his dusky nipples and lines that Jeongguk had only seen once before, in the dim lighting of Taehyung’s dorm room. Lines of ink crossing the right of his ribcage. A treble staff in the key of D-flat major. A sporadic staircase of notes decorated it, and if it were any other time, Jeongguk would ask him what song he’d chosen to ink onto his skin. He didn’t even know Taehyung had tattoos until that night.

But right now, he was too desperate to feel Taehyung’s body against his to gawk at the notes any longer. Instead, he skimmed his fingers down his chest, teasing Taehyung’s nipple until he mewled into his shirt. Of course Taehyung would only shut his big mouth when he finally got the kind of attention he wanted. Smirking at the thought, Jeongguk leaned forward and sucked a mark onto the soft skin of his stomach, fascinated by how quickly it turned red. He licked a wet stripe up
Taehyung’s chest, littering him with bites.

Although Taehyung couldn’t speak properly, he made his thoughts clear, rolling his hips and tugging relentlessly on Jeongguk’s hair. Finally, he couldn’t take it anymore.

Letting his shirt fall, Taehyung uttered a single, “Fuck.” And then he was yanking Jeongguk up to look at him by his hair, demanding, “Kiss me.”

Jeongguk didn’t hesitate. He pressed Taehyung’s lithe body to his, lips colliding together in the sort of desperation he’d always imagined between them but never quite reached. Not like this. Not with Taehyung on his lap, looking absolutely wrecked without trying, kissing him with too much fervor and passion not to be sincere. He tasted like a minibar of cheap booze, and Jeongguk was sure Taehyung was thinking the same thing as he licked into his mouth, but they didn’t care. They’d kissed after playing Overwatch with a bag of Doritos and a bottle of Mountain Dew between them. Nothing was gross after that.

“You’re thinking about the Dorito kiss, aren’t you?” Taehyung giggled against his lips.

“Fuck, how did you know?”

“You think about it every time we kiss and it doesn’t taste like fucking strawberries and unicorns.”

Every time we kiss. Like it was a thing that happened on a regular basis.

It used to be.

Jeongguk pulled back, wrinkling his nose. “Dude, what does a unicorn even taste like?”

“Did you really just dude me? Damn, you let your rival give you like twenty hickeys and you’re suddenly on dude terms. Lucky me.”

“Rival?” he repeated through a snort of laughter. “This isn’t fucking Pokemon Red, Kim, no matter how badly you want Blue to show up and put you in your place.”

Taehyung dramatically cast his hand on his forehead, reminiscing. “My first sexual fantasy. And dare I say my best. Arrogant, cocky, selfish asshole who wasn’t afraid to give me a brutal reality check. I think he shaped my type for years to come.”

Jeongguk planted his hands on the ledge, leaning back to quirk an eyebrow at Taehyung. “I don’t know if I should be offended or not.”

“Oh, you didn’t use to be my type,” Taehyung assured him. “Then uni happened and bam, you’re suddenly everything I want and hate all rolled into one. It’s really rather frustrating, you know.”

“So all those times we made out in high school, I wasn’t your type?”

“Not at all. You were my cute best friend who happened to be the sweetest little bunny on earth whom I just wanted to love and squish and occasionally give head to.” Taehyung tickled under Jeongguk’s chin as he cooed.

Jeongguk swatted his hand away. “I’m literally older than you. I got into so many fights on your behalf and this is how you repay me?”

Taehyung sucked his bottom lip between his teeth, admitting, “Okay, yeah, that was a little hot. You’d get all riled up if I so much as breathed a word about a guy commenting on me, especially
my body, good or bad. It was less hot when you stopped getting into fights for me and instead watched your friends beat the shit out of me.”

That felt like a punch to the gut, but he supposed he deserved it.

“I’m sorry.” He knew it wasn’t enough, but he pulled Taehyung close to him anyways, surprised when the latter buried his nose in the dip of Jeongguk’s collar.

“S’okay,” he murmured. “High school’s dumb. Every person, every scene, every little clique and conflict...it’s all pointless anyway. None of it matters here, y’know? We’re all different people. Different scenes. Different cliques and conflicts. And none of this is going to matter in a year. I love shit like that. I love the weight of inevitability. I know it’s all going to change. So what’s the point in obsessing over the little things? Jimin, Hoseok, and Yoongi are inevitably going to get their shit together and make things official. There’s no point in stressing about questionable movie date interactions. Yugyeom is inevitably going to get drunk off his ass tonight and break his third stereo system of the month. What’s the point in worrying about how steady he is on his feet right now? You’re inevitably going to end up somewhere amazing, doing the thing you love because you’re just that damn successful, with unbelievable amounts of money in your pockets. What’s the point in beating yourself up over what your poor prejudiced old daddy thinks of your choices? I’m inevitably going to end up working this shitty club gig for the rest of my life until my ass sags because even if I pay off our debt, there’s no way in hell I’m going anywhere. I’ll be supporting my dad until he dies, and no one takes me seriously as a professional dancer, especially if word of my job got out. I’ll probably overdose on something stupid before I graduate and die choking on a dick because I love a little poetic justice”

Jeongguk hated how relaxed Taehyung sounded about everything he said. Like all of it was...well, like it was inevitable. He made fun of it, sure, but an undeniable bitterness weighed down his voice as he spoke.

“Tae-”

“Speaking of, I need to get to work.” Taehyung changed modes abruptly, swinging a leg off of the tub and getting to his feet. “You’ve lost me like…” He checked the time. “...eighty thousand won.”

Jeongguk opened his mouth to offer to just pay for his losses, but a loud knock came at the door.

“Taetae? Babe? Are you in here?”

The brief hardness vanished from Taehyung’s face as he raced over to let whoever interrupted them inside.

Damnit.

Whoever this guy was, he was annoyingly good looking. Probably better looking when he wasn’t standing next to Taehyung. No one looked their best when they stood next to Kim Taehyung. But this guy had the nerve to match him in confidence. Blonde hair. Slim, oval face. Pouty lips. Soft eyes that sparkled when they fell on Taehyung, who he had the audacity to call babe.

“Baekhyunnie-hyung!” Taehyung exclaimed, throwing his arms around the guy. Tone oozing with his fake persona. “I was just about to text you and see if you were here yet. Thanks for coming to get me. How’d you find me, though?”

The guy, Baekhyun, he assumed, shrugged. “Wasn’t hard. A bunch of people were huddled around gossiping about something and I heard your name thrown into the mix. Said you’d ducked into the
bathroom with this Jeon guy which was apparently a big deal—” His gaze finally slid past Taehyung and landed on Jeongguk, who stood with his arms folded, trying not to glare. “Oh. I take it that’s you.”

“Yeah.” The word came out rougher than he intended. Oops. “That’s me.”

Taehyung glanced back at Jeongguk. “Sorry I dragged you from the party for so long. Thanks for listening to me, though. Go get hammered or something, I’m gonna bounce.”

The last thing he expected Taehyung to do was thank him for the final two minutes of their, for lack of a better term, conversation.

“Um, no problem. Try not to work too hard, Kim.”

Taehyung’s face fell for the briefest of seconds, but Jeongguk was too caught up in eyeing the way Baekhyun placed a protective hand on his lower back, steering him towards the door, to notice.

“Sure, Jeon. See you around.”

And then he was gone.

Was it too much to want him to stick around just once?

Probably. A few drinks together and a better understanding of each other didn’t fix everything.

Whatever. The night was still young. He didn’t need Taehyung to have a good time. Especially when Taehyung apparently had other people he’d rather be around.

Shoving the thought down, as well as ignoring the fact that he just received the best lap dance of his life from his ex-best friend, Jeongguk pushed his way out of the bathroom and back into the sea of sweaty bodies and booze.

Half an hour and six shots later, his mind had been completely taken off of anything but the dance floor and whoever stood immediately next to him. He got lost in the music and the pleasant fuzziness in his head. After a while, he felt a tap on his shoulder.

“Blew me off to dance alone, huh?” Lisa teased him, shining magenta under Taemin’s lights.

Wait, did he blow her off? For what?

He couldn’t quite remember. Something to do with Taehyung, but then again, everything eventually came back to him.

“Sorry.” Jeongguk gave her a lopsided smile. “Got caught up with something and couldn’t find you when I finished. I’m here now though.”

“I can see that.” Lisa’s laugh sounded bright, but it had a tempting undertone to it. “Wanna dance?”

“Absolutely.” It didn’t take long for them to get comfortable. Somehow, his hands ended up on her hips, her back to him, rolling in time with the music. At least he was doing his part to dispel whatever rumours the campus gossip queen had started. She was sweet enough, and definitely pretty. Just not exactly his type. It didn’t matter, though. They were having fun; she could hold a conversation, and they had plenty to talk about.

And she felt nice against him. Even if she didn’t smell like lavender. Even if her hands were too small and she didn’t have wild dark hair. Even if she didn’t move with the grace and wrath of a
“Hey, pretty thing!” A loud whistle caught Taehyung’s attention, arms hooked around the pole behind him. He cocked his head in the direction the sound came from until his gaze landed on a table seating a guy around his age, surrounded by a group of his friends no doubt. “You wanna come down from there and have a little fun?”

Taehyung rolled his eyes and adjusted his grip on the pole, flipping his body up to catch the top in downsplits that he could spin slowly out of, ignoring the voices cutting over Hojin’s set. How the hell did they even get in here? Sin was fucking expensive, the exact reason why he hadn’t gone looking for a new place yet. Nowhere else was going to make him as much as this place. Everything was insanely classy and overpriced. Their crowd typically consisted of older guys who had money to throw around on a decent atmosphere and actually talented dancers, making his little catcaller a bit of an anomaly.

“If only that kid would shut up.”

Biting his lip, he just shrugged and straightened out, sliding to the floor in splits. He arched his back, making sure to show off just how perfectly his ass cradled the sleek crystal pole. They kept the set tonight a bit more mellow to make sure he could stay on stage for a while since they didn’t have a lot of dancers on hand. Baekhyun was currently making his rounds on the floor and Kwangsu had taken a client to one of the private rooms, so right now, it was just him on stage. Not that he minded having all of the attention on himself. It wouldn’t be the first time.

If only that kid would shut up.

“V, isn’t it?” He’d approached the stage now, clever eyes shining under the club’s blue lights. “How long you gotta stay up there for? Aren’t you cold in just your cute little booty shorts?”

When he danced, words were just about his least favourite things in the world. So Taehyung neglected words in favour of hooking his arms in place and pulling himself into a duchess, gazing at his vocal patron wide-eyed upside down. The sequins of his red and black shorts dragged on the glass, but flickered nicely with the stage’s clashing magenta lights. Luckily, body heat filtered through the air, and the pole no longer felt cool against his bare chest.

A tug came at his hips. The familiar sensation of bills sliding between the straps of his lace thong, peeking out provocatively from his shorts.

“Silent treatment over now?” the client inquired politely enough. Interesting, considering how much of a douche he’d sounded like just a minute ago.

Taehyung pulled himself upright to revolve slowly, flicking through the amount he’d slipped him. Fifty-thousand.

Unimpressed, Taehyung gave him another nonchalant shoulder lift and smoothly inverted his body into a closed leg hang, giving him a rather nice view of his ass.

“You really do play hard to get, huh?”

He pretended not to hear him over the music, swaying his hips and catching higher up the pole, leg hooking behind him to spin cleanly.
Two more fifty-thousand bills landed at the base of the pole.

Oh, now he had his attention. He slid down to a headstand, retrieved the money, and somersaulted to the edge of the stage. He sat on his knees in front of the guy, eye level with him as he looked back with undisguised intrigue.

“Acrobatic little thing, aren’t you?” Now that he was closer, he could determine the quality of his voice. Surprisingly gentle and deep. He looked cute, too. Soft, youthful features. Shame. Taehyung didn’t give up much for a man he didn’t think could handle him.

“You’re one to call me little,” Taehyung pointed out, seeing as the patron stood at least a couple inches shorter than him. “Did you interrupt my set for a reason or did you just want to have a chat up here?”

The guy reached up, finger tapping the silver bell that hung from his red and black choker to make it ring. “Come have a chat down here, pet.”

Taehyung suppressed a snort, instead purring, “I’m nobody’s pet, honey.”

“You are tonight. We’ll pay you real well for hanging out with us for a bit.”

Sometimes offers like this came up; guys wanted to buy his company for a night, trying to get to know him and get deals they normally wouldn’t.

“Little young to be tossing around such big bills and promises, don’t you think? Daddy’s gonna be upset to see you throwing his money away on pretty pets like me,” Taehyung teased, curious how much money they were really talking.

People always paid more when they had something to prove.

The patron arched an eyebrow, chin resting on his folded arms. “Is that any of your business, pet? I’d wager a guess that you’re tired of all these old men and their wandering hands. Let us remind you what guys your own age can do.”

Taehyung laughed, light and sweet. He knew exactly what guys his own age could do. The thought made him miss Seokjin’s touch a little. And...well, never mind. “Why does it sound like you’re trying to get me to agree to a gangbang?”

The patron shrugged, but there was a mischievous gleam in his eyes. “Name your price.”

“My price for what? A round of dances for your table?”

“We can start there.”

Taehyung thought about it, modifying prices and tallying in his head. “Seventy-thousand. And you’re buying me a drink.”

A smile spread across his client’s face. “I’ll double it, pet. And buy you two drinks.”

He wasn’t going to argue with more money. Especially this time of the month. “How charitable.” Taking the guy’s outstretched hand, Taehyung hopped down from the stage. Jang would just have to get Baekhyun to go up.

The rest of the night passed in a blur. He couldn’t quite wrap his head around where he was or what he was doing, but he knew that he was making a lot of money, and that’s really all he cared
about. Whatever drinks he’d been given were strong, senses dulled by alcohol but enhanced by something suspiciously similar to ecstasy he thought he might’ve taken at some point. All he knew was that he was warm, energised, and getting passed around like a particularly popular toy. He danced for hours, far past the end of his shift, and entered more champagne rooms than he could count.

This. This was the only way to defy inevitability. Get lost in the sensation of nothingness; no expectations, no future plans, no wants or needs. Everything is composed solely of light and touch. Colours and shapes sparking before his eyes, sweat-slicked skin pressed against his body, lips on his neck, tequila on his tongue.

“How much for your body, baby?” the ringleader of his party table murmured against his mouth. He knew he introduced himself at some point. He just didn’t care to remember his name.

Taehyung sunk his teeth into his bottom lip, drawing it out before giggling. “Got me already, don’t you?”

Hands clutched his hips. “I want all of you, pet. Wanna see how pretty you look underneath all of us.”

His head was full of too many other incredible sensations to pay much attention to his words. “If I wanted to sell my ass, I’d be a hooker. M’not.”

Another pair of hands landed on his shoulders, smoothing down the curve of his back. Taehyung instinctively arched into the touch, lips seeking out whatever bit of skin was closest to him.

“All three of us for one and a half million won,” a new, vaguely familiar voice coaxed from behind him. “We’ll get a hotel room. It’ll be fun.”

The rational part of Taehyung knew what a terrible idea this was. Why the hell would he go through with this?

And then the weight of inevitability settled on him again. And suddenly he felt like giving a big old fuck you to the cosmic universe. So yeah, sure, he’d be the center of a gangbang while drunk off his ass and high on ecstasy. He was getting paid good money for it. The burning out of his self-consuming star was inevitable, after all. And he had no interest in just fading into nothingness.

Chapter End Notes

i literally have two headcanons: namjoon slept with jeongguk before anyone else and taehyung’s a kinky little shit. there. that's all of them. those will always appear in my fics, sorry.

more importantly, thanks for reading! i’d say the fic is ~roughly~ halfway over? i haven't completely finished it, but i only have about ten major scenes planned out till the end. also, you can probably expect smut next chapter.

twitter! (stream black swan)
Mistakes were made.

But at least Taehyung was able to stumble out of the shitty hotel around six in the morning with his shorts and courtesy bathrobe intact and his dignity definitely shattered on the floor. Like it was worth anything before. After he quietly vomited up the contents of his stomach, he’d checked the trash bin just to make sure, relieved when he found three full condoms inside. At least they’d used protection. His head was pounding like Jeon Jeongguk on his door before a run and nausea ate at his stomach, but he had close to two million won to show for his efforts, and he considered that a success.

Sort of.

Luckily, they hadn’t gone far from Sin, all of them too wasted to make it more than a couple of blocks. Taehyung took the stairs down to the club entrance and pushed through the doors. Clean-up staff swarmed the floor and the daytime lights were on, hurting his eyes. With a grumble, he shielded them and hurried to the changing room.

“Oh, so he finally shows his face,” a voice drawled the minute he got to the back.

Not interested in putting up with Jang, Taehyung walked straight past him to his locker.

“No panties in your purse? Heels in hand?” he continued to jeer.

“Fuck off.”

Jang slammed his locker door, forcing him to meet his gaze. His head throbbed with the noise. “I was so fucking worried, you know that? I’ve been here since you took off, just waiting to make sure you came back in one piece. I called. I texted. Nothing.”

Taehyung rolled his eyes. “I’m a big boy. I can take care of myself, thanks though.”

“You’re starting to get as bad as Kwangsu, you know.”

He shot him a venomous glare. “No, I’m not. Kwangsu is out of it every night and barely sticks around long enough for two dances. He hasn’t worked the stage in five months. I’m nowhere near as bad as him. So let me live in peace, please.”

“You used to be the one I could count on to keep the other dancers in line. Now you’re the one I’m constantly having to keep an eye on. What happened?”

“I literally just went to get dicked down, it’s not that deep.” Taehyung massaged his forehead, reaching for his locker again. “I made money. I don’t see what the problem is.” He fished out his real clothes, changing faster than he ever had in his life.
Jang scoffed, folding his arms. “The problem is that you’re not a prostitute. You’re a stripper, and—”

“And what I do with my body is my choice. Stop trying to fucking parent me. I need to get paid. I’m not above selling myself to accomplish my goals. Either way, I’m my own commodity. You don’t get to regulate that. Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to get home, take a hot shower, and crash for twelve hours. I’ll see you tonight.”

Before Jang could object further, Taehyung swung his bag over his shoulder and stormed out. It was only once he was outside that he realised he didn’t drive himself here, having ditched that stupid party with Baekhyun.

Frustrated tears pricked at his eyes. He plopped down onto the sidewalk, dropping his head in his hands for just a minute to gather his thoughts.

Did he actually fuck up?

He wasn’t sure yet. All he knew was that he was tired, hungover, and he wanted to go home.

With a sigh, he pulled out his phone and dialed the only number he felt safe calling.

To his surprise, it took Jimin a few rings to pick up. Usually the answer was instant.

“Taetae? What’s up?” He spoke through a yawn, words slightly muffled with sleep.

Taehyung immediately felt guilty. “Sorry, did I wake you?”

“S’no big deal. What do you need?”

Picking at a loose string hanging from his sleeve, Taehyung mumbled, “So maybe I fucked up a little.”

“Did you sleep with Jeongguk?”

“What the fuck? No?”

Where did that even come from?

“You owe me ten thousand won,” Jimin informed someone who was certainly not him.

“Did you bet on me sleeping with Jeongguk?” Taehyung spluttered. “With who?”

“Yoongi-hyung,” Jimin hummed. “So how did you fuck up exactly?”

Taehyung glanced around, suddenly paranoid. “Can we talk when I see you? And uh, could you come pick me up?”

“Well, honey. You at work or something?”

“Yeah. Right outside.”

“Okay. Small problem, though. I’m at Hoseokie’s with Yoongi right now, and I didn’t drive over here. I can have Yoongi drop me off at my car, or—”

Taehyung honestly didn’t care anymore.
“You can just ride over with him if it’s easier.”

“You can just ride over with him if it’s easier.”

“Thanks.” Jimin sounded relieved, not eager to end his time with Yoongi so soon. “We’re on our way, see you soon.”

“See you,” Taehyung echoed, hanging up.

Twenty minutes passed in which all he knew centered around the morning’s crisp breeze, the occasional strange glances from early pedestrians, and his own frequent shifts from regret to defiance.

He didn’t have anything to be ashamed of, which meant the obnoxious thoughts circulating in his aching head had no right to be there. Or maybe he had everything to be ashamed of, as fit his usual schedule.

Eventually, a black sedan pulled up alongside the curb, sparing him from himself. Jimin rolled down the window and waved him in, concern written all over his face. Taehyung just grabbed his bag and hauled himself into Yoongi’s car.

“Are you okay? What happened?” Jimin turned around in his seat to ask the moment he sat inside.

Taehyung glanced at Yoongi to find he’d already been watching him out of the corner of his eye. “I’m not going to judge you if that’s what you’re worried about. And if you have secrets, I won’t tell them either. That’s not who I am.”

Jimin shot him a grateful look, squeezing his arm.

They were good together. Healthy. How did they do that?

“Yeah, alright,” Taehyung resigned himself. “You drive, I’ll talk.” Once they were on the road, he felt better about opening up. Yoongi couldn’t look at him this way. “Okay, so I’m prefacing this for Yoongi-hyung so it makes sense. I strip at that club you picked me up outside of.”

Yoongi shrugged. “Whatever it takes to make money, right? That’s how this world works.”

“Exactly.” He didn’t expect him to get it so instantaneously. “So anyways, I ditched Taemin’s party last night because I got called into work and while I was doing my set, this guy approached me and basically offered me a lot of money to do some tiny-bit-stupid shit. I hung around his table, got drunk, took a couple pills, and I’m pretty sure all of them fucked me if the way my ass and thighs hurt like a bitch and the fact that I woke up in a hotel room with them down the street from my club are anything to go by.”

Jimin snatched his hand up, fixing him with a worried glare. “Taehyung! That’s too much, you know it’s too much. You’re just there to dance and get paid. Nothing else. Why would you-”

“How much did you make?” Yoongi cut over him.

“Almost two million from just that table.”

“That’s why,” he answered Jimin’s question for him.

Jemin shook his head. “It’s not worth it.”

“It is for me,” Taehyung replied simply. “I have a check due in a week.”

“What’s the money for?” Yoongi inquired, although Taehyung got the feeling he wouldn’t care if
he answered or not. Still, a part of him wanted to confide in him, especially if he was going to become a permanent part of Jimin’s and Hoseok’s lives.

“Hospital bills,” he decided to respond vaguely. “But that’s not really important. Tell me about your night.”

Jimin tossed him a skeptical look. “You’d really rather talk about our night than this?”

“Oh, yeah, wait I take it back. All you did was fuck, right?”

Yoongi muttered, “No,” at the exact same time as Jimin’s, “Yup!”


“Still asleep,” Jimin informed him happily. “Didn’t want to wake him if we didn’t have to. Don’t worry,” he added upon seeing Taehyung’s questioning expression. “We picked up breakfast and wrote him a note saying where we went.”

“Cute,” Taehyung repeated with a smile. Anything to take his mind off his own worthlessness sounded fine by him. “Party closed down okay? No one got arrested this time?”

“From what I’ve heard, everything went well.”

“Any good hookups?”

For some reason, Jimin glanced at Yoongi almost guiltily.

Immediately intrigued, Taehyung leaned forward. “That looks like a yes to me. Spill, Jiminie. Otherwise I’ll have to check my notifs and read up on the gossip, and I really don’t feel like it. My head hurts too much for that.”

Shifting uncomfortably in his seat, Jimin deflected, “It’s nothing, Taetae. Nothing you’d be interested in.”

“Too late. I’m already interested. What happened?”

“Nothing,” he insisted.

“Doesn’t sound like nothing.”

“Seriously, it’s fine.”

“What’s fine?”

Yoongi’s voice cut over their bickering. “Jeongguk slept with Lisa, apparently.”

Jimin landed a firm smack on his arm.

“Hey! I’m driving!”

Taehyung couldn’t think, mind suddenly blank. “He...what?”

“That’s just the rumour,” Jimin interjected fiercely. “We don’t know if it’s true.”

“She said so herself, and other people said they were all over each other at the party, so yeah, I’m pretty sure it’s true.”
“But I- he’s gay.” Taehyung didn’t know how to explain why the thought made him furious. “I gave him a fucking lap dance. We made out in the bathroom, what the fuck?”

“Most people don’t know he’s gay,” Jimin attempted to console him. “And- wait, what? What happened between you two?”

Taehyung glared out the window. “I don’t know anymore. Don’t repeat it, though. I wouldn’t want to go messing up his image, or whatever the hell he thinks he’s protecting by sleeping around with fucking Lisa of all people.”

“She’s really sweet, you know.”

“Yes, I’m aware,” he snapped. “She’s a fucking angel. Doesn’t mean I can’t make her do eighty wind sprints on Monday.”

“I think that’s called abuse of power, actually,” Yoongi supplied helpfully.

“She should’ve thought about that before sleeping with- actually, you know what? Forget it. I don’t even know why I care. He’s allowed to live his life and experiment with whoever he chooses. I really don’t have enough fucks to give about it. I’ve got bigger things to worry about.”

“Tae-”

“No. I’m over it.”

Jimin clearly didn’t believe him, but he let it be. They rode back to the dorms in silence, only broken by the occasional conversation between Jimin and Yoongi and the quiet murmur of the radio. As soon as they arrived back to campus, Taehyung swung his bag over his shoulder and rushed out of the car.

“Thanks for the ride. Have fun back at your place.”

“Call me later, okay?” Jimin requested to his retreating back.

“Yeah, sure.”

He closed the door harder than he meant to, hurrying inside. Residents gave him a couple of strange looks as he passed, but he paid them no mind. He knew he looked like shit, thanks.

Once upstairs and in his own room, he dropped his bag and collapsed on his bed. Exhaustion dragged at him like lead. Still, because he had masochistic tendencies, he pulled his phone from his pocket to check his notifications.

If his timeline confirmed anything, it was the rumour about Jeongguk and Lisa. For some reason, everyone wouldn’t shut up about it, uploading photos from the party last night where they looked disgustingly close and calling them the campus’ new power couple. Please. If he had any inclination to date, he’d be one-upping them in seconds.

Actually, that gave him an idea.

Me

you’re taking me out
Bogumie-hyung

Wow yes hello to you

too after a week of

absolute silence

Me

you’re seriously still

mad about that?

Bogumie-hyung

Not mad. Just like…
a little pissed

Me

if you take me out

i promise to make

it up to you

Bogumie-hyung

Tae you know I don’t

want anything from

you

Me

yeah i know that’s

why you’re the best
Me
so is that a yes

Bogumie-hyung
...yeah I guess so.

Bogumie-hyung
I’ve missed you like
a /little/

Bogumie-hyung
But if I hear one
fucking word about
Jeon Jeongguk I’m
ditching your ass

Me
ew don’t say that
name in my presence

Bogumie-hyung
And suddenly you’re
my favourite again

Me
i try

Me
lunch and shopping?
i never did help you with
the wedding stuff

**Bogumie-hyung**
Sure but then we’re
going clubbing sometime

**Me**
dude hard pass

**Me**
you know that’s
not my scene

Did that qualify as a lie? Perhaps. But regardless, it only counted as a little white lie. He didn’t *like* the club scene, although he actively participated in it every night.

**Bogumie-hyung**
Live a little babe

**Bogumie-hyung**
Please? We never
actually go out

**Me**
...fine

**Me**
only because i
was a dick to you
though and i want
to apologise

Bogumie-hyung

Thanks taetae

Me

mhm you’re welcome.

Me

i’m gonna go take
a little catnap. ttyl

Bogumie-hyung

Sleep well <3

Me

<3 <3 <3

Having made his peace with Bogum, he dropped his phone on his shitty IKEA nightstand, threw his clothes on the floor, and promptly fell back on his pillows. His head hurt. His body hurt. And he had to work again tonight.

Once he got his mind to agree with the program of ignoring last night and everything that happened with Jeongguk, he could relax enough to pass out.

... 

Buzz.


Taehyung groaned, roused from the best sleep he’d gotten in weeks by the nonstop vibrating of his phone. He reached out blindly, too lazy to open his eyes and check the caller ID.
“What?” he grumbled into the receiver, arm thrown over his eyes to block out the light seeping in through his window.

“Are you home?”

Well, that was just about the last voice he wanted to hear.

“Why the hell do you care?”

Jeongguk paused, then realised, “You just woke up, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” Taehyung sighed, rolling onto his side. “What time is it, anyway?”

“Six.”

Taehyung sat up in an instant, alarm clawing at him. “Fuck.”

“Late for something?”

“No, just...I didn’t mean to sleep for so long. I need to work on something for my Gender Performance class before work tonight.”

“Gender Performance? I took it last semester.”

Taehyung shifted his phone to his other ear, digging through his bag. “Good for you? What do you want?”

“My laundry basket is full.”

“You absolute shit. I told you. I’m not doing your laundry.”

He had no desire to head over to Jeongguk’s dorm, much less do his nasty laundry.

“I’ll help you with your assignment. I have all my old stuff.”

Funny how little it took to change his mind.

“Yeah, alright, dickwad. What’s your building and room?”

“921. Third floor, first room. You sure you don’t need me to walk you? Hold your hand all the way across campus? Us poor kids can be scary, you know.”

Taehyung rolled his eyes, heading for his tiny en suite. “You’re the son of a millionaire politician. A dirtbag one at that, but a millionaire nonetheless.”

“And yet you live in a nicer dorm than me.”

“I literally just got lucky. Admissions screwed up my papers and by the time they figured it out, I had already moved in and begged for them to let me keep it. I threatened discrimination. Now let me hang up so I can go shower.”

“You could keep the call going while you shower. I don’t mind, even if you accidentally switch it to facetime,” Jeongguk suggested cheekily.

“No, you perverted shit. Go call Lisa for that.”

The words just sort of slipped out.
“I- You know what, we can talk about this when you get here. Take a shower, Taehyung. I don’t want my dorm smelling like a strip club.”

Taehyung stared at his phone for a moment. “Fuck you. I’m not coming over.”

“I was kidding! I’m sorry, that was mean.”

“Yeah, it was. You’re not forgiven, but I need help so I’ll see you in twenty.”

“See you. Again, sorry.”

“Forget it. Bye.”

He hung up before Jeongguk could say anything else; he’d just make it worse.

As soon as his hair had been thoroughly washed of the scent of booze with strawberry shampoo and his body had been cleansed of the scent of sex using vanilla body wash, he tossed on a black t-shirt and matching jeans. Glancing at himself in the mirror, he quickly blew his hair dry and held it back with a red bandana. He didn’t care enough to style it just to see Jeon Jeongguk.

On second thought, he threw on just a touch of makeup to feel a little less like he hadn’t taken an eleven hour nap. And yes, he could still call it a nap if he wanted to.

With his bag slung over his shoulder and phone in his back pocket, he headed downstairs. Of course, Jeongguk had to live across campus, forcing him to walk twenty minutes in the leafy turmoil of autumn wind.

The residence hall itself didn’t look too bad; clean, spacious, clearly a hot spot for parties. And although the lift was out of service, Taehyung didn’t really mind taking the stairs. He’d already walked this far, after all.

He knocked twice on the door to number 1, ignoring the curious looks of the floor’s other residents popping in and out of their rooms. Finally, the door swung open, Jeongguk right behind the door, lopsided grin on his face as usual.

“Hey,” he greeted him.

Taehyung suppressed an eye roll. “Hey, asshole.”

Jeongguk’s face immediately morphed into a pout. “You know I didn’t mean it. I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, whatever. Just let me in.”

The pout didn’t disappear, but he held the door wide open nonetheless. Taehyung brushed past him, taking in the quaint room with its two beds, bookshelves, and desks. One of the beds currently held a human being, glued to their phone. But with the sound of the door closing, they glanced up.

“Oh, hey, Taehyung-ah.” Yoongi dropped his phone on his bed, stretching with a yawn. “Sleep okay?”

Taehyung thought back to this morning where he’d fully confessed to being a stripper, and let Yoongi pick him up at one of his most vulnerable moments.

“Better than I did last night. I take it Jiminie’s back home, too?”

“Mhm, I dropped him off after breakfast with Hobi.
“Good, thanks for taking care of him. Not to be pushy, but you might want to head over there now. Golden boy’s gonna help me study and I promised to blow him so I have a feeling you might not want to be around for that.”

Jeongguk’s attention snapped to him amusingly fast. “Wait, what?”

“Yeah, that’s my cue to leave,” Yoongi agreed, getting to his feet. Sweeping his bag over his shoulder, he traipsed out the door.

“I- you didn’t mean that, right?” Jeongguk asked apprehensively, the moment Yoongi had gone.

“Obviously not,” Taehyung snorted. “I just didn’t want to subject him to three hours of us harassing each other. He did me a favour this morning, and I’m not about to turn right around and kick him in the dick for it.”

“The beautiful ways you utilise the Korean language never fail to amaze me.” Jeongguk plopped down on what Taehyung assumed was his own bed, if the angsty black comforter, black pillows, and black sheets were anything to go by. That man could really do with a few years of solid therapy.

Taehyung arched an eyebrow in mock surprise, sitting on the grey blanket covering Yoongi’s bed opposite him. “Was that sarcasm, Jeon Jeongguk?”

“Oh no, definitely not.”

Jeongguk obviously went for more sarcasm, but even a backhanded compliment was a compliment in Taehyung’s book.

“Aww,” he cooed. “It means you’ve never slept with a girl, honey. Naive little Jeonggukkie, never exposed to the brutal Never-Have-I-Ever rounds that take place in the dressing rooms of gay strip clubs.”

“I didn’t know it was such a universal experience,” Jeongguk retorted. “Next time I end up at a gay strip club, I’ll be sure to just slip into the back room. I’m sure the dancers won’t mind.”

Taehyung drew his bottom lip between his teeth, letting it pop back with a shrug. “Depends on how much you pay us once you get in there. We’d let you stay the whole night if you doled out enough bills.”

A confident smirk tugged at Jeongguk’s lips. One Taehyung didn’t trust. “Oh, you’d let me stay the whole night? If I decided to show up and check the place out just for the hell of it? Maybe watch a few of the dancers…”

Suddenly, panic coursed through him. “Don’t you dare show your face in my club, Jeongguk. Ever. You’re not...we get a respectable crowd, alright? I don’t need some greasy bad boy in there messing up our reputation.”

Jeongguk chuckled, relaxing back. “I’ve literally never worn leather in my life. You can’t call me a
bad boy.”

“You were literally in a punk band in high school, but whatever. Nowadays, I don’t know how you got any girl to lay you when all you wear are black hoodies and sweatpants.”

“We didn’t sleep together.”

“Sure, and I’m not deathly allergic to bullshit.”

“Seriously, Taehyung.” Something in the firmness of his voice made Taehyung look up. “We didn’t sleep together. We left together, yeah, but I told her I wasn’t feeling it, dropped her off, and went home.”

Taehyung crossed his legs, ignoring the sudden rush of satisfaction his words gave him. Huh. They didn’t sleep together. The sentence circled his mind for a few laps.

“She said you slept together, you know. Everyone’s talking about it.”

Jeongguk lifted a shoulder, like he couldn’t care less. “Everyone talks about me all the time. Not my fucking problem.”

“Well, now I feel kind of bad.” Taehyung sighed dramatically. Yes, he was going to one-up Jeongguk. And yes, he was doing it simply because he could. And maybe if he played it off as a joke, he would stop beating himself up over it. Show Jeongguk he didn’t care, so he wouldn’t care either. Plus, it never hurt to antagonise him a little. “I went out and let three guys fuck me because I thought you’d betrayed the gay code. I had to make up for your loss.”

“That’s not even remotely close to how that works, and wait—” Jeongguk’s doe eyes went wide in shock. “Three guys? Like, separately, or-?”

“No, no, like...well, yes but no. I don’t know, it’s kind of blurry. I drank a lot and did some drugs that I shouldn’t have touched, but I feel fine today, after my eleven-hour nap of course, so obviously it wasn’t that bad. Don’t worry,” he added after seeing Jeongguk’s incredulous expression. “We used protection. I checked before I ditched them this morning. I don’t want any weird diseases.”

“You, Kim Taehyung, baffle me.” Jeongguk gazed at him with a strange mix between horror and curiosity.

“Really whipping out the big words today, aren’t we?”

“Two syllables, baby. I passed Writ 101 with a B-minus.”

Taehyung tried to suppress his laughter, and the odd fluttery feeling he got whenever Jeongguk mockingly called him baby. “I really worry about you and your grades sometimes, Jeongguk.”

He cocked his head, playful smile restored. “You worry about me?”

“And your grades,” Taehyung emphasised.

“Well, lucky for you, I passed Gender Performance with an A.”

“I’m suddenly feeling very lucky indeed,” he confessed. “That class has kinda been kicking my ass all semester.”

Jeongguk patted the bed beside him. “Come here. Show me what you’re working on. I might have
some old assignments that could help you out.”

Taehyung grabbed his bag and scurried to his side faster than he’d ever admit. “We got assigned a research article to read and annotate for discussion on Friday, but I’m mostly concerned about my final project. I know what I’m doing, but I haven’t gotten any time to work on it.”

“What article?”

“Neale’s—”

“Oh, yeah. I remember. The great defender of heterosexual men.” Jeongguk lounged back comfortably, watching Taehyung as he extracted his materials. He looked good, even just hanging around his own dorm. Too good. It wasn’t fair.

“I take it you didn’t enjoy what he had to say then?”

“On the contrary, I think more people should discuss how mainstream portrayals of masculinity are destructive to the male psyche just in the same way we discuss the representation and stereotyping of women and the LGBTQ community. I appreciated his point. I just think he could have worded some of his ideas more open-endedly.”

Taehyung couldn’t help but stare a little. “Holy fuck, Jeongguk, I didn’t know you were actually smart.”

Of course he knew. He’d always known. Jeongguk had one-upped him in sciences his entire life, and they’d always been on par during literature and history classes. But imagining today’s Jeongguk as an intellectual didn’t exactly fit the image he’d replaced him with in his head.

Jeongguk swatted him on the shoulder. “Don’t be a dick. I told you I passed with an A. I do well in the classes that are worth my time. I’m not going to waste energy on a subject that offers nothing new or interesting for me.”

“That’s kinda hot,” Taehyung informed him, maintaining a straight face.

“No need to sound so surprised. You did give me a lap dance last night,” Jeongguk reminded him, as if he would forget.

Taehyung winked, tossing his sixteen-page article on the bed. “Only because you asked nicely. I don’t do that for just anyone you know. In fact, I gave you just about all the perks there are. You got to touch me, you got to talk, and I let you kiss me. You’re welcome, by the way.”

Jeongguk rolled his eyes. “You’re such a brat, you know that?”

“Oh trust me,” he purred. “I know.”

The air between them felt heavy, weighed down with something warm and tense. A moment passed in which they only looked at each other, daring the other to either do something or move on. Taehyung couldn’t explain why this happened every time they were together, but it had always been like this with Jeongguk. Especially when they fought, but even when they tried to do something as simple as sitting beside one another. An inexplicable urge to ruin Jeongguk and make him his in every way just took over him.

Which might explain why he found himself on top of Jeongguk with his hands up his hoodie, tracing over every ridge of his washboard abs. Jeongguk gripped his waist to hold him steady, nipping at his bottom lip to coax his mouth open.
Taehyung let him control the kiss simply because he knew how much Jeongguk second-guessed himself when he wasn’t in control, and he had no interest in letting him back out now. His assignment lay forgotten beside him; calloused thumbs from years of handling basketballs brushing along his hip bones drove every other thought from his head.

“Off,” Taehyung commanded against his lips, tugging on his hoodie. He didn’t care how he got him, in whatever way, he just knew he wanted him.

And what a pleasant distraction he would make.

Jeongguk pulled Taehyung onto his lap as he sat, yanking his hoodie over his head before his feverish hands returned to his skin, like he’d never know anything else besides Taehyung’s body.

His breath caught in his throat as he took every inch of Jeongguk in. God, the things Taehyung would let Jeongguk do to him with those biceps.

“Look at you, all grown up,” he said, smooth as silk. As he spoke, he trailed his fingers from Jeongguk’s sharp jaw down his chiselled stomach. A snapshot of a memory from the night Jeongguk picked him up flashed through his mind. “Such a big boy now.”

Jeongguk caught his wrist, gripping him tight. Taehyung’s eyes flicked up to meet his doe ones, surprised by the hardness in them. “Tell me what you want, and I’ll give it to you, but only in this room. Understand?”

Taehyung tilted his head. “Are you offering me what I think you’re offering me? Trying to replace Seokjinnie?”

“No,” he growled. “I’m showing you that I can do better than him. I know who you are and what you want. You don’t need to pretend like he’s enough.”


A hand curled in his hair, tugging just hard enough to make him gasp.

The dark gleam in Jeongguk’s eyes was nothing short of devious. “Oh honey,” he mocked him. “I think I do.”

“I guess I’ll give you the chance to learn how utterly wrong you are,” Taehyung hummed, looping his arms around Jeongguk’s neck to straddle him properly.

Jeongguk’s breath ghosted along his throat as he murmured, “How generous,” before sucking a vicious mark onto his skin. Not like the little love bites Seokjin would leave, but obvious purple and red bruises he knew he’d be trying to hide for days. Still, Taehyung couldn’t help but lean into his touch, a soft moan slipping past his lips. It didn’t escape Jeongguk’s notice, who pulled away immediately. “What was that, darling?”

He knew a faint blush had risen to his cheeks. He was rarely the first to make noise. “Nothing. I think you need to get your hearing checked, Jeon.”

“I never pegged you as the shy type, Kim,” Jeongguk teased him, returning his attention to his throat.

Taehyung tangled his fingers in Jeongguk’s long dark hair, holding him close as he relished the feeling of finally having it between his hands. “Not shy. I just have some goddamn modesty.”
Jeongguk laughed against him, hands slipping under the hem of his shirt. “Yes, the little stripper is so modest.”

“Is that a challenge?” Taehyung didn’t give him the chance to respond. He broke away from his hold and made direct eye contact as he grasped the bottom of his shirt and tugged it slowly, tantalisingly up his body, swaying his hips on Jeongguk to capture his attention. He made sure to take his bandana with it, tossing both clothing articles on the floor. Then, tongue swiping along his lips, he carded a hand through his hair, tousling it in just the way that always got to his patrons.

But Jeongguk didn’t miss a beat. With insistent hands, he pulled him farther up his body, kneading along his back. “I think you just proved my point, actually,” he murmured.

Taehyung shrugged, more interested in his mouth than the words that came out of it. He captured his lips in another kiss, losing himself in the feelings of Jeongguk’s teeth and tongue. It felt easy, came naturally, as long as he didn’t think about the years of history between them. The pain, the regret, the hatred. If he just blocked all of that out, simply becoming two bodies together rather than two souls ripped apart, everything about this felt right. Jeongguk’s skin felt hot and electric against his own, every touch deliberate.

Some of his guilt lifted when he remembered that Jeongguk wanted this, too. Wanted him.

“If you let me leave this room without fucking me, I’m holding it against you for the rest of your life,” Taehyung informed him against his lips, making sure Jeongguk knew exactly what he wanted.

“I was planning on it, princess, but I appreciate the threat anyways.” Jeongguk looked up at him, a playful glint in his eyes. “You sure you can take it, though? Poor thing took it three ways last night, I wouldn’t want to overwhelm you.”

“‘Overwhelm’ me?” Taehyung repeated with a derisive snort, shoving down the heat simmering his stomach from hearing Jeongguk call him princess. “You and what dick, Jeon?”

Although he could feel him pressing against his thigh through his sweatpants, and it definitely wasn’t the little three-incher he always used as the punchline of his jokes.

“Why don’t you do a little work and find out?”

A shiver raced through him at that, one Jeongguk definitely caught if the smug smile on his face was anything to go by.

“Shut up,” Taehyung muttered, distracting Jeongguk with another kiss as he slid a hand down his body, fingers dancing along his abs and the waistband of his sweatpants. Looking for a bit of a reaction, he ground his palm against Jeongguk’s boner, triumph filling him as Jeongguk inhaled sharply. “Bet I could get you off like this,” he hummed. “Get you all needy without even taking your pants off.” To emphasise his point, he cupped as much of Jeongguk as he could through his sweats, thumb stroking along the obvious outline of his erection.

“Taehyung…” A warning note entered Jeongguk’s voice.

“Hm? Got something you want to say, golden boy?” Taehyung grasped him tight, flicking his thumb over the clothed head of his cock.

“Don’t you need to get your assignment done?”

Stunned, Taehyung sat back on his heels, staring at Jeongguk. “Your dirty talking game could
really use some work.”

Jeongguk arched an eyebrow. “I know it kills you, but shut your mouth for a second so I can finish.”

That got his attention.

“I’m listening.”

“How good are you at multitasking?”

Taehyung tucked his hair behind his ear, replying, “I can give a good lap dance and two handjobs at the same time, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Jeongguk’s smile slowly transformed into something dangerous. “I was thinking something more along the lines of annotating your article bent over my desk.”

Uninvited thrills coursed through him.

“Easy,” he said, but the word came out a little breathless. “But I don’t see how you’re helping in any way.”

“You have to write an analysis at the end, right?” Upon receiving Taehyung’s nod of confirmation, he offered, “I’ll coach you through it using mine as a reference. And the second half of your final project. You start it, I’m willing to help you finish it. Deal?”

Taehyung couldn’t help but toy with him a little. “All of this just to fuck me? You must’ve been wanting it for a while now.”

Jeongguk searched his gaze, finally surrendering, “I never stopped wanting it. But you know that already.”

A content hum came from deep within his throat as he got to his feet, tugging Jeongguk up alongside him. “I know no such thing. You should say it again.”

He could tell Jeongguk was weighing the pros and cons of a smart-ass remark.

Luckily, he chose correctly.

“I want this. I want you. Not...not like anything serious,” he added hastily upon seeing Taehyung’s curious expression.

Part of Taehyung almost wished this hadn’t come about so casually. That they weren’t doing this simply because they had years of sexual tension between them that finally reached an unignorable boiling point, and Taehyung felt like he had something to prove after his disastrous night. That they’d gotten here meaningfully. But maybe this was easier. Taehyung kept all of his sex casual. It shouldn’t be any different with Jeongguk. That small part of him shouldn’t long for something a little more romantic. He shook the thought off. This was fine. This was what they deserved.

“Obviously,” Taehyung agreed, although he felt an inexplicable pang in his chest. “I love it when you tell me exactly what I want to hear. My good boy,” he cooed.

A hand tangled in his hair, shoving his head down against the cool surface of his wooden desk. Not enough to hurt; Jeongguk kept a restrained hold on him. But the display of power made him feel hot all over nonetheless.
“No. Tonight, you’re going to be my good boy. Aren’t you, Taehyung-ah?” Jeongguk had adopted a lower tone that washed over him like the breeze before a storm, crackling with electricity. His assignment clattered onto the desk beside him along with two highlighters and a pen.

“Y-Yes.” He didn’t mean to stammer. Trying to ignore the way Jeongguk traced along his spine, he propped himself up and grasped the pen, sliding his assignment in front of him.

“Good,” Jeongguk said nonchalantly, as if they were discussing the weather. “Colour system work for you?”

Excitement sparked in him at the thought of Jeongguk being rough enough to warrant safewords.

“Works just fine,” Taehyung replied, matching his cool tone.

“Great.”

And then a sharp smack landed on his ass, jolting Taehyung forward as he attempted to read the first line. “Gonna need you to stick this out for me, princess.”

Fuck.

He hadn’t fully realised what he’d signed up for.

Taehyung never got aroused this fast. In his line of work, he couldn’t, since he spent half of his time grinding on men with his dick very visible. He’d mastered the art of suppressing a boner pretty quick, and that usually translated to his hookups since it was second nature at this point. But something about the way Jeongguk moved and spoke had him pressing as close to the desk as possible to alleviate some of the pressure in his jeans. Still, he had to put up a bit of a fight, otherwise this would be no fun.

“I swear to god, Jeon, if you call me princess one more time, I’ll-”

Another spank caught him off guard, sucking in air between his teeth.

“You’ll what?” Hot breath fanned over his ear as Jeongguk leaned forward to whisper, “You’ll hit me?”

Well, yes, that’s what he was going to say. But now, second thoughts were flooding his mind. So instead, he almost imperceptibly raised his hips; an invitation.

The gesture didn’t escape Jeongguk’s notice. A low chuckle rumbled in his throat as he smoothed a hand down his spine and over the curve of his ass.

“That’s what I thought, princess. Now get going; that article isn’t going to read itself.”

“Screw you,” Taehyung muttered, but he got back to reading. Attempting to lose himself in the critical picture of men in film Neale painted, he barely registered as Jeongguk reached around him to undo his jeans, tugging them down past his hips. He did register the dull sting of him hooking a finger in the waistband of his underwear just to snap it back. “The hell was that for?” he asked without looking up.

“Pink is a nice colour on you, is all.”

Only now Taehyung remembered that he’d worn his tie-up pink lace panties, intending to debut them at the club tonight under his usual outfit to spice things up when his clothes inevitably came
off. “I didn’t wear them for you, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

Jeongguk pressed a kiss to the small of his back. “So you’re telling me you go around wearing crotchless pink panties all the time?” He tugged on one of the strings just to see if it would give.

Taehyung finished highlighting his point before replying, “Sometimes. Is that a problem, sweetheart?”

“No, but I do have a problem with your tone, sweetheart,” Jeongguk mocked him, sickly sweet. His words had him sticking his ass out more, a silent request to continue.

Unable to back down, though, he just noted, “I didn’t know you were such a dom,” before circling and writing a short response to one of Neale’s points on narcissism and identity.

Taehyung hadn’t realised Jeongguk moved away until he felt him press up against him again, the sound of a cap flicking open having him suppress a bubble of arousal and intrigue.

“You’re lucky I’m a dom,” Jeongguk snorted. “Because no one else can put up with the serious level of brat-taming you require.” As he spoke, he gently parted Taehyung’s cheeks through the gaps in his panties, circling a slick finger around his rim.

“Hey!” Taehyung reached back, swatting his hand away. “These are new, you’re not getting them dirty.”

Jeongguk gripped his hair again, a little less forgiving this time as he forced Taehyung’s cheek against his desk. “Hold still and they’ll stay good as new.”

He held him there for a minute, clearly aware of the way Taehyung didn’t dare breathe.

“That better be a promise,” Taehyung warned as soon as he let him up, though, highlighting another section he had a feeling his professor would want to discuss.

“That’s entirely up to you,” Jeongguk countered as he returned to taunt him with a single finger. And then, finally, just as he really began to understand what connection this article had to the rest of his curriculum (hint: it’s identities adapted based on gender), Jeongguk pressed his finger in slowly.

Like that would be enough to satisfy him.

Exasperated, Taehyung dropped his pen to snap behind him, “Jeongguk, I got fucked three ways from Sunday fifteen hours ago, I should be plenty loose.”

A sharp sting filled him as Jeongguk spanked him again, harder this time. “Actually, yesterday was Friday. Focus on your annotation.”

“‘Yesterday was Friday,’ he says. ‘Focus on your annotation,’ he says,” Taehyung mocked under his breath, attempting to do what Jeongguk said regardless of his attitude. “It’d be easier to focus if I wasn’t distracted by the tiniest- oh, shit, fuck okay.” He had to grip the desk for a minute as Jeongguk forced two more slick fingers inside of him without warning.

Surprisingly, Jeongguk asked softly, “You okay?”

Taehyung rolled his eyes, adjusting to the fullness. “I’m fine, Jeongguk. You just caught me off guard. I’ll be a lot more fine when you start doing something with those fingers, though.”
Before he could even finish, Jeongguk curled them, dragging against his walls in an admittedly heart-stuttering way. Taehyung’s head dropped to the desk for a second as he collected himself, rocking back against Jeongguk’s wet fingers. He started scissoring him open with two, twisting to get in deeper.

“Still good?”

The thrust he followed with brushed against his prostate, coaxing a low moan from his lips. “Fine,” Taehyung forced out, eyes shut as he lost himself in the waves of pleasure washing over him.

Jeongguk pulled out just as rapidly as he’d entered, yanking his head off the desk by his hair. Taehyung whined at the loss, blindly seeking his fingers with his hips.

“You’re not focusing,” Jeongguk scolded him, sweet as honey. “How many pages do you have left?”

Taehyung felt like slapping him, but he plucked at the article’s corners, counting. “Nine. I’ve done seven already, c’mon Jeongguk, don’t be a dick.”

A comforting hand caressed down his back and over his ass. “Finish. And don’t get distracted. If you’re good, I’ll reward you.”

Interest piqued, Taehyung returned to reading, inquiring, “And how do you plan on doing that?”

Jeongguk slowly pushed two of his fingers back inside him, earning a breathy whimper. His nails dug into the pads of his fingers where he gripped his pen tight. “I’ll let you come first, obviously.”

Taehyung snorted, rereading a line that didn’t register in his head. “Please, as if you could stop me.”

Without pause, Jeongguk slipped his other hand down the front of Taehyung’s underwear, squeezing his stiff erection as a warning. Taehyung instinctively bucked into his hold, savouring the brief touch. “Go ahead and try if you want. But I guarantee you’ll enjoy your reward more than your punishment.”

Then he withdrew and continued to fingerfuck him as though nothing had happened. Taehyung bit his cheek, deciding not to give Jeongguk any more ammunition. Another page down. At this rate, he should finish in a matter of minutes.

And then Jeongguk withdrew once more as the unmistakable crinkle of a condom wrapper came from behind him. Taehyung couldn’t help but glance back. Suddenly, not drooling became a lot harder when he caught sight of Jeongguk shirtless, long hair a mess from their early makeout session, hard-on straining in his sweatpants, the corner of a foil packet between his teeth. Of course, Jeongguk saw him looking and arched an eyebrow, tearing the wrapper.

Fuck.

A sly smirk curved at Jeongguk’s lips. “Yes, that’s what’s about to happen. What a clever observation, Taehyung-ah.”

Taehyung’s eyes went wide as he realised he spoke aloud. Cheeks flushed, he turned his attention back to the assignment in front of him. “Just get on with it, then.”

Another light smack on his ass. He hissed, drawing an unintentional line through his statement.
“That’s a pity,” Jeongguk chuckled, peering over his shoulder to observe his mistake.

Taehyung could feel him pressed up against him, Jeongguk’s entire naked body covering his. Everywhere their skin met felt hot, burning with anticipation. Somehow, he felt very small underneath Jeongguk even though they were the same height. He hadn’t felt like this during sex in a long time, and Jeongguk hadn’t even started fucking him yet.

Jeongguk hooked his chin over Taehyung’s shoulder, reading his last note out loud. “‘Mulvey-Sadism and guilt equal control, shown in Neale’s active/passive observation.’ Your handwriting looks a little shaky, but at least you’re processing what he’s saying.” He rocked his hips against him as he spoke, making sure Taehyung could feel every inch of his hard cock, covered in latex, dragging against him and very much not inside of him, where it should be.

“Why aren’t you fucking me?” he snapped. “I don’t have all night.”

“Because you haven’t said ‘please’ yet?” Jeongguk replied as if it should be obvious.

Taehyung tried to give Jeongguk a dirty glare, but the angle didn’t really work in his favour. “I’m not saying it.”

Jeongguk shrugged. “Then I guess I’ll just stay here and watch you work.”

Even though the thought made him want to whine in desperation, he had an image to maintain. “Be my guest. Stand behind me with your thick cock hanging between your legs, staring at my ass until you can’t take it anymore. I really couldn’t care less.”

That usually did it. As soon as Taehyung laid out the taunt, made it clear his pleasure didn’t depend on his partner, they surrendered their little game. Taehyung had always been a pretty vocal power bottom, and he was used to getting what he wanted.

But somewhere along the line, Jeongguk didn’t get the memo.

“Just ask nicely, Taehyung-ah. It’s not that difficult. You’re already writhing beneath me, getting yourself all worked up for no reason. Just ask.”

How did he always know exactly what thoughts were running through his head?

Taehyung rocked his hips back again, relishing the way the unlubricated condom caught in the crease of his ass. “You can’t make me. Now shut up and fuck me while I finish this.”

Jeongguk sighed, exhale breezing over his back and suddenly Taehyung felt the weight on his
body disappear. Still, he didn’t glance behind him, desperate to finish this stupid assignment and make Jeongguk fuck him into his shitty mattress.

And then the laces of his panties were being pulled aside, and suddenly he felt a new intrusion slip past his entrance. Warm, wet, and mind-numbing. A small whimper graced the air as Jeongguk worked his tongue inside of him. He pulled out to circle his rim, getting spit and lube on his panties just to piss him off. But Taehyung couldn’t even muster a complaint when Jeongguk began eating him out in earnest, trying to coax every degrading noise he could from him. His pen shook in his trembling hands and his knees felt weak. He could only imagine how Jeongguk looked right now. He had to be on his knees.

Taehyung couldn’t resist; he checked over his shoulder, and immediately regretted it because he could just see Jeongguk’s forehead and his mess of dark hair over the curve of his ass, and the sight coupled with the insistent swirl of his tongue was enough to drive him past desperation.

“J-Jeongguk,” he cried out, bracing himself on the desk. “Fuck, just- god, fuck me you piece of shit.”

A moment of agonising relief presented itself as Jeongguk pulled back, remarking far too cheerfully, “You’re just always a friendly little ray of sunshine, aren’t you? Say please.”

Taehyung felt his resolve slip away as Jeongguk decided to keep him busy with his fingers while he waited for an answer, stretching him far beyond what he needed just to watch him squirm.

“I-I…”

The edge of the desk dug into his palms.

Jeongguk kneaded his ass with his free hand, massaging soft skin with calloused fingers.

Taehyung bit his lip hard enough to draw blood. He needed this. He needed Jeongguk.

“Fuck, please, Jeongguk.”

“Please what?”

He didn’t need to look behind him to know Jeongguk was standing now, wearing the biggest fucking self-satisfied smirk on his face.

“I hate you so much,” Taehyung informed him, hissing in a fantastic mix of pain and pleasure as Jeongguk increased the speed of his fingering, remaining stubbornly unphased by all of this somehow while Taehyung devolved into an incoherent irritated mess. “J-just, fuck me, please.”

Shame boiled deep within him every time the word left his lips, but he couldn’t deny how much he liked the burn.

“God, I love hearing that word come out of your mouth,” Jeongguk groaned, the blunt head of his cock teasing Taehyung’s rim, wetter than it had been a few minutes ago. He’d clearly slicked himself up during Taehyung’s pity party, knowing full well he’d say exactly what he wanted him to say.

And he’d probably continue to say everything Jeongguk wanted if only to finally feel some release.

“Please, Jeongguk,” he reiterated, tone begging, even to him. “I’m asking nicely, okay?”
Jeongguk smoothed a hand down his body again and Taehyung continued to shiver beneath his touch.

“Yes you are, aren’t you? I suppose you’ve earned it.”

Taehyung bit back a stinging retort and just nodded weakly. “Please.”

But he didn’t even need the final plea. Taehyung moaned shamelessly as Jeongguk slid in, burying himself up to the hilt before drawing back out again. Only the tip of his cock stayed inside him, still taunting.

“J-Jeongguk, fuck, please, just fuck me like you mean it. Or have you forgotten how to use your dick?” Taehyung snapped, trying to fuck himself back on Jeongguk’s cock. But his attempts were stopped by a firm palm splayed across his spine, holding him in place.

Jeongguk leaned over him again, thrusting back into Taehyung as he went. He felt his elbows tremble where they propped him up on the desk. Clicking his tongue in disappointment, Jeongguk pointed out, “You’ve still got three pages left, princess. I’ll fuck you the way you want when you finish. Until then, I’m just gonna play with your pretty little ass however I want since I’ve got nothing better to do. Make sense?”

It annoyed him to no end just how much sense it made, actually. Jeongguk was taking this opportunity to put him in his place like he’d been wanting to for years, and evidently, he’d thought about it quite a bit. And the smaller, less oppositional part of Taehyung sort of liked it, too. Liked the idea of just being Jeongguk’s toy for a few minutes, a doll for him to play with how he pleased while he did coursework, of all things. It was degrading, and impersonal, and exactly what their relationship warranted.

Steve Neale would’ve had a ball analysing him for his stupid research on the identity associated with masculinity.

Fingers curled in his hair, but their grip felt gentle, twisting silky strands tenderly.

“Colour?” Jeongguk asked carefully.

Only now Taehyung realised he’d zoned out briefly, lost in the fantasies his mind conjured.

“Green. So very fucking green, yes, it makes sense. Sorry, I got so caught up in thinking about how much I want to be your pretty sex doll that I forgot I had the real thing right here.”

Jeongguk sighed, low and deep as he eased back into Taehyung. “Fuck, that’s nice, baby. Thinking about my cock so much you forgot about anything else, hm?”

Taehyung’s nods were short and erratic. “Mhm. You fill me up so good, hyung. So long and thick, nothing like those boys from earlier. Took two of them at once and you still feel better.” He had no problem complimenting Jeongguk to get what he wanted, especially when it came to the size of his dick. Then again, he hadn’t lied, either.

“Two at once?” Jeongguk mused, shallow movements still enough to make Taehyung’s hands shake as he tried to write. “That’s a little greedy, princess, don’t you think?”

“None of them felt like you,” Taehyung panted. And it was true. Jeongguk managed to fill him up in a way no one ever had before, managing to keep him on edge with his pace, hitting all of the right places even when he was just trying to toy with him.
A wet trail traced over the shell of his ear before Jeongguk bit his lobe, whispering, “None of them will ever feel like me.” Then he straightened up, tapping his paper and remarking with a startling composition, “That’s not true. The male body is rarely looked at through a lens of lust or intrigue in film. Right here, Neale states those lenses we see are usually fear, hate, and aggression. One might think you’re not paying attention, Taehyung-ah.”

He emphasised his point by daring to pull out again. Taehyung could feel lube dripping wet tracks down his thighs where Jeongguk left him open and yearning. “I’m paying attention!” he promised, desperation tinging his voice. “I-I was just making a point. Examples that counter Neale’s claim. God, please, Jeongguk, I just have a page left.”

Jeongguk’s teeth sunk delicately into his shoulder, and Taehyung threw his head back, eyes shut in uncontrolled pleasure. There was something so innately sensual about the way Jeongguk touched him that made his body react in unfamiliar ways. “Then finish,” he commanded, licking a stripe down Taehyung’s back that he littered with hickeys as Taehyung tried to do as he said and finish the damn reading. Just as he was scribbling down his last note, he felt Jeongguk slide back into him. The slow circling of his hips quickly became rapid thrusts that had Taehyung crying out, struggling to even complete his sentence.

Finally, victoriously, he flung the pen down. Jeongguk ruffled his hair as a sort of congratulations before catching it in his fingers to have something to grip onto as he began pounding into him mercilessly. Unable to take it anymore, Taehyung collapsed on the desk, only managing to keep his ass in the air while Jeongguk fucked him to the brink of ecstasy. So much more pleasurable than the pills he’d popped last night.

Cheek pressed to cold wood, Taehyung could feel warm tears gathering at the corners of his eyes and he loved it. Loved letting Jeongguk take him apart in the way only he could, having never felt so thoroughly wrecked by anyone. Even Seokjin.

He hated it, too. Hated that Jeongguk knew just how to make him fall apart, how to make him beg, and cry, and surrender himself entirely.

As if Jeongguk could hear his thoughts, he slowed to a halt, carding his fingers through Taehyung’s hair.

“Why the fuck would you stop?” Taehyung hissed, stretching himself back up into a more stable position so as not to be looked down on.

“I-” Jeongguk blinked, leaning forward to swipe a thumb under his cheekbone. “You’re crying.”

“Yes, I’m crying! Because I’ve never been fucked so good in my life, and I’m angry about it, okay? So get back to it and I swear, if you stop again, I’m leaving.”

Jeongguk pressed a kiss to his nape, then another to the center of his back. “Fine, fine, I’m going. Your legs are shaking too, you know,” he noted, snapping his hips into him experimentally. The tip of his cock nudged his prostate, leaving him hungry for more.

Taehyung lurched forward as his thrusts began to pick up a steady rhythm again, supporting himself with a splayed hand. “I-I’m fine.” His words came out breathier than he intended.

“Well, fine isn’t really what I’m shooting for,” Jeongguk informed him, thrusts faster but just as clean. He clearly had experience with his dick, and Taehyung didn’t want to think about why or with who. Besides, Taehyung liked it messy. Liked when his partners treated him like their own personal slut, tossing him around whichever way they pleased. Liked being fucked dumb, until
tears and spit mingled so shamelessly on his face that his partner couldn’t help but scold him for being too sloppy.

And it seemed as though Jeongguk got the memo. He yanked Taehyung’s hips back against him, stilling his movements as he buried himself deep and pulled Taehyung into a standing position.

“Ah, fuck,” Taehyung panted, arching into Jeongguk. “Y-you stopped again.”

“What?” Leaving a hot trail of kisses from his ear down his throat, Jeongguk mused, “You’re really gonna leave me? After saying you’ve never been fucked so good in your life? Your threats just keep getting cuter and cuter, princess.”

Taehyung made to shove him away, but Jeongguk caught his wrists, holding them firmly behind his back. Heat rose to his cheeks and down through his abdomen at being manhandled so well. Jeongguk gave another experimental roll of his hips, undoubtedly relishing the way Taehyung frantically pushed back against him.

“Needy,” Jeongguk murmured. “I just wanted to get you up off that desk before you got tears and drool all over the assignment we just finished. My poor messy baby. Is that too much to ask?”

He shook his head. “N-no.”

Jeongguk reached forward, gathering the slick spit from Taehyung’s lips with his thumb before wiping it down his chin. “Cute,” he repeated teasingly. And then he pulled out completely, and gave him a small push towards his bed. “Hands and knees, princess.”

Still, he had some semblance of dignity left, and a reputation to maintain.

“Make me,” Taehyung taunted, trying not to give in just from how empty he felt without Jeongguk.

He appraised Taehyung for a moment then shrugged. “If that’s what you want.”

Suddenly, strong arms were wrapped around him, turning him around and picking him up only to drop him face down on Jeongguk’s black comforter. Taehyung instinctively braced himself on his hands and knees, immediately trying to turn back when he realised Jeongguk got him in the exact position he wanted him.

“Now, now,” Jeongguk clicked his tongue, holding him in place by his hips, undoubtedly flexing his stupid biceps. “Are you comfortable?”

“No, you asshat, I’m on my knees for you. What do you think?”

“I think you look rather nice like this.”

Another firm tap landed on his ass, and Taehyung didn’t mean to lean into his touch as eagerly as he did.

“Lucky for me, I don’t care what you think.” He snarked, attempting to cover up the betrayal of his body.

“Really?” Jeongguk prompted, tugging him against his hips by his messy hair. Taehyung could feel him, hard and slick. A wet circle was drawn on Taehyung shoulder with his tongue, sinking his teeth in before he remarked, “I think you do.”

Taehyung grasped his wrists, trying to yank him forward as a means of conveying what he wanted.
“For fuck’s sake, Jeongguk, fine, I care. Now will you stop being such a goddamn tease? At this point, I’m wondering if it’s even worth it.”

“God, you’re a brat,” Jeongguk retorted, lining himself up once more. “Fine.” He sunk back in, slow and taunting, but Taehyung felt full again and that’s really all he cared about.

“Fuck,” he moaned. “Don’t you dare go easy on me.” Taehyung arched into him, bracing himself on the bed to push back against Jeongguk’s thrusts.

A bruising grip wrapped around his hips, holding him in place. Taehyung prayed his fingers would leave marks. “Wouldn’t dream of it,” Jeongguk reassured him, snapping into him at a brutal pace.

Everywhere he touched felt like heaven, skin heating up beneath his fingertips, clenching around his cock just to try to keep him from pulling out again. He’d never been this desperate for someone, and while the thought scared him a little, he realised he wouldn’t have it be anyone else. He could be desperate for Jeongguk. Whine, beg, cry for him if only he kept fucking him like this, easing years tension and hatred between them with gentle kisses on his back and every mind-numbing hit to his prostate.

Eventually, Taehyung couldn’t keep his head up anymore, even if humiliation washed over him the second he had to lower it to the bed. Resting on the comforter, he simply let himself get lost in the heat and euphoric sensations taking over him. He prided himself on being able to come untouched, and let his cock stay strained against his panties, wet spot forming from Jeongguk’s teasing and just how undeniably good he felt.

His fists tangled in the blanket and the words, “Shit, shit, Jeongguk, I’m—” tumbled from his lips before a tight hand clenched around the base of his cock, cutting off his bubbling orgasm. “You fucker!” he practically cried into the comforter.

“Just a little longer, baby,” Jeongguk soothed him, kissing between his shoulder blades. “You’re being so good for me. I told you exactly what was gonna happen, though. Told you you’d have to wait if you got distracted. And that’s what you did. So now you have to wait for me. Understand?”

“Fucking soft dom,” Taehyung muttered, tears blurring his eyes. “Yes I fucking understand.”

“You’re kind of vulgar, baby, you know that?”

Jeongguk slowed his pace as he spoke, dragging this out so much longer than necessary, hand still vicelike around him. Taehyung just wanted to come. Was that too much to ask?

“I know. I’m trying to work on it,” he spoke through gritted teeth, shoving his hips back against Jeongguk’s thrusts, end of his sentence turning into a whimper as Jeongguk met him halfway.

“Good. No one likes hearing you talk back so much.” Jeongguk punctuated his point by stroking Taehyung’s cock lightly, smearing the beads of precome spilling from him around the head.


A soft, breathless chuckle escaped Jeongguk, although it became more of a groan as his hips snapped into Taehyung’s once more, landing another insistent spank on his ass. “You’re definitely a challenge.”

Taehyung shut his eyes, lips parting as waves of pleasure threatened to consume him. “Fuck, please, please, Jeongguk,” he begged. “I w-want, fuck, wanna come so bad. P-please.”
He hated the tremble in his voice but couldn’t find the strength to fight it down. Right now, Jeongguk owned him, and the most vulnerable part of him knew he wouldn’t have it any other way.

Jeongguk didn’t give him permission, but he released his cock in favour of holding his waist, fucking into him hard and deep, practically hammering him into his bed. Taehyung felt himself bounce with every thrust, gripping on tight to the comforter, tears pricking his eyes again. Not because it hurt, but because it felt too fucking right.

Suddenly, Jeongguk’s movements began to grow rapid and his pace sporadic. One thrust more pushed Taehyung over the edge, spilling all over his panties and Jeongguk’s black comforter. He would almost feel bad about it, but his thoughts were floating somewhere high and far away as Jeongguk tensed inside him, releasing into his condom.

A satisfied, “Fuck,” slipped past Jeongguk’s lips as he gently pulled out of him. Taehyung collapsed the minute he no longer needed to stay on his knees, curling around his blanket, making sure to avoid his come. No need to get messy afterwards if he didn’t have to.

He took a few moments just to recover, breathing heavily, lost in a daze.

The sound of the condom hitting the bin alerted him enough to open one bleary eye, not missing the fond way Jeongguk was looking down at him.

“Stop staring at me and come here,” he mumbled, loosely catching his wrist and tugging him down. Jeongguk relented, tumbling into the bed next to him.

“You came on my blanket.”

Taehyung could hear the pout.

“You decided to fuck me on your blanket,” he shot back tiredly. “Not my fault.” Slowly, he pulled himself up to lay on the pillows.

Strangely enough, his heart hadn’t exactly calmed down.

Jeongguk yanked the comforter back before settling beside him, carding a hand through his hair. It felt nice.

Too nice.

Still, Taehyung found himself nosing Jeongguk’s chest, slinging a leg over him.

“I didn’t realise you were a cuddler,” Jeongguk said with a faint laugh.

“Just shut up and hold me for a second, it’s not that hard,” Taehyung grumbled, rolling on top of him completely.

“You know, most people are nice after getting dicked down,” Jeongguk pointed out, wrapping a reluctant arm around him. “Even if it’s just for a minute.”

“I’m usually nicer, which means you must be the problem.” Taehyung nuzzled his collarbones, tugging the skin lightly between his teeth.

Jeongguk glanced down at him, an amused glimmer in his eyes. A hand came up to tousle his hair again, and Taehyung had to resist the urge to collapse against him fully and fall asleep.
“You’re lucky you’re cute, because no one would tolerate you otherwise,” Jeongguk informed him.

“Yeah, I know.” They spent a few minutes more in silence, just holding each other, until they couldn’t excuse the comfortableness of the space anymore. He sighed and gave Jeongguk’s chest one last kiss before rolling off of him and getting to his feet. “Can I use your shower?”

Jeongguk arched an eyebrow, still lounging back on his bed. “If by *my* shower, you mean the floor showers down the hall, be my guest.”

Wrinkling his nose, Taehyung snatched his clothes off the floor and started to get dressed, ignoring the drying wetness between his legs and on his stomach. “Never mind, pass. I’ll head home before going to work. Oh, and I’m emailing you the info for my final project. You’re welcome to take a look at that tonight.”

“Thanks for the kind invitation,” Jeongguk snorted, finally sitting up. He located his boxers and sweats, pulling them on as he slipped Taehyung’s assignment back into his bag.

“My pleasure,” Taehyung hummed, accepting the bag and slinging it over his shoulder. He ran a few fingers through his hair before putting it up with his bandana. “How do I look?”

Jeongguk gave him a careful once over, and Taehyung had to ignore the heat pinpricking his skin. “Like you just hooked up with someone and you’re trying to sneak out before he wakes up.”

Bounce in his step, Taehyung headed for the door. “Works for me. Thanks for the study session. See you later, Jeon.”

Following him, Jeongguk rolled his eyes. “See you, Kim.” He waited for Taehyung to step out the door before he shut it softly in his face. Admittedly, it felt a little weird to be the one standing in the hallway, come drying on his skin. Usually he hooked up in his own room to avoid this tricky next bit, namely, not getting stopped by anyone he knew on his way back.

And he almost made it, too.

Just as he rounded the corner in his own residence hall to catch the lift up to his floor, his chest collided with someone else’s as they tried to get off.

“Watch it!” Taehyung hissed, righting himself and the other person nonetheless. He couldn’t help but feel the broadness of his shoulders, so similar to…

He glanced up.

Oh.

“Shit, sorry, Seokjinnie,” Taehyung apologised, properly smoothing out Seokjin’s shirt.

“It’s fine,” Seokjin chuckled, catching his wrists and lowering them back to his sides. “I actually just came from your room, I was looking for you.”

Taehyung cocked his head. “Oh? What’s up?” He prayed Seokjin couldn’t smell the sex on his skin.

“I just…” Seokjin bounced nervously on the balls of his feet. He shouldn't be allowed to be as cute as he was. “Well, Namjoon asked me on a date, and I kind of want to go-“

“Kind of?” Taehyung pressed, a smile on his lips.
Seokjin sighed. “I really want to go. But I wanted to make sure we were, you know, done with this…”

“We talked last night, I told you, it’s cool. I’m actually really excited for you, hyung.”

And he was. Taehyung had seen them last night, had seen them for months. Namjoon clearly adored Seokjin, but Seokjin had been too busy with him to notice the center’s feelings. Now that they were spending less time together, though, it finally seemed to be sinking in.

“Well, we were all kind of drunk, so I wanted to check with sober Taehyung.”

He laughed. “Sober Taehyung gives his full approval. When’s the big date?”

A faint blush tinted Seokjin’s high cheekbones. “Tomorrow.”

Taehyung clapped his hands. “Let me help you find an outfit!”

“No offense, Tae, but I don’t want to look like a slutty starving artist or pilates instructor.”

Hands on his hips, Taehyung retorted, “I do not dress like a fucking pilates instructor. The audacity of such an accusation is astonishing. I am professionally training in jazz, classical, and contemporary, thank you very much. Pilates can kiss my ass. I’ll take yoga any day of the week.”

Seokjin shook, hand over his mouth to suppress the hilarious sound of his laughter. “I didn’t-” He took a deep breath, collecting himself. “I didn’t realise that would set you off on such a tangent. What did pilates ever do to you?”

“It’s just given dance a bad reputation, okay? I couldn’t even count how many people ask me, ‘Oh, like pilates?’ when I tell them I dance. Like, no bitch! Fucking real dancing. I swear the next person to mention pilates in my vicinity is catching these hands.”

He paused, realising he’d ranted until he’d run out of air.

Seokjin fixed him with a fond gaze, but it felt different than usual. “Please tell me we’re still friends?”

“The best,” Taehyung promised, grinning.

“So, if we’re such good friends you should be able to tell me who you just slept with,” Seokjin segued cleverly.

Taehyung gaped at him, absolutely thrown off.

“Tae, I’ve slept with you a hundred times. I know what you look like right after sex.”

“Well, there’s half the mystery out the window already, so I think I’ll cling to that bit of information a little longer, otherwise it would be no fun,” he hastily defended himself.

Seokjin sighed, but let him be. “If you say so, I won’t push it. I’m just glad to know that you’re spending some time relaxing.”

“I got one of my Gender Performance assignments finished?” Taehyung offered, trying to salvage his reputation a little in front of Seokjin.

But he just stared at him, a mix of disbelief and pride on his face. “You really had study date sex, didn’t you?”
“Maybe,” he mumbled.

“At least you’re finally getting your assignments done,” Seokjin replied with a laugh, shaking his head. “I’ll give you a heads-up before the big date, okay? We can grab boba and I’ll allow you into my closet. Fair?”

“Yes!” Taehyung exclaimed, excitement for Seokjin overwhelming his twinge of embarrassment over being caught.

“Sweet.” Seokjin ruffled Taehyung’s hair fondly. “I’ll talk to you later. Go take a shower.”

“Yes, sir,” Taehyung saluted him, stepping into the elevator. “See you later, Seokjinnie.”

He gave him a small wave, and then the doors were shutting. Taehyung sighed to the empty air around him. Did he really just use a swap hands card on his friends with benefits? Switching Kim Seokjin for Jeon Jeongguk, of all people?

Taehyung considered the pros and cons of banging his head against the elevator wall, but realised he’d be charged if he got blood on campus property.

Fuck.

He really slept with Jeongguk.

And yes, they’d been joking about it for months. Actually, since they were old enough to comprehend the idea of sex. Taehyung always told Jeongguk he wanted him to be his first time (clearly that hadn’t worked out). And yes, they’d gotten pretty damn close when they were sixteen. But this felt...different.

First of all, Taehyung had lost the ability to make jokes about his dick, so that was the primary major downside to all of this.

But second of all, how was he supposed to treat Jeongguk now? He sure as hell wouldn’t be treating him like he treated Seokjin, with all the PDA and cute dates on the side. And besides, it depended on if he thought this was going to become a frequent thing. Which it wasn’t. This was a one time deal. It didn’t matter how well Jeongguk could use his dick -frustratingly well, unfortunately- or how well he thought he knew Taehyung. He didn’t. He just made for a good distraction.

Then again, he didn’t exactly regret it, either. Although he’d never admit it to Jeongguk, he had...well, a good time, to put it lightly. Not just while they had sex, but a part of him sort of liked talking to Jeongguk again. So, really he hadn’t lost anything. Besides yet another piece of his dignity, which he rarely had around Jeongguk anyway.

Still, he wouldn’t continue to sleep with him just to have an excuse to see him.

As he stepped out of the lift, his phone vibrated with a new message.

**Juancock**

you forgot to take my laundry
Or...maybe he would.

Me
invite me over again on
monday and maybe i’ll
grab it then

Taehyung couldn’t put a name to the feeling in his chest at the daring of his own text, but he knew he hadn’t felt it in a while.

Juancock
aw is that you trying to see me
again?

Unsurprised by his attitude, Taehyung contemplated whether this warranted a real response or a sassy one, and figured the latter had gotten him this far. Might as well go with what works.

Me
no that’s me trying to
see your dick again

Juancock
sure. that’s cute taehyungie

Me
never mind. do your
own fucking laundry.

Juancock
you’re so touchy y’know that
Juancock

you don’t have a class after philosophy
right? come over then

Taehyung wondered how angry he’d get if he didn’t answer until he got off work. It could be a fun little gamble.

Deciding to do just that, he let himself into his room and dropped his phone on his bed before heading to his shower for the second time that day. He could hear his phone vibrating, and an immense pleasure coursed through him from thinking about Jeongguk’s irritation.

He wouldn’t let things between them change that easily.

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Jeongguk stared at his blank white ceiling, unable to completely comprehend what had just happened.

He’d just fucked Taehyung.

His brain could barely make the synapse connections to form the sentence in his head.

He’d fucked Taehyung, and it felt unbelievably good.

Almost as if he’d been wanting to do it for years.

A selfish part of him wished it had happened differently; that he’d taken him out properly, invested a few months in making sure he knew Jeongguk wasn’t just into him for the sex, that they’d actually come to terms with everything that had happened between them.

But he knew Taehyung wasn’t into that. Commitment held no intrigue for him, especially not now, and besides, Jeongguk had no idea if he even wanted something so certain with him. He’d barely had him back, really had him, for two days. So he would keep his mouth shut about his stupid fantasies and let Taehyung control this however he wanted. Eventually, that’s all it came down to. Taehyung wanted help with his coursework, Jeongguk wanted help with his housework, and they’d somehow ended up with Taehyung bent over his desk, pretty tears clinging to his lashes while he pleaded with Jeongguk, ass in the air.

Maybe it would be a harder sight to forget than he initially thought.

And now he’d invited him over again to-...to what? To fuck casually? Like they could suddenly go from hating each for five years to being (hardly) friends with benefits?

It shouldn’t work that way.

...
And yet, apparently it would work that way, as Jeongguk found over the course of the next week, in which he met up with Taehyung pretty much every chance they got. Between classes, between practices, after games; hell, they’d even gotten something in after Taehyung’s special Monday lesson where they continued working on his impossible routine. He couldn’t explain why it came so easily, or why it worked so well. But whenever their break schedules lined up and Taehyung wasn’t tired from running that day, they’d sneak off to one of their dorms, undoubtedly get into an argument about something, and just sort of...fuck it out.

He particularly liked this method because it meant he usually won the argument, which felt rather refreshing since he’d gotten so used to losing to him.

On Friday, however, something felt different.

Taehyung slipped inside the hall, nearly late as usual, dropped his printed rough draft of their project model in front of him, and pulled up a chair beside him and Seokjin.

Peering around Seokjin, Jeongguk asked, “What are you-”

“If you throw a hissy fit right now, I’m taking that rough draft back and chucking it in a fireplace so you can write the damn thing yourself,” Taehyung instantly retorted.

Jeongguk levelled him with a pointed stare. “Actually, I was going to ask what you were thinking for our final presentation, but if you want to start something at this hour, be my guest.”

“Honestly, you’re both ridiculous,” Seokjin grumbled.

For once, Taehyung actually seemed slightly mollified. “Sorry...Just stressed.”

“About...?”

Taehyung glanced anxiously at his phone before pocketing it. “Nothing. So, Seokjinnie, how was your date?”

Seokjin launched into a full-fledged retelling of the third date he’d gone on with Namjoon, which Namjoon had run past Jeongguk enough times for him to know it by heart, so Jeongguk just sort of zoned out.

He was supposed to head home to his family on Sunday for yet another agonising dinner, and to say he wasn’t looking forward to it would be an understatement. It would just serve as yet another opportunity for him to argue with his dad, worry his stepmom, and stress out his little brother.

At least Junsoo would be home this time. He missed that kid.

On another note, Lisa had been contacting him pretty regularly since last Friday night. Not that it irritated him so much; she wasn’t annoying in the slightest. Just that he didn’t hold anything for her, and therefore felt like he was wasting her time. He wouldn’t be hitting her up to sleep with, and he sure as hell wouldn’t be taking her on any dates if he could help it, so guilt about the entire situation had begun to set in.

Especially with Taehyung by his side constantly, getting riled up every time she so much as spoke a word in his vicinity.

Speaking of Taehyung, he looked less put-together than usual today, falling on Jeongguk’s reliable go-to of a hoodie and sweatpants, although he managed to pull off the look with his pretty face.
“Jeon Jeongguk!” a sharp woman’s voice snapped him out of his daze.

“Um, yes, Kyosu-nim?” He straightened up, attempting to look attentive. Apparently his class had started without him realising.

“I swear, while Kim Taehyung spends most of my class asleep, you spend even more of it staring at him. Is it too much to ask you to look straight ahead for an hour and a half?”

A faint blush rose to his cheeks. “No, Kyosu-nim.”

He knew Taehyung was sitting there snickering at him, but he didn’t dare chance a look now. Besides, he didn’t even know he’d spaced out in Taehyung’s direction. It just sort of happened. But his professor made it sound like a frequent occurrence, which it most definitely was not.

An agonising hour and a half later had Seokjin hurrying out of class with a quick “Joonie wants to get lunch!” and essentially ditching him with Taehyung since everyone else cleared out just as fast.

“So, even Kyosu-nim noticed your blatantly obvious attraction to my face, huh?” Taehyung teased him, scooting into Seokjin’s vacant seat.

Jeongguk groaned. “I really don’t want to hear it. I tuned out for like one second and suddenly she’s accusing me of committing your likeness to memory.”

“Not the worst face to have stored up there,” Taehyung said with a shrug. “If aliens got ahold of you to download the human form, then they’d have the best-looking one to use.”

“Your sheer humbleness and modesty continue to fill me with awe.”

“Let it continue to fill you with awe somewhere else,” he suggested, hand creeping up his bicep.

Jeongguk shook his head but got to his feet. “It’s barely eleven.”

Taehyung frowned. “It’s never too early for ice cream, Jeonggukkie.”

“It’s- I- wait, for what?”

“Ice cream,” Taehyung repeated, pushing his chair in. “Oh my gosh, what were you thinking I was suggesting?”

Jeongguk could only stare at him. “You-” And then he saw Taehyung’s face, and the barely concealed laughter. “Fuck you, this is you messing with me.” Turning on his heel, he headed for the door in a huff.

“Now, don’t work yourself into a tizzy!” Taehyung called after him, giggling. “I’m not messing with you. I mean, kinda. I was thinking, like, ice cream and then I’ll ride you ‘til my break’s over, but if you’re not down-”

“No, fuck it, I’m down.” Jeongguk had no idea why this suddenly came so easily between them, but he figured it was better than not having him in his life. “Where do you want to go? I’m not really an ice cream connoisseur, so this is on you.”

“Oh, I’m a goddamn ice cream connoisseur,” Taehyung proudly declared, leading him down the stairs and out of the Humanities building.

“You’re so weird.”
“You like it.”

Jeongguk just rolled his eyes and followed him across campus. He refused to acknowledge liking anything about Taehyung, especially not to his face.

He couldn’t help but notice some of the looks they got, but they were more blatant than usual, most pairs of eyes only followed Taehyung.

The added attention didn’t escape his notice either. He caught him glancing at their spectators more than once before ducking his head and muttering something under his breath.

“What’s all the staring about?” Jeongguk finally had to ask as they crossed the street into the city.

“Nothing.” Taehyung shoved his hands in the loose pockets of his white hoodie.

“It doesn’t seem like nothing.”

“Seriously, Jeongguk, let it go.”

Cheek caught between his teeth, Jeongguk decided it wasn’t worth arguing with him over.

“You ever think about what would happen if people found out?”

Jeongguk looked at him, seeing the way he stared straight ahead in resolution, dark hair tangling in the breeze.

“Found out what?”

Taehyung’s gaze briefly dropped to the sidewalk. “Your secrets.”

Nerves started to prick within his veins and under his skin at the thought. “All the time. You?”

“Course. Kinda hard not to, especially when they actually do get out.”

A brief suspicion took over him. “Did...did someone find out? About your secret?”


“What makes you say that?”

“They’re all watching me,” Taehyung said quietly. “Closer than usual. And...and one of the guys I slept with last Friday night...he seemed kinda familiar, so it got me thinking...y’know, maybe.”

For some reason, the urge to protect Taehyung rushed over him, swift and unbidden.

“Don’t think about it too much. Not until you know if it really got out or not. And if it did, you point me in the direction of the guy and I’ll take care of it.”

Taehyung laughed, light and unconcerned, even though Jeongguk knew better than to believe the deceptive sounds he made. “You’re cute. My reputation’s fucked whether the guy gets some retribution for it or not. Doesn’t really matter at that point.”

“Fucked because of your job or fucked because you slept with him?”

“Probably both. More so the former than the latter, honestly. Not a single agency or competition in
the country cares who I sleep with, but they care who I dance for.”

In that moment, it finally hit him.

“Your life’s not very fair, Taehyung.”

“I don’t think anyone’s life is very fair,” he countered seamlessly. “I mean, think about it. There’s no standard. There’s barely any right and wrong. There’s just loss and gain, and all the messy extras that come with both. Kinda like ice cream,” Taehyung compared, tugging Jeongguk down a different avenue and holding the door to a quaint-looking parlour open for him. “We all make choices, and there’s benefits and drawbacks to everything.”

Jeongguk stepped inside, waiting for Taehyung to follow him into the cool room before reflecting, “You’ve given it a lot of thought, haven’t you?”

Taehyung shrugged, making his way up to the pastel blue counter. “One might go so far as to say too much.”

The girl at the counter greeted Taehyung warmly, waving and chatting with him about his day. She seemed only a bit older than them, and she clearly knew Taehyung well.

He must come here a lot.

“Hyung meet Yuri-noona, noona meet hyung. Or he also goes by Jeonggukkie when he’s not being a stuck-up—”

“Okay, that’s enough,” Jeongguk soothed him before he went off on a tangent in public. “It’s lovely to meet you, noona,” he greeted her with a polite dip of his head.

“You too, Jeonggukkie,” Yuri teased. “It’s rare to see Taetae bring someone in. Keeps to himself mostly, you know.”

Jeongguk shot him a look, under which Taehyung just shrugged innocently. “Oh yeah, he’s a real loner this one. Can hardly get him out of the dorms.”

He watched as Taehyung just nodded vigorously, blatantly indulging his sarcastic lie.

“Well, good thing someone dragged him out, then,” Yuri said good-naturedly. “So, what can I do for you boys?”

“Single-scoop apple with strawberry syrup for me in a dish, please, waffle cone on the side. And…” Taehyung turned to him, sizing him up. “He’ll do—”

“I can order for myself,” Jeongguk interrupted.

“No, hold on, I wanna test something.”

Jeongguk arched an eyebrow, but let him test his theory.

“Go on, then.”

Taehyung turned confidently back to Yuri, ordering, “And two-scoops of vanilla red bean for him in a dish, please.”

Jeongguk couldn’t explain the amount of irritation he felt knowing Taehyung remembered his favourite ice cream order down to the way he held it.
“C’mon,” Taehyung whined, elbowing him as he dug out his wallet. “Tell me I got it right.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because I absolutely did and you’re just too stubborn to admit it.”

Jeongguk shook his head, but a chuckle escaped him. Thinking fast, he plucked Taehyung’s wallet out of his hand and shoved it back in his pocket. Before he could protest, he got out his own and left their total, plus a generous tip because Yuri seemed genuinely sweet, on the counter.

Taehyung stared at the money on the counter, crossing his arms. “You didn’t have to pay. I’m not bringing you here for charity.”

“And you didn’t have to order me two scoops,” he replied easily. “So I figured, if I’m getting more ice cream than you, I should probably pay.”

“I...I ordered you two because you’re allowed to eat more than me…” Taehyung trailed off, uncharacteristically quiet. “You don’t gain weight as fast.”

Feeling strangely guilty, Jeongguk explained, “And I’m paying because I want to.” And because he realised Taehyung was having a way worse day under the surface than he let on, he asked, “Do you want to walk or sit?”

“Um…” Taehyung glanced anxiously out the window, as if he could feel the judgemental looks awaiting him. “Sit.”

“Then why don’t you go find us a seat?”

Taehyung hesitated at the kindness in his voice, obviously uncomfortable with it, but eventually took it in stride and just nodded, heading for the back of the parlour.

The moment he was out of earshot and Yuri had returned to the counter, Jeongguk inquired, “Could I get another scoop of apple?”

She flashed him a knowing smile. “Of course you can,” and added his requested scoop on top of the other, drizzling strawberry syrup to make a fruity concoction. “I meant what I said, you know,” she commented as she rang him up. “He’s never brought someone here, and I’d say he’s been coming at least once a week for the past year. Half the time he doesn’t even eat, but he’ll order something from the lunch menu to take home. Usually he just sits back there and works on assignments.”

Jeongguk glanced over at him, seated by the far bank of windows, nose to his phone once again. “Would you believe it if I told you he’s probably the most popular guy on campus?”

“From the way he acts?” she asked with a contemplative tilt of her head. “No. But from the way other people talk about him? Yeah. His name’s been passed around here enough times.”

Taehyung would never know the true extent of his popularity. Then again, maybe that was a good thing. If he knew, he might never relax, always on edge about anyone and everyone’s opinions of him.

“Makes sense,” Jeongguk finally said, grabbing both of their dishes and making sure to balance Taehyung’s waffle cone on top. “Thank you, noona.”

Yuri beamed. “Of course.”
He picked his way carefully between the cluttered white tables, and set Taehyung’s ice cream down in front of him.

A part of him couldn’t believe it. Couldn’t believe he was sitting in an ice cream parlour at eleven-thirty in the morning with Kim Taehyung.

Another part of him couldn’t believe they hadn’t been doing this for years.

Taehyung glanced up from his phone. “Thank-” His eyes narrowed when he spotted the dish. “Jeongguk, I told you. I can’t eat that much.”

Jeongguk just placed a spoon by his dish. “You can, and you will.”

Shaking his head, Taehyung muttered, “Seriously, you want me all bloated bouncing on your dick?”

Feeling his cheeks heat up at Taehyung’s words, Jeongguk nervously looked around the empty shop. “Could you like...not say shit like that in public?”

Taehyung laughed, breaking off a piece of his waffle cone to dip. “I didn’t take you for a prude, Jeon.”

“No, not...not that. The…”

He watched as the realisation sunk in.

“The gay shit,” Taehyung guessed, sounding unfairly unimpressed.

Jeongguk sifted through his ice cream with his spoon, unable to meet his sharp gaze. “Yeah.”

“’Course,” he mumbled. “I just...no. Forget it. Never mind. It’s none of my business.”

Taehyung angrily jammed another piece of waffle cone in his ice cream. At least he appeared to have forgotten about the extra scoop.

“What’s none of your business?” He had to ask, curiosity overtaking common sense.

Taehyung finally looked up at him, his dark stare piercing Jeongguk’s defenses in ways that made him question whether he should worry.

“What are you so afraid of?”

Jeongguk’s spoon clattered against the side of his dish.

Startled, he rushed to retrieve it, brushing him off. “Nothing.”

Taehyung laid his own spoon across his dish. “Clearly you’re afraid of something. I just don’t understand what. Practically half the campus is queer. All of your friends are out. In fact, you’re basically their token ‘straight’ guy.” He didn’t neglect the air quotes. “The people closest to you already know. So, I just don’t get it. Why bother?”

Jeongguk shoved his tongue against his cheek before stating, “You’re right. It’s really none of your business.”

A heavy silence hung between them. Then, Taehyung simply shrugged. “Fine. I’ll try and cool it with the jokes and shit, then. Sorry. Just...there are better reasons to hide, you know. Better things
“If this is more of your ‘nothing matters’ bullshit, then I really don’t want to hear it,” Jeongguk cut him off. “You might be living your life like you’re going to die tomorrow, but some of us want to actually make it. And to make it, you’ve gotta make sacrifices. So yeah, I’d rather fly under the radar and graduate without anyone’s prejudices thrown on me, even if it means keeping my secrets to myself.”

Taehyung chuckled, that same bitter sound he made that never failed to eat at Jeongguk.

“Yeah. I can’t imagine what that must be like, sacrificing parts of yourself to make it in this broken fucking world.”

Jeongguk suppressed the urge to roll his eyes, a natural defense mechanism against seeing Taehyung in pain. He’d just never realised it before.

Pushing his nearly full dish aside, he said quietly, “I’m not really hungry any more.”

“Don’t waste your food,” Taehyung chastised, although Jeongguk could see the interest in his own dish fading from his eyes.

Suddenly, an insistent vibrating came from Taehyung’s phone, screen lighting up with the contact name “Diminie” surrounded by a concerning number of hearts.

Taehyung’s hand flashed out, accepting the call.

“What’s up?”

Jeongguk didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but his volume was up kind of loud and Jimin didn’t exactly speak quietly.

“Hwang wants to see you...um, something about some photos or something. She said she tried getting ahold of you, but you weren’t answering. She kinda cornered me in ballet and demanded I bring you to her.”

He watched as all the colour drained from Taehyung’s usually golden face.

So that’s why he’d been checking his phone all day.

“Oh. Oh, yeah, okay. Cool. I’ll um...I’ll head right over.”

“Baby, if you need me to stick around—”

“No, no it’s cool. It’s um...it’s probably about the winter competition. Don’t worry about it. I’ll see you tonight.”

“Yeah...” Jimin seemed hesitant to hang up. “See you tonight. Seriously, text or call me if you need anything. I’ll bail on ballet for you. You know I’ll do it.”

Taehyung’s laugh sounded forced, even to him. “I know, I know. I’d rather you not do that, though. Bye, Jiminie.”

“Bye. Love you.”

“Mhm. Love you too.”
Taehyung hung up, and spent a moment just staring at his phone in silence.

Finally, he appeared to remember Jeongguk’s existence.

“Well, fuck me sideways, I guess,” he said, feigning cheerfulness as he got to his feet.

Concern mounting, Jeongguk followed his lead, pushing his chair in. “Is that about-”

“The fact that I’m twenty minutes away from getting kicked off the team? Yeah, I think it might be.”

Trying to be optimistic for him, Jeongguk reasoned, “Maybe it really is about the competition.”

With a snort, Taehyung unlocked his phone and shoved it under Jeongguk’s nose. Three texts glared back at him.

Coach Hwang

I’ve been trying to call you for the past two hours, but if you’d prefer to do this the hard way, I’m more than happy to meet you in my office during your break.

Coach Hwang

And as I’d hate for you to walk into this conversation unprepared, just know that I’m highly disappointed in your behaviour, and your position will be undergoing evaluation by the University company throughout the week.

Coach Hwang

This will be much easier if you simply come talk to me, however. We can discuss the matter of appeal. Please
don’t blow me off on this, Taehyung-ssi.

I’m upset, but I’m still on your side.

Just come meet with me.

“I’m pretty damn sure it has nothing to do with the competition.” Taehyung shoved his phone back in his pocket.

He wanted to console him somehow, but he had no idea where he should even start.

“She said you could appeal it, right?” Jeongguk offered. “You’ve just gotta go through with whatever she suggests and like...stay clean until then. What are even the grounds for kicking you off, anyway?”

“Depends...” Taehyung trailed off, lost in thought. “I don’t know what she has. Or who told her. But think about it. Strip clubs aren’t exactly illegal but they’re not quite legal. Neither is pro-” He swallowed, forcing the word out. “Prostitution. Which is technically what I did, and I guess have been doing, for months.”

A long pause stretched between them, one Jeongguk didn’t know how to fill.

“I mean, it’s not really pro- that,” Taehyung rushed to defend himself, voice hushed as they walked. “I’ve never slept with a patron before until Friday night. But just performing sexual acts for money is considered that, so I don’t really have any legs to stand on there. And then it’s a whole different thing if I got caught popping pills or something because you know how strict the laws are around here. Basically, whoever decided to royally screw me over just needed to stick around long enough to snap a picture of me breathing for it to be incriminating enough.”

Jeongguk didn’t even know what to make of his situation, but he understood why the word was hard for him to say. It was hard for Jeongguk to hear coming out of his mouth, especially pertaining to him. The Taehyung he’d watched grow up, known for fourteen years, about to get demoted from captain of his university’s dance team on the grounds of prostitution and drug use. It didn’t seem real.

What could he do? If he tried to comfort him, Taehyung would undoubtedly shove him away. And even now, Jeongguk didn’t know what to say. He didn’t know this Taehyung. Not really.

“I know this looks like a shitty situation, but you haven’t seen the outcome yet. Let’s just...wait, okay?”

“Yeah. Sure.”

They had crossed back onto campus now, and the reaction was almost immediate. Taehyung kept two feet of space distance between them, head held high and defiant.

“Just, whatever you do,” Taehyung murmured, slowing enough for Jeongguk to hear. “Don’t try to protect me. It’s not worth it.”

“Why would I need to-”

“Hey, Kim!” a loud familiar voice called from the grass. Mingyu jogged their way, nodding to Jeongguk, a deviant grin on his face. “Saw your pictures.”
“Yeah, you and half the campus,” Taehyung snorted, instantly defensive. “You’re not special, sweetie.”

Mingyu cocked an eyebrow. “At least we finally know why you’re such a bitch. Too tired from sucking cock all night to act like a decent human being.”

“Dude,” Jeongguk interjected. He knew Mingyu didn’t like Taehyung, not solely because of their rivalry, but simply because they didn’t get along. They never had. Still, even though they’d been friends for three years, Jeongguk couldn’t back him up on something as uncalled for as that. “That’s not-”

Taehyung held up a finger, taking a step in Mingyu’s direction. His stance was nothing short of predatory, a dangerous glint in his eyes.

“You’re right, I’m fucking exhausted. So unless you want to see something really indecent, why don’t you run that by me again, but this time, try adding a little humility. Then again, if you’re worried it’s gonna ruin your bad-boy rep, or whatever the hell you think you’re flaunting, don’t even stress it. My respect for you is already lower than the standards of your last girlfriend.”

Mingyu laughed, shaking his head. A sure sign that Taehyung’s insult stung, if Jeongguk knew anything about his tics.

“Seriously, who the hell hurt you, Kim? You run around acting like you’re the shit but everyone knows the truth now. You’re just a little slut who can’t-”

“Mingyu, that’s enough,” Jeongguk cut him off, tugging Taehyung back by his hoodie. Anger boiled in his veins, but he tried to do as Taehyung requested and not get too involved.

Surprise flashed across Mingyu’s face. “Don’t tell me you’re actually with him on this, Jeongguk. I know you two are pretending to play nice these days for the team, but really? He’s said shit to you that’s ten times worse than anything coming out of my mouth.”

Jeongguk went to snap something back, but Taehyung spoke over him.

“Yeah seriously. Don’t stick up for me just because you’re bored, Jeon. We all know you’re better than that. Why don’t you two catch up through grunts, or however jocks communicate. I’ve gotta run, I’ll catch you later. Or maybe not.”

And before he even understood what had just happened, Taehyung hurried down the sidewalk in the direction of the Performing Arts center, leaving Jeongguk to just stand there and stare after him, a whirlwind of emotions at war within him.

Had he done something wrong? Why did Taehyung suddenly just turn on him like that?

The minute he came to his senses, Jeongguk rounded on Mingyu. “What the fuck was that about?”

“What do you mean? He had it coming.”

“No, he really fucking didn’t.”

Mingyu appraised him, unimpressed. “I take it you haven’t seen the pictures, then.”

He considered lying, but realised he’d rather be in the know than out of it. “...No.”

With a sigh, Mingyu took out his phone and held it up for Jeongguk to see.
Three photos had been posted on Twitter through an anonymous user, their first and only post.

Although the lighting was in fluctuating shades of magenta and blue, Jeongguk could clearly see a zoomed-in photo of a platform. A crystal pole extended from floor to ceiling, around which Taehyung had his body twined. Rather than his gold top, Taehyung wore nothing but tight red and black shorts, fishnet tights, stiletto boots, tattoo on display, and a collar-like red and black choker around his neck. Again, more makeup than usual highlighted his face, lips glossy and red while his eyes were lined, but he was still unmistakably Taehyung.

Mingyu swiped left to show a different photo, an unidentifiable finger pressed to Taehyung’s lips. One could infer what was happening here, but the pills weren’t explicitly shown, and therefore, Taehyung couldn’t be convicted over it.

Jeongguk winced when he saw the third photo; still at the club, it seemed, but in a different section. Some sort of private room. Taehyung was kneeling between the legs of some guy, whose face had been conveniently cropped from the photo.

“Explains some things, doesn’t it?” Mingyu joked, pocketing his phone.

He couldn’t even pretend to join in, feeling sick to his stomach.

“I already knew,” he eventually said. His feet followed Mingyu of their own accord, still unable to challenge his friends even when he knew they were wrong.

“You knew he was a stripper and didn’t say anything?” Disbelief filled his voice. “Really? You?”

“It wasn’t my secret to share.”

“Like he wouldn’t have hesitated if it were yours,” Mingyu scoffed.

Jeongguk shook his head. “He wouldn’t have said a damn thing if it were mine, actually. Taehyung’s good at that. Keeping secrets. Or at least, the ones that matter.”

“Didn’t realise you confided in him nowadays.”

His comment, albeit sarcastic, raised a few questions for himself. Since when did he put so much stock in Taehyung’s discretion?

Truly, he’d never stopped trusting him, he realised. Taehyung had his secrets for years, all of them, but he never once worried that he’d let them out. He just knew that some level of mutual respect still existed between them. It had to, or else they would have ruined each other years ago.

Then again, he didn’t have nearly as many of Taehyung’s secrets. In fact, he’d learned more about him in the past three months than he had in five years. It made him wonder how much of his personality was real, and how much of it he’d been staging since he was sixteen.

“I never stopped confiding in him.”

He didn’t notice he’d spoken aloud until he caught Mingyu staring at him, dark brows drawn together with questions.

“Forget it,” Jeongguk muttered. “I still have three hours to kill until Digital Editing. Let’s go wake Yugyeom up.”

Although Mingyu readily agreed, Jeongguk suggested it as nothing more than a distraction. He
really didn’t care about hanging out with them right now; he wanted to be waiting outside Hwang’s office to hear the verdict on Taehyung and his position on the team. But apparently, he wasn’t wanted. Taehyung had made that pretty damn clear with the one-eighty he pulled before bolting.

So as usual, he’d just wait for Taehyung to make the first move.

~*~*~

“You have five minutes to explain yourself,” Coach Hwang stated, unable to even acknowledge the photos on her desk.

Taehyung lifted his chin. “I work. It’s not that difficult of a concept to grasp.”

“You know, I get it, Taehyung-ssi. I do. You’ve always acted different from your peers, setting impossible standards for yourself while painting on a persona that, frankly, sells yourself short on both talent and work ethic. And I don’t know how large of a role this... job of yours plays in that, but the minute it starts impacting your life here on campus is the minute I can no longer tolerate it.”

Furious, Taehyung argued, “How is this in any way affecting my life on campus?”

“Your behaviour, Taehyung-ssi!” Coach Hwang snapped. “You’re only passing half your classes and you’re starting fights with other students every two minutes!”

“Ever consider that I’m just ridiculously incompetent and confrontational, and it has nothing to do with my job?” Taehyung retorted. If these were the grounds she planned to kick him out on, she’d have to try a hell of a lot harder than that. She couldn’t kick him out based on his personality traits, for fuck’s sake.

“See, this! This is exactly what I’m talking about. You put yourself down while attacking everyone around you simultaneously, and the environment you create is nearly impossible to work in.”

Oh, and you figured that out from the three practices you’ve attended all semester? he wanted to reply, but figured more sarcasm wouldn’t help his case.

“I-I’m sorry,” he said with a sigh, massaging his temple. “I didn’t realise it was such an issue. But they’re not related. That’s just...that’s just me. It’s all me.”

Sympathy filled her eyes, and it set off a nauseous reaction in him. He didn’t want her sympathy. He didn’t want anyone’s sympathy.

Returning to her seat, his coach gestured for him to do the same.

“Could you perhaps tell me about your situation?”

“What situation?”

“How...” she gestured to the photos. “How all this came about.”

Taehyung laughed, a sharp, cold sound. “If I knew that, we wouldn’t be having this little chat.”

“Not the photos. I mean, your choice in occupation.”

“Oh.” He glanced towards the window, watching as students crossed campus three floors down. “It’s not really a story worth sharing.”
“Taehyung-ssi, I want to help you, but I need you to open up to me a little.”

Arching an eyebrow, Taehyung inquired, “I’m off the team regardless, aren’t I? Does it really matter?"

She exhaled, broken and frustrated, tucking in a lock of hair that escaped her dark ponytail. “Just because you’re no longer part of the dance team.”

_No longer part of the dance team._

“-doesn’t mean your problems are unimportant.”

“I don’t have a problem,” Taehyung said shortly. “I’m fine. It’s cool, honestly. This just gives me a chance to prioritise more. Get another job.”

“You can still appeal your situation if you have a defensible case to present,” his coach argued.

Self-loathing began to overwhelm him.

Taehyung shook his head. “I don’t. I don’t have any excuses for my behaviour or my choices, and I’ll deal with the consequences. I appreciate your help, I really do. And I’m sorry for disappointing you. I hope the next captain serves the team better than I could have. If it helps, I’d give my vote to Taemin, but I know he doesn’t want the position. Neither does Hoseok. But I think Jimin, Lisa, and Chungha would all make excellent candidates. I just...I need to know. Is this going on my record? Will it be a legal issue? Will dance companies see this infraction?”

A sadness lingered in his coach’s voice as she answered, “Not if you step down.”

“Then, that’s what I want. I formally resign from my position.” Getting to his feet, Taehyung added, “Thanks for everything. I know I was never your first choice anyway, so I hope you find someone now who lives up to your standards.”

Coach Hwang watched him closely, as though she had something else she wanted to say, but in the end, she just nodded. “Have a good afternoon, Taehyung-ssi.”

He dipped his head, hand already on the brass door handle. “Thank you, Coach. You too.”

The moment he stepped into the hall, waves of anger and disgust crashed over him, threatening to bring him to his knees. Bracing himself against the stark cream wall, he took a steadying breath.

He would lose everything for this stupid job. He made too much money to quit.

And he’d do it without saying a word. He didn’t deserve anything more.

Tears began to gather in the corners of his eyes, and all he wanted to do was call his dad, but he couldn’t see him like this. He couldn’t even face the sound of his voice knowing all the things he’d done. But he wanted someone to hold him and tell him it was okay, he was okay, and forgive him for his mistakes. Just for a minute.

His first thought was Jimin. But Jimin had class, and besides, he would just take pity on him. Taehyung didn’t want pity; it was nearly as useless as sympathy.

He couldn’t go to Hoseok; he still had barely any idea about what he did for work. Or, at least, he didn’t until today. Everyone knew now, thanks to whatever asshole decided to just upend his life without a second thought. As if there’d be no repercussions for it, like it was all a big joke.
The only other pair of arms he wanted to fall into, had wanted to fall into for years, he couldn’t, because Jeongguk hated him, and-

No. No he didn’t.

Fumbling with his phone, Taehyung texted him with trembling hands.

Me

hey um…you

still around?

His tears almost broke when Jeongguk texted him back immediately.

Jeon

i’m at yugyeom’s

until my class at

3 but i can head

out if you want

Yes, that’s what he desperately wanted. And yet, he found himself typing:

Me

oh no lmao

don’t worry

about it.

Jeon

you sure?

Me

yeah i’m good
Jeon

how’d your talk
with hwang go

Me

like i expected
it to

Jeon

so youre really
off the team?

Me

it’s not a big
deal. i can get
another job now
so really it’s a
good thing

Jeon

that doesn’t make
it easy

Jeon

if you want to talk
about it, i can ditch
yugyeom it’s not an
issue
Me

nah i’m over it
i have a class
in an hour anyway

Jeon

...yeah okay. if you’re
sure.

He’d never been less sure of anything in his life. But he was still terrified of appearing weak in
front of Jeongguk, and he’d done an embarrassing amount of that in the past three weeks alone. So
he would just have to suck it up and get his damn emotions under control.

Still, he didn’t feel as though that text warranted a response so he just jammed his phone in his
pocket and headed downstairs. He had a little over fifty minutes to get himself together before
Gender Performance. At least he had an actual assignment completed on time today, thanks to his
“study sessions” with Jeongguk.

Yet for the first time since he came back after his dad’s hospital stay, he couldn’t stand the eyes on
him. Rather than meet the curious, mocking, and disgusted gazes of his peers, he wanted to yank
his hood up, keep his head down, and just disappear.

But he couldn’t. Better to be a stripper and proud than a slut and ashamed.

So, he held his head as high as he could while looking simultaneously unbothered, all while a
frustrating knot built in his throat and he wanted nothing more than to curl up in his bed and
wallow in self-pity.

And the moment he passed through the door to his dorm, that’s exactly what he did. Shoes off,
socks off, pants off -because who the hell wears pants in bed?- and blankets up to his nose.

Vibrations came from his phone but he couldn’t be bothered to read the vicious texts coming his
way. He’d went out with Bogum on Sunday just like he promised and made up, but his possible
reaction scared him the most. If Bogum turned him away, he really wouldn’t have anyone left to
hold him accountable. And as selfish as it sounded, he needed that. He couldn’t be his own anchor,
too easily caught up in the whims of the wind to hold himself steady.

Finally, freely, he let his tears fall. Clutching a pillow to his chest, he cried over his own idiocy and
the loss of the one thing that brought him joy in his otherwise bleak, empty life. Whenever he felt
overwhelmed or furious with the depressing turn his life had taken, he could count on dance to
stand as a break in between all that. Just as he needed someone to ground him, he needed that break
to keep his head above water.

A knock came at his door, unexpected and unwelcome.
He didn’t even bother saying anything. Whoever stood outside would take the sign that he wasn’t home and let him be.

Except the door swung open, and he had to rush to sit up and wipe the tears from his face.

Of course, he forgot to lock the damn thing.

“What do you want?” he snapped, glaring at his visitor.

“I knew it,” Jeongguk said simply, shutting the door behind him.

“Knew what?”

Another traitorous tear skated down his cheek, one he brushed away angrily.

“That you’re not as fine as you’re pretending to be.”

Taehyung turned his head away, unable to stand the sight of him while he cried. “You’re not my fucking psych. Get out.”

Unable to stand the sight of him because he’s everything he’s wanted, even while he’s in tears, and he can’t have him.

Jeongguk undid his boots, leaving them by the door. Like he thought he could just march in here and settle in however he pleased.

“I don’t have to be your psych to know what you sound like when you’re upset,” he reasoned, having the fucking audacity to come sit beside him.

“I told you,” he said cuttingly, leaving little room for miscommunication. “Get out. I don’t want your pity. I’m fine.”

Jeongguk shook his head, then had to brush his long hair from his eyes. Eyes that filled with too much warmth when looking at him. Too much for the hundreds of times they’d looked at him with nothing but contempt.

“You’re not fine, and I’m not here to pity you. I think what happened must hurt like hell, worse because it’s beyond your control, and you don’t know who to blame. So I guarantee you’re blaming yourself even though this isn’t your fault. You’re making sacrifices and it’s costing you more and more every day, and that shouldn’t be how sacrifice works. You should be gaining something by giving so much of yourself up. And you have a right to cry over that. It’s not the deal you made. And it’s not fair for the world to continue screwing you over so blamelessly.”

Taehyung knew that if he met Jeongguk’s gaze, he’d break into tears all over again. So he kept his mouth shut, eyes on the blanket twisting around his hands.

But then Jeongguk wrapped his arms around him, a sensation that was once more becoming frighteningly familiar, and Taehyung didn’t know how to keep it to himself anymore.

He let his tears fall, an ugly broken sound escaping him as he turned and let Jeongguk press his forehead to his shoulder.

Stroking his hair, Jeongguk murmured, “You’re okay. I’ve got you.”

No. No he didn’t. This wasn’t how this was supposed to go. Taehyung didn’t look to his hookups for emotional support, let alone to cry on their shoulders.
Frustrated with himself, with Jeongguk, and the mess he’d gotten them both into, he clung to his shirt and tried to compose himself.

“You should go,” he sniffed, pushing him away. “This is weird.”

Something Taehyung would almost describe as hurt if he were braver flashed in Jeongguk’s eyes.

“What’s weird about it?”

“This, Jeongguk!” Anger surged through him, and he gestured between them, astounded that he didn’t get it. “You being here. I don’t want it to be you.” Of course I want it to be you. “It’s not your job to comfort me. I like what we have right now. Anything else doesn’t make sense. We can hang out sometimes and we can fuck, but this isn’t it. This isn’t what we’re supposed to be so just...yeah, you should go. I have a class in twenty anyways.”

Jeongguk stalled, frowning as if something didn’t compute. “Look, if this is about that thing with Mingyu-”

Taehyung gaped at him. “This has literally nothing to do with Mingyu. Or anyone else. Oh my god, did you think I was mad about that?”

“Well, yeah. You sounded pissed and suddenly you were getting on me for defending you, and I thought I did something wrong, so if this is-”

“No, Jeongguk,” he emphasised, a headache forming behind his eyes. “I got on you because I didn’t think that little row was worth jeopardising your friendship with Mingyu over, so I acted like that to make sure Mingyu thought you were on his side. Everything I just said about us, I said because I meant it. Let’s just keep this casual. Besides, I’d hate to ruin your straight-boy shtick. Okay?”

He could see Jeongguk biting his cheek, a habit he’d tried to curb years ago but clearly the training hadn’t stuck.

“Yeah. Okay. That’s what I want too. I didn’t realise trying to be there for you while you’re going through something qualified as taking this too seriously, but I get it now. My bad. Just- are you sure you don’t want me to at least walk you to your class? In case someone else tries to talk shit?”

Taehyung shook his head. “You’re not my protector. And I put up with people talking shit about me without you for years. No need to try new things.”

“Right,” Jeongguk said with a sharp nod, already retrieving his kinky-ass stomper boots. “I’ll um, see you around then. And for fuck’s sake, put on some pants before you leave your dorm.”

He glanced down, only now realising he’d stripped to nothing but his white hoodie and black boxers. Not like Jeongguk hadn’t seen him in less.

“Doesn’t matter at this point. I’m the campus slut, remember?”

Jeongguk winced. “That’s no reason not to wear pants in public, Taehyung.”

Despite how shitty he felt, the teeniest of laughs slipped past his lips.

Stupid Jeongguk.

“I guess I’ll put on pants just for you. Wouldn’t want you to throw a hissy fit over me flaunting my
ass for anyone else.”

Jeongguk had the nerve to wink at him, almost making him rethink his previous statements. “You know I’m not good at sharing.”

“Wow, alright, that’s your cue to leave, golden boy. Oh, and good luck. You guys have a game tonight and tomorrow night, right?”

“Yep. Then we have three games next week.”

“Try and win, then. You’re easier to put up with after you’ve crushed someone else’s hopes of advancing.”

Jeongguk rolled his eyes. “I’ll do my best. See you.”

“Bye.”

Taehyung waited until the door shut behind him to collapse back against his pillows. Leave it to Jeongguk to make him feel five percent better about his situation just by existing next to him for a minute. Even when Taehyung acted like the world’s biggest dick to him, he just let it slide and smiled through it.

Yet another person Taehyung didn’t deserve in his life.

And although he wanted nothing more than to curl up and fall asleep, he wasn’t working his ass off to skip classes. So, he tugged his clothes back on, viciously scrubbed his face of any tears, grabbed his bag, and headed out the door.

And the first person to say a damn word to him about the photos or his captaincy would be catching a sharpened pencil up the ass.

…

Unfortunately, that first person happened to be his Gender Performance professor.

“...and take a closer look at the stereotyping of women in film up until the modern 21st century, as well as how this transition has differed and evolved worldwide. That’s all for today. Feel free to pack up. Oh, and Kim Taehyung-ssi? Could I see you after class?”

Taehyung fought the urge to sink down in his seat as every eye in the lecture hall turned on him for the upteenth time.

“Yes, Kyosu-nim.”

Gathering his items, he ignored the stares and made his way down to where his professor stood. At least the rest of his classmates had the common sense to keep their mouths shut. If nothing else, his preceding reputation should keep most of them in check.

His professor smiled as he approached, shuffling papers on his podium. Still, he said nothing to him, almost as if he were waiting for him to speak first. Students began to file out as the class came to an end.

“You wanted to see me, sir?” Taehyung inquired tentatively.
“Yes, very much so.” So he had been waiting for him to say something. “I know we haven’t spoken plenty one-on-one, as your class is rather large, but your name is one I hear quite a bit even amongst the faculty.”

Taehyung adjusted his bag, feeling uncomfortable with the idea. “Probably not all good things, then, I’m sure.”

His professor shook his head. “On the contrary, many of your instructors have nothing but high praise for you, particularly your Philosophy professor. And I did notice that you’ve been struggling in my class for the majority of the semester, but your grades have recently improved tremendously.” He slipped a document from his pile, showing Taehyung’s recent annotation and attached analysis that he completed with Jeongguk’s help. “I was particularly impressed with the detail you went into with Neale’s essay, examining the depth of the masculine identity and the counterclaims you proposed in opposition to his point.”

Oh, right. The counterclaims he’d recalled bent over Jeongguk’s desk with his dick up his ass.

Feeling his cheeks heat up at the memory, he muttered, “I got some help. I didn’t want to fall behind any more so I found, uh...a tutor.”

Technically not a lie.

However, his professor seemed intrigued. “That’s excellent, it’s always refreshing to see a student taking control of their education. Do you mind if I ask who you asked to tutor you? I’m assuming they’re a past student of mine.”

“Oh, Jeon Jeongguk.”

His professor immediately lit up. “You picked well, then. He’s incredibly smart, and he’s not afraid to challenge ideas that don’t sit well with him. His grade never once dipped below a ninety-eight. I’m glad his tutoring style is as effective as his work ethic.”

Jeongguk mainly tutored by taunting him with his wrong answers while he fucked him, actually, but clearly it was plenty effective.

Taehyung dipped his head. “He’s been very helpful, and, uh, educational. We’re friends, as well, so it hardly feels like we’re studying.”

He still wasn’t lying. Technically. Except for the small part where they weren’t really friends but they weren’t really enemies anymore, either. They became whatever they needed to be to fit their situation, which worked just fine for him.

“Good, learning should never feel like a chore. Speaking of, and please tell me if I’m crossing a boundary, but I respect you a lot for showing up to my class today. Most people in your situation would have neglected their last class on a Friday afternoon in favour of perhaps avoiding the public for a while.”

And there it was.

Taehyung faked a smile, the most sincere one he could muster. “Us men and our pride, right? If I didn’t show up, that would just be cementing the idea that I have something to be ashamed of. I don’t. I know who I am, and honestly, I’ve dealt with worse.”

Nodding thoughtfully, his professor said, “And you’re a clear-cut example of why masculine identities don’t have to all be based on the same principles. It’s a rather tiring construct, to be quite
frank, and therefore, I commend you not only for pulling your grade up significantly with this past week’s assignments, but for not allowing other people to dictate your choices. You know,” he turned from him, ruffling through his papers once more. “I do think you deserve a bit of a reward. Here.”

He extracted a blank white envelope, passing it to Taehyung. Although confusion filled him, he accepted it nonetheless.

“My wife and I had planned on seeing the Korean National Ballet’s production of the Nutcracker, as it’s that time of year, but unfortunately, a few last minute obligations came up that we can’t neglect. I’d be beyond happy if you’d accept our tickets. As a dancer, I know you’re more likely to appreciate them than anyone else. Perhaps you could bring Jeon Jeongguk-ssi along as a thank-you for his excellent tutoring. Or really, anyone of your choice.”

Shocked, Taehyung just stared at the envelope in his hands for a moment. Real tickets to the Korean National Ballet. He hadn’t seen a professional live performance since high school, so hellbent on saving every penny he could for years. And this was...for him, this was a dream come true.

“R-Really? Are you sure? I mean, there’s plenty of other students worthy of-”

“Trust me, you’re the student I can count on to ensure those tickets get used.”

Swallowing, Taehyung glanced up at his professor, afraid of how watery his eyes must look. What a stupid thing to get emotional over. Apparently, today was just a test to see how pathetic he could get.

“Thank you, Kyosu-nim.”

His professor’s smile was nothing but gentle. “Of course. Now hurry up and start your weekend.”

Taehyung bowed once more, clutching the envelope to his chest. “Yes, sir.”

He started for the door, only to hear, “Oh, and Kim Taehyung-ssi?”

“Yes?”

“Keep holding your head up high.”

A genuine smile tugged at his lips.

“Always, sir.”

As soon as he stepped into the hall, he undid the envelope and slipped out the two tickets inside. Silver lettering on blue washed paper informed him of the date and time.

Almost afraid of what he was about to do, he took out his phone. Texts from Jimin, Hoseok, Bogum, and Minho dominated his screen, but he ignored them in favour of someone else.

Me

are you free next saturday evening?
Jeon

depends. is this a study session or something else

His heart fell. Of course, Jeongguk only wanted to meet up for sex. He was just abiding by the rules Taehyung had set earlier. Still, he needed to test his luck. Worst comes to worst, he could just take Bogum. He’d take Jimin or Hoseok, but he didn’t want to have to pick between them since he loved them both too much, and he felt bad separating them.

Me

i take it you’re not interested if it’s something else?

Me

and aren’t you in class rn?

Jeon

actually i’m very interested. what’s the occasion

Jeon

and yeah but we just edit film. it’s not that difficult.
Me
it’s a surprise. but
you’re gonna like it.

Jeon
i’m both terrified and
intrigued

Me
just the way i like
you then

Jeon
you sure you’re doing
okay? you’re being
nice and it scares me

Me
stfu.

Jeon
that’s better. i’ll text
you on the bus.

Me
cool

Why did he always feel like he just ran a marathon every time he finished a text conversation with Jeongguk? They never went the way he intended, and he always ended up saying more than he meant, but to his credit, at least Jeongguk just ignored most of his idiocy.
On a far less pleasant note, he had one more person to get into contact with.

Me
two things:

Me
i want to pick up a
friday shift

Me
and do you know
anyone offering
something part-time
between the hours
of six and eleven
that meets my
qualifications

To his relief, the club’s manager texted him back almost instantly.

Jang-ssi
consider it done.
i’ll expect you here
tonight at eleven.

Jang-ssi
and i know you’re not
gonna be all over this
one but i know a
reputable guy looking
for male escorts

Sickness and anger fought for dominance within him. Unable to even bring himself to answer that
text, Taehyung pocketed his phone, zipped the tickets safely inside his bag, and headed back for
his dorm.

He wouldn’t do it.

He refused to sink to that level.

He wanted money, *needed* it faster than most people, but he refused to pay for his parent’s hospital
bills through sex. He could justify stripping. In that setting, he held all the power. Or clearly, he
did, until his patrons got him drunk, high, and reckless.

A part of him desperately wanted to know who took those pictures and leaked them for everyone
to see. Another part of him just wanted to forget it and move on. Maybe some mysteries were better
left unsolved. He had enough enemies to choose from, he could sit there and point fingers for days,
but he knew it wouldn’t come to anything. There was a chance he could ask the security people at
the club to review that evening’s footage. Hopefully they still had it.

Still, after losing his position on the team, he wouldn’t feel right doing something that wasn’t
dance-related for work. It felt like the last connection he had to himself, his own personal anchor.
He’d have hope that the universe would smile down on him and offer something out, but they
hadn’t exactly been on the best terms lately.

He would have to wait and see whether his situation was as inevitable as he thought it might be.
Perhaps, for once, he could evade sacrificing everything for nothing in return.

*Your life’s not very fair, Taehyung.*

One of many keen observations made by Jeon Jeongguk in the past three months. And Taehyung
had a feeling that the longer he let him stick around, the more of those he’d allow to poison his
consciousness.

Having Jeongguk back in his life could be good for him, and Taehyung had to confess:

The thought terrified him.

Chapter End Notes

i made this one longer because like...ten pages of smut should still allow for thirty
pages of plot right. on a more interesting note, this whole fic was inspired solely by
taehyung, jeongguk, and jin in 5th muster dimple/pied piper so if you want to know
the exact vibe i’m going for with their characters here, it’s those ones.

i had to learn so much choreography today and i want to k-word myself but we’re
working through it. anyway: twitter! and thank you for reading!
Bite My Tongue, Bide My Time

Chapter Notes

- title from billie eilish's you should see me in a crown
- also the song taehyung dances to if you want to listen to it during that scene
- here's the performance i scripted his off of but more classic-style (nsfw warning)

warnings for this chapter: homophobic language/slurs, frequent use of the words slut and whore

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sun had already begun to set by the time Jeongguk’s car got buzzed through an ornate wooden gate, rays disappearing behind the towering dark brick house, deep in the heart of Pyeongchang-dong. Pulling into the well-kept pebbled driveway, stones crunching under his tires, he parked alongside the edge of the lawn.

Sometimes, a wistfulness would take over him, a longing for his childhood home in Busan. So many memories lingered there. But the moment his world had been turned upside down with his mom’s absence, everything that reminded his dad and his new wife of her had to go, and that included the house. At least they had the decency to wait until he graduated high school to completely uproot, although Jeongguk thought it couldn’t be good for Junsoo’s development to move him across the country at such a crucial point in his life.

And almost as if his thoughts had summoned him, the front doors burst open and an eleven-year-old boy came dashing down the steps.

“Hyung!”

He could hear his shouting from his car.

A wide grin broke out on Jeongguk’s face as he killed the engine and stepped outside.

And although he knew Junsoo would complain about being too big for Jeongguk’s antics these days, he caught him as he came running down the stairs, picking up his skinny body and spinning him around.

Yelping in surprise, he clung to Jeongguk before pounding on his shoulders, laughter spilling from him. “Put me down! I’m too big!”

“You’re never too big to fly,” Jeongguk countered, but abided by his request. Once he knew Junsoo stood steady, he asked, “How’s my favourite athlete?”

“You’re never too big to fly,” Jeongguk countered, but abided by his request. Once he knew Junsoo stood steady, he asked, “How’s my favourite athlete?”

“Tired,” he complained instantly, crossing his arms. “But so good, too! We just finished our season! We didn’t win, which was kinda disappointing, but I still had fun and I made a lot more friends.”

Jeongguk ruffled his hair before heading back to the car to retrieve his bag and phone. “That’s great, bud. You always make friends easy, so I’m not surprised. I’m glad you had fun. You think you’re gonna play again next season?”
“Definitely,” Junsoo confirmed, following him, adjusting his green sweater that he’d thrown over his white collared shirt.

Damn, he did not miss dressing like that. In fact, he’d made sure to dress about as opposite of that he could get with his black ripped jeans, matching t-shirt, and unzipped hoodie. Of course, the combat boots completed his “Disappointment Son” look, hair down and messy, and as much metal as he could put in his ears.

His phone buzzed in his hand as he grabbed it out of the console. A smile touched his lips as he read the message.

**taehyungie**

okay wait

**taehyungie**

picture this:

**taehyungie**

you’re hungry.

**taehyungie**

you go to order lunch

in like america or smthng.

**taehyungie**

you got to a /sandwich/

shop

**taehyungie**

and they list fucking hotdogs on the menu.

**taehyungie**
you’re gonna be pissed

Trying not to break out in laughter, Jeongguk hurried to type back:

Me
doesn’t change the
fact that /technically/
hotdogs are sandwiches

taehyungie
you’ve said a lot of
disgusting shit.

taehyungie
but this.

taehyungie
this is the line.

The little nose peering over his shoulder didn’t escape his notice.

Pressing his phone to his chest, Jeongguk asked, “And what do you think you’re doing?”

Junsoo grinned sheepishly. “Being curious? Eomma always says it’s good to be inquisitive. And uh, I’m inquiring.”

“No, you’re being nosy,” Jeongguk corrected him. “And I know for a fact Sae-eomma didn’t teach you that.”

“I just wanna know who you’re texting,” he whined. “You’re never on your phone.”

Snorting, he swung his bag over his shoulder. “I’m on my phone all the time. C’mon, let’s go inside. I’m starving.”

“You’re starving all the time,” Junsoo muttered. “Last time you came, you took all the food out of the cabinets. I didn’t have snacks for like a week because you took them all.”

“You’ll get it when you go to university.”
“I want to get it now, though.”

“Too bad,” he replied, taking the steps two-at-a-time. “You’ve got every meal made for you all day long for another seven years at least, so you better buckle up and enjoy it. I’m about to.”

Junsoo raced after him, beating him to the door just to hold it open.

He’d always been such a good kid.

“Thanks.” Jeongguk mussed his dark hair again as he passed, exchanging his boots for house slippers. He would be a disappointment to his family. He refused to be a disappointment to all families. “Sae-eomma! I’m home!”

“Jeongguk-ah! I’m in the kitchen!” he heard called in his stepmother’s sweet melodic tone from within the house.

As he headed in her direction, his phone vibrated again.

**taehyungie**

jeez i’m sorry i didn’t think you’d take the joke so seriously

**taehyungie**

hotdogs absolutely count as sandwiches

**taehyungie**

now quit that ignoring me bullshit

Shaking his head, he stifled a laugh and pocketed his phone. He’d let Taehyung stew for a little longer. If he gave it twenty minutes, he’d be a pouty baby about the whole thing. But any longer, and he’d get angry, and as much as Jeongguk enjoyed his feisty brat, he really wasn’t in a position to deal with him right now.

“What are you smiling about over there?” his stepmom asked, peering around the archway to the kitchen.

Only now realising he’d been grinning like an idiot, he covered, “Just happy to see you. I already spun Junsoo around and if you’re not careful, you’ll be next.”
She laughed, ducking back into the kitchen and motioning for Jeongguk to follow her. “Where’d that kid disappear to anyway?”

Glancing behind him and seeing nothing but empty white hall, Jeongguk shrugged. “Must’ve had some important business to attend to.”

“I’m grabbing my soccer jersey!” Junsoo called down the stairs. “It’s got so many grass stains on it!”

“Why would Jeongguk want to see that?” his stepmother inquired, exasperation evident in her voice as she stirred the vegetables and meat simmering on the stove.

“It’s proof of how hard he’s worked, Sae-comma, of course I want to see it.”

“Exactly!” Junsoo exclaimed, practically teleporting to his side with a white jersey in hand. Indeed, it had been covered in streaks of green. Jeongguk could only imagine how bad his knee pads looked.

It made him proud.

“Dang,” he whistled, holding it up higher to examine it. “How many goals do you think you blocked this season?”

“Hundreds,” Junsoo replied easily. “Coach says I’m the best goalie he’s had in five years.”

“Coach Yun says I’m the biggest problem he’s had in five years, so I think we’re both doing pretty well.” He accepted the high-five Junsoo sent his way, grinning it his stepmother’s sigh.

“Both of you are going to give me the biggest headache I’ve had in five years! Go entertain yourselves in the living room or something!” she said, shooing them out of the kitchen.

“That took longer than usual,” Jeongguk commented to Junsoo as they made their way down the hall.

“It’s ‘cause she missed you.”

Just as he’d thought, his phone vibrated again the moment he took a seat on the cushy cream sofa.

**taehyungie**

hyuuuung

**taehyungie**

i’m sorry okay??

**taehyungie**

please stop ignoring
Me
stop pouting i wasn’t
ignoring you

Me
i just got home

Me
and thank you for
admitting that i’m
right about the
hotdog thing

taehyungie
...not pouting

This would be so much easier if he didn’t act so fucking cute.

taehyungie
and feel free to say
hi to daddy for me

taehyungie
or -pardon me-
floor leader jeon
jeongnam
Me

ew

Me

and you know if
i so much as mention
your name he’s gonna
flip his shit

taehyungie

yeah ik

taehyungie

me and your old man
have a solid history

taehyungie

i mean, it was under his
leadership that the bill
to legally acknowledge
same-sex partnerships
didn’t pass, so...

Disgust washed over him.

Me

don’t remind me.
i’m still so far beyond
pissed about it. and
fucking ashamed to be related to him.

taehyungie

but imagine how much more he’d hate me these days ohh myyyy godddd that’d be so funny

The thought alone instilled him with fear. Whether he felt afraid for Taehyung or his father, he hadn’t decided yet.

Me

yeah funny for a minute.

Me

i gtg my brother’s reading over my shoulder

Immediately, he felt Junsoo back up, acting like he hadn’t been snooping on his conversation.

taehyungie

idk your brother because he came after my time but say hi to him for me too

Me
taehyungie
call me later. i should be home
by 4:30 but if that’s too late
for you, i’ll just talk to you
tomorrow yeah?

Me
i’ll stay up. have fun at
work but please be careful
and safe.

taehyungie
when am i not

Me
literally all the time.

Me
please?

taehyungie
*sigh*

taehyungie
yes sir jeongguk
sir
Me

...  

Me

ngl i think my dick twitched

**taehyungie**

JEONGGUK YOUR BROTHER.

Feeling his cheeks heat up, Jeongguk pressed his phone to his chest and made sure Junsoo hadn’t read those last few messages. Thankfully, the kid was on the sofa and no longer paying any attention to him.

**taehyungie**

oh

**taehyungie**

well in that case

**taehyungie**

if i were there i’d do more than make your dick twitch, sir
you’ve been gone for two days

kinda miss bouncing on your big cock

Was this...was this how sexting started? He had no idea. And despite how easily Taehyung had set this conversation up, Jeongguk couldn’t exactly carry it out right here.

stop, i’m gonna have a boner during dinner and i /really/ don’t want to have that conversation

imagine how much fun
it would be if i sucked you off under a table

Impossibly warm now, Jeongguk retreated to the cream armchair opposite the sofa, doing his best to preserve his brother’s innocence.

Me
taehyung. stop.

taehyungie

sorry sir

Me

no no don’t act
cute i’ll feel bad

taehyungie

jeonggukkkk


taehyungie

you’ve gotta pickkkkk


taehyungie

i’ve got three modes and you’re not satisfied with any of them :(

Me
are those three
modes bitchy,
horny, and cute?

Taehyungie

yesss :(

He stifled another laugh. In all honesty, he’d been sort of worried about leaving Taehyung alone over the weekend after everything that happened to him on Friday. He wanted to be there for him to have someone to confide in and offer support, but Taehyung apparently didn’t want any part of that, so he’d backed off and given him space to do whatever he needed to do to feel okay.

Still, even though he’d given him space, he still worried about him.

It’s funny how quickly things change.

As time went on and they got closer again, it felt almost as if all the floodgates had opened and every feeling, memory, and sensation he’d ever associated with Taehyung had come rushing out in tidal waves. Rather than hate his smile, Jeongguk found his heart aching every time he saw it. Rather than wanting to hurt him back for insulting him, he’d begun to find every harsh word endearing because he knew Taehyung didn’t put any venom behind them.

Rather than wanting to see him zip his lips shut, he wanted to kiss them senseless.

And the idea scared him. More than he’d like to admit.

Because he knew that if Taehyung caught even a whiff of his feelings, he’d run in the opposite direction and disappear for good.

And he couldn’t lose him again.

Never again.

So he would keep it to himself. Everything. Because having Taehyung in his life at all was better than the heartbreaking alternative.

The sound of the front doors opening and shutting, and the exchanging from shoes to slippers had him rushing to get out another text.

Me

let’s stick with cute

then
Me
and i really gtg now
my dad's home

taehyungie
okay jeonggukkie-hyung
say hi for me uwu

The satiric amount of heart emojis gave him a frustrating amount of conflicted emotions.

Me
wow hated that
nvm forget the
cute thing

taehyungie
uwu

Me
goodBYE taehyung

taehyungie
.byе asshat

That felt better.

“Darling!” he heard his stepmother squeal, wooden spoon thumping against a pan. “How was your
day?"

And so the descent into hell begins.

“Fine,” a cold, deep voice brushed her off. “Where’s Jeongguk? His car is parked outside, tires tearing up the grass. He needs to move it.”

Jeongguk pocketed his phone, catching Junsoo’s eye as he put his own device away.

“Wish me luck?” he whisper-mouthed to his little brother.

“Good luck,” he mouthed back.

Taking a deep breath, he gathered his wits and strode back down the hall and into the kitchen. His father leaned against the island, dark suit still crisp, appraising his stepmother’s cooking with obvious disinterest.

“Can I help you with anything, Sae-eomma?” Jeongguk inquired politely, making sure to give his father the cold-shoulder.

She shook her head, eyes wide. “No, no, I’ve got this, thank you. However, your father is here.” She motioned to him, as if Jeongguk couldn’t see. Expensive rings flashed on her fingers in the overhead crystal light.

“I’d be happy to set the table,” he offered, still ignoring the elephant in the room.

“Jeon Jeongguk.”

His eyes unwillingly snapped to his father, hand hovering over a stack of folded linen napkins.

“Yes?”

Something akin to loathing glimmered in his father’s eyes as he stared him down.

“Don’t you have something you want to say to me?”

Jeongguk opened his mouth to respond that No, no he doesn’t but his phone vibrated once again and he figured checking his texts mid-conversation would piss him off even more. So that’s exactly what he did.

“Hold that thought,” he snubbed him, reaching for his pocket.

taehyungie

sorry sorry i’ll stop

ik you’re with your

family but do you

think i’m qualified

to be a dental

assistant
A snort of laughter escaped him.

Me

first of all: no

Me

second of all:
dentists terrify you

“Jeongguk!” his father snapped, impatient.

He glanced up, not failing to catch the anger etched in every line of his arrogant face.

“Sorry,” he said with a shrug, even though they both knew he didn’t mean it. “Taehyung says hi, though.”

The reaction was immediate, and so incredibly satisfying.

His father froze, shock, anger, and disgust flashing across his face as his hands balled into fists. Even his stepmother knew to take a careful step away.

“Taehyung who?”

Jeongguk levelled him with a pointed stare. “Kim Taehyung. Surely you haven’t forgotten him already? You know, the guy I was best friends with for a decade that you went and tormented every chance you got. That you threatened to chase from the house with a gun if he ever showed his face around here again, so afraid that he’d ‘turn your son gay’ as you so eloquently put it.”

“Jeongguk,” his stepmother intervened quietly. “Please don’t do this right now.”

“Tell that to your husband,” he retorted. “He's clearly trying to start something, and I'm sick of it. Why can't he just let him live his life without taking it so personally?”

“Because the boy’s a fucking fairy and I won’t have you mingling with people like him,” his father snarled.

“Language, please, Jeongnam.” She was pleading now, eyes darting towards the living room where her son sat, potentially exposed to all of the ugliness that she’d wanted to disappear before she settled into this family.

His father shot her a withering look, shrugging out of his suit jacket.

“Won’t have me mingling with him because he’s gay or because he’s not part of the top ten-percent?”
With a mature roll of his eyes, his father replied, “Quite a mix of both, in fact. You’re lucky enough that we allow you to attend that pigsty of a university as it is. But I won’t stand for you being around that boy.”

Jeongguk snatched up the napkins, already heading for the dining room. “I’m not a teenager anymore. You don’t get to dictate who I allow in and out of my life.”

After a tense few minutes of silence with only the simmering pan and the sounds of Junsoo’s game floating from the living room to fill the air, the four of them finally settled around the ornate cherry table.

“Did you take your overnight bag to your room, Jeongguk-ah?” his stepmother asked, a tautness to her sweetness.

Ducking his head, he apologised. “Sorry, Sae-eomma. Not yet. I’ll do that first thing after dinner. I got so caught up in seeing you and Junsoo that it completely slipped my mind.”

A forced smile tugged at her red lips. “Ah, well, there’s no rush.”

Another awkward pause, this time broken by the clinking of their wine glasses, Junsoo’s water glass, and chopsticks on elegant porcelain bowls.

“Dinner tastes wonderful,” he offered. “Thank you.”

“Yes, thanks, Eomma!” Junsoo chimed in.

“No need to thank me,” she mumbled, side-eyeing her husband. His praise was the only praise that mattered, after all.

“Jeongguk, did you hear what I was saying earlier?” His father ignored her look. “Move your car. It’s on the lawn.”

“It’s barely touching the dirt.”

“Don’t argue with me. Just do it.”

Jeongguk plucked up a strip of beef, deciding this argument wasn’t worth having. “Fine.”

More silence stretched out before them.

Yet, surprisingly, his brother was the first to speak.

“Hyung’s got a girlfriend.”

Jeongguk shot him an incredulous look. “Don’t be ridiculous. Where’d you get that idea?”

“Smiling and laughing at your phone all the time,” Junsoo responded immediately, cheeky grin on his face. “And you’ve got scratches, I saw when you took off your coat. Jaehyun-hyung said it happens when she’s giving you a massage and accidentally presses too hard.”

Ignoring the blood rushing to his cheeks, because those scratches were most definitely not from a massage but rather Taehyung’s manicured nails digging into him as they did it missionary style, Jeongguk muttered, “Don’t believe everything your hyungs tell you. I don’t have a girlfriend.”

But now his stepmother was watching him closely, and his father showed a concerning amount of interest as well, even setting aside his chopsticks.
“You know, I don’t think you’ve ever mentioned a girl to us,” his stepmother mused.

“Never been one to mention.”

“Most boys your age have had at least one girlfriend.” Jeongguk could see the dangerous glint in his father’s eyes. “I wonder why you haven’t. You’re a good-looking boy, and smart, as well. And you’re the star of your basketball team. I can’t see where you’d have trouble.”

Jeongguk knew his father had his suspicions. Has had them for years, especially when Taehyung hung around. But he also knew that if he were to confirm these suspicions, his father would disown him, and he’d be left without a method to pay his way through university.

“I just don’t really have the time,” he explained instead.

“So who have you been texting, then?” Junsoo inquired, curiosity shining in the innocent tilt of his head.

Jeongguk hated that he had to be here for this.

“My friend, Taehyung. He wanted me to say hi to you, too, Junsoo-yah.”

“You must like your friend a lot,” Junsoo noted, beaming from being recognised by one of his older brother’s friends.

He noticed his father tense.

Just because he wouldn’t out himself didn’t mean he wouldn’t toy with him a little.

“Oh, I do. I like him a whole lot.”

And he realised, for perhaps the first time in years, that he did like Taehyung. This Taehyung. Today’s Taehyung. With his wild temper, brazen attitude, and unmatched confidence. But he liked the stuff buried under the surface, too. The way he thought so intricately and carefully about everything. His defiance against life’s expectations of him. The deep introspective questions he plucked from seemingly nowhere, only to aim them at Jeongguk like his answer actually meant something to him.

But his father...his father hated him.

“If you can’t stop yourself from saying that name in my house, Jeongguk, you’re more than welcome to leave.”

His stepmother shook her head, a silent plea to stay.

The message came loud and clear. If he left, his father’s anger would turn on her and Junsoo instead.

Jeongguk rested his head on his hand, making sure to plant his elbow firmly on the table. “Sorry, my bad. It just rolls off the tongue so nicely. But I don’t mind keeping it to myself. Anyways, Sae-eomma, you told me you were thinking of investing in a greenhouse?”

Her hands were trembling. He’d have to tone it down for her sake.

“Yes, I want to be able to grow herbs during the wintertime but I don’t want to risk getting dirt all over the house.”
Nodding, he replied, “If you need any manual labour done, I’d be more than happy to stop by.”

“Thank you, darling. I’ll let you know.”

The rest of dinner passed by at an agonising pace, mostly him, his stepmother, and his brother attempting to make small-talk while his father brooded at the head of the table. Finally, when they’d cleared away the plates, him washing, Junsoo carrying, he attempted to grab his bag and escape to a guest room for the night.

“Jeongguk, I’d like to speak with you for a moment.”

Dreading whatever lecture was coming his way, Jeongguk turned slowly, and trudged after his father into the living room.

His father sat in the armchair. Dick. He was going to sit there.

But he settled for making himself comfortable on the sofa.

“What?” he asked bluntly, wanting to get this over with as quickly as possible.

Crossing his legs, his father wasted no time in saying, “Do you realise how much of a disgrace you’ve become in the past year alone?”

Jeongguk shrugged. It didn’t hurt if he didn’t let it. “Probably, but you’re welcome to enlighten me.”

“The outfits, the piercings, the attitude. Are you ashamed of who you are, or something? Ashamed of this family?”

“I’m ashamed of you,” he stated flatly. “But that has nothing to do with my choices.”

His father snorted, setting down his wine glass. “Do you ever plan on growing up?”

“That’s not something you really plan for. And if it is, I daresay you’ve yet to put your plan into action.”

“You’re my son, and I won’t stand for being treated as anything less than your father.”

“Maybe if you acted like a father, I’d treat you like one.”

An angry red bloomed in his father’s face. “And how exactly do you believe a father is supposed to act?”

Jeongguk’s thoughts immediately went to Taehyung’s father, whose smile lit up a room, who cooked for them when they came home from school and danced around the kitchen to old trot songs, who gazed at his wife with so much love they felt like the only ones in the room, who never failed to ask about his day, and treated him like his own son.

“Not…not like this,” he said quietly.

Several heavy minutes passed between them of him waiting for his father to speak and his father waiting for him to take it back.

When nothing changed, Jeongguk finally muttered, “May I be excused?”

His father massaged his temple. “Go.”
Feeling less than triumphant, he hurried back to the entryway where he’d left his bag, slung it over his shoulder, and practically raced for the curved wooden staircase.

Locating his favourite guest room, he dropped his backpack on the massive white bed and yanked back the white drapes covering the floor-to-ceiling windows to expose the orange light of evening. He still had hours to kill before Taehyung got off work, and strangely enough, all he wanted to do was talk to him.

He was the only one who would understand. Who knew about Jeongguk’s situation and kept his secret.

No one else knew who Jeongguk really was. The son of simultaneously one of the most successful and one of the most disliked politicians of the modern century, with enough money to neglect taking his studies seriously altogether if he felt like it.

He’d never talked about it openly though, never requested to be treated like the kids of his father’s coworkers because he wanted to live his life genuinely. He attended public school. He walked, biked, or took the bus home. He didn’t flaunt his money, and only ever asked as much of his father’s bank account as he could stomach, and certainly never more than he needed to survive. He never told his friends, even today. Except for Taehyung, of course.

Taehyung knew everything about him.

A lot of his lifestyle had come at the request of his mom, and despite all of the ways she’d broken his heart, he’d never stop thanking her for those decisions. He didn’t want to be one of those spoiled rich kids. He wanted friends who liked him for more than the bills in his wallet. Probably in a similar sense to the way Taehyung wanted friends who liked him for more than his face.

Maybe they weren’t so different.

Then again, they were undeniably worlds apart these days.

Taehyung lived his life barely thinking past tomorrow, whereas Jeongguk struggled not to obsessively plan for everything.

He’d never told him why, though. Why he took up the whole stripping gig. Why he was so desperate for money.

The thought nagged at him, because even though he’d firmly decided to ignore the reemergence of a few repressed feelings, he still didn’t like seeing Taehyung work himself nearly to death.

He still didn’t like seeing him cry.

And if Taehyung would just tell him why he was doing all of it, Jeongguk could help. He could give him money for whatever he needed, even if it meant forgoing food for the next six months.

But he couldn’t do anything without Taehyung opening up to him.

And at this point in his life, nothing sounded more impossible than getting Kim Taehyung to be emotionally vulnerable.

Especially not with him.

So, Jeongguk resigned himself to homework, dragging his laptop, a white t-shirt, and black sweats out of his bag. Once he changed, he settled into the firm mattress, comforter pulled around his
shoulders. He needed to finish the rough draft of his script for Screenwriting, the one he’d been partnered with Lisa on. She’d recently rounded it out, but he needed to edit, and he knew it would take agonising hours. Better to do it now, in his pyjamas and music blaring from his earbuds than later, most likely with Taehyung’s chin hooked over his shoulder, goading him into disregarding the assignment in favour of shutting him up with moans and whimpers.

If he were to be honest, he preferred the latter, but he also really needed to get this done.

Just as he opened the document, a knock came at his door.

“Yeah?” he called, yanking an earbud out.

“Can I come in?” Junsoo’s soft voice asked tentatively.

“Heck yeah, get in here.”

Junsoo immediately burst inside, throwing himself down on Jeongguk’s bed, 3DS in hand.

Jeongguk arched an eyebrow at the boy by his feet. “You planning on moving in or something?”

“I just wanna hang out in here for a while,” he appealed, pout in place and everything. “Until bedtime.”

A fond smile graced his face. “Go for it.”

While he read through their script, he chatted with Junsoo, catching up on his life, his friends, his hobbies, what games he liked, what books he’d been reading.

It felt nice, just hearing about the life of a regular eleven-year-old boy.

When he was eleven, he spent nearly all of his time at Taehyung’s playing the brand new release of Mario Kart Wii and listening to the first SNSD album on repeat. So clearly, Junsoo had more of a social life than he did, but he’d been pretty content back then with just his video games and his Taehyung.

“I like your hair, you know,” Junsoo commented as he won yet another round of Super Smash Bros. “Abeoji hates it. But I like it.”

Chuckling softly, Jeongguk pointed out, “Abeoji hates a lot of the things I do. But thanks.”

“I-I don’t know why,” he mumbled. “He never talks nice about you. Says mean stuff all the time. Eomma gets mad at him for it.”

The fact that his stepmother defended him even in his absence filled him with an unexpected warmth and gratitude.

“We’ve just never really gotten along, bud. Don’t worry about it.”

“But...I don’t want you to hate each other.”

Surprised by the sadness in his tone, Jeongguk set his laptop aside.

“C’mon, we don’t...we don’t hate each other,” he reassured him, unsure of how true his words actually were. “We just don’t agree about a lot of things. And that’s okay. There’s always going to be someone in life who has opinions that are different than yours. And I just happen to be that person for Abeoji.” Thinking of Taehyung (like he thought of anything else lately) he added,
“There are worse things. Worse reasons to hate people. Worse ways to miscommunicate.”

Junsoo blinked up at him. “University’s changing you.”

“...Maybe. And maybe that’s not so bad.”

“Wait, hyung! I got another challenger!” Junsoo exclaimed in glee, hoisting his DS in the air.

“Who do you think it is?”

Laughing to himself, Jeongguk honestly divulged, “I have no idea, but congrats.”

He listened to Junsoo play for a little while longer, until his stepmother made her way up to his room and demanded Junsoo go to bed, then proceeded to scold Jeongguk for letting him stay up past his bedtime.

Jeongguk didn’t know what his bedtime was, to be fair.

Finally able to settle in once more, he went back to drowning the world out and editing his script. Lisa was a talented writer. Jeongguk’s skills weren’t nearly up to par with hers, but he wanted to be behind a camera, not a desk, so he wasn’t too worried about it. Still, he didn’t want to leave all the work to her so he tried to do his best.

The hours continued to tick by. At some point, it started to rain, clouds blocking out the glow of the city as droplets pelted against walls of glass. The entire room became doused in its rhythm; soothing, insistent.

Four eventually rolled around, and his phone vibrated with a long awaited, and surprisingly early, text.

**taehyungie**

i’m driving home

rn.

**taehyungie**

would it be okay

if i called you while

i drive?

**me**

miss me that much?

**taehyungie**
don’t wanna be alone.

His heart always did strange things when Taehyung chose to drop his facade with him. Without giving it a single thought, he called Taehyung.

The phone swore he picked up but still the line remained silent.

“Taehyung?”

“Yeah?”

Jeongguk moved to the window, unable to sit when met with the hesitant coldness in his voice.

“Are you okay?”

A pause.

“Yeah, Jeongguk. I’m okay. Just tired. Are you?”

He had no idea where that came from. He thought he sounded okay. But then he went over the night’s events in his head, and realised,

“I don’t know.”

“I wouldn’t be okay either if I had to be in his house for longer than a minute. Did he say something to you?”

He laughed, albeit with less bitterness than Taehyung usually managed to muster. “More like what didn’t he say.”

“If you’d like to start there, we certainly can, although it might take a little longer. He probably didn’t say a lot of things. Like whether or not he believes birds are government spies, which he would know more about than most people. Or if he actually enjoys wearing those stupid tight suits which are totally unnecessary for his job. Or he probably didn’t say how amazing his son is because, unlike most people, he refuses to see it. He didn’t say that you have the biggest heart in the world because he wouldn’t know since he lost his place in it a long time ago. He didn’t say that you make him proud because even though you do, he’d never give you the satisfaction of knowing it because he’s afraid of who you might be. But if you want, we can talk about the things he did say.”

The lights beyond his window were starting to blur together, and he couldn’t tell if the excess water came from the rain or something else. All he knew was that Taehyung shouldn’t be allowed to say those things. Shouldn’t be allowed to hate him for five years and then tell him everything he desperately wanted his father to say.

“I wish I hated you.”

Only the sounds of muffled traffic came from Taehyung’s end for a minute.
“I wish I hated you, too.”

He hadn’t expected that level of honesty from Taehyung. He offered out a lot of opportunities for Taehyung to open up but he never really expected him to take them. So when Taehyung did, he didn’t know what to say next.

“...He asked me if I knew how much of a disgrace I’ve become,” he admitted, the words still echoing in his head.

“His definition of disgrace is pretty damn skewed,” Taehyung pointed out. The moment had passed. “What he considers to be a disgrace, I- other people would probably be pretty fucking impressed by. You’re talented, you pass your classes, after the little hiccup at the start of the season you’re practically guaranteed a spot in the semifinals, you’re humble, you don’t drain his bank account, and -maybe he doesn’t care about this last bit but I do so I’m saying it anyways- you’re hot as hell. Literally no room for being a disgrace there. I would know. I’m prime disgrace material.”

Jeongguk shook his head, even though he knew Taehyung couldn’t see him. The room had become stifling, but his heart swelled with the unintentional praise. “You’re not a disgrace.” As he spoke, he grabbed his jacket and headed up a second flight of stairs, through a set of sliding glass doors onto the house’s pristine veranda. The rain pounded overhead, catching on the leaves of the trees as each drop fell. A fresh, earthy, nighttime breeze gusted across his face and in his hair, but he didn’t mind.

He could breathe out here.

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed, Jeongguk, but I’ve been kicked off of my dance team, I’m barely passing my classes, and I’m a stripper. If my dad knew, he’d...”

Jeongguk knew Taehyung’s dad. And more than anything, if he knew, he’d just make sure he was safe and happy, and let him live his life the way he wanted to.

“He’d what?”

“He’d be so disappointed,” Taehyung whispered, voice thick with emotion. “And furious with me.”

“I don’t think he would be. Tae, your dad loves you.”

“You don’t understand.”

Jeongguk looked out over the shadowed lawn, resting his weight on the stone ledge. “Maybe I don’t. Help me to.”

“...I do it for him. The money. I need it for him. His hospital bills. And the ones left by my...my mom.”

And suddenly, he understood.

Taehyung didn’t just work this job because he liked the attention and enjoyed having the ability to buy himself pretty things. He did it to keep his family from sinking into bankruptcy after his mother’s passing.

“What happened to your dad?” He was almost afraid to ask.
But Taehyung didn’t hesitate in responding.

“Leukemia. Hasn’t been able to work since the middle of my freshman year.”

Both of his parents had been diagnosed with different cancers. Jeongguk had never met someone living a life as unfairly merciless as Taehyung’s.

“...I think understand now.”

Taehyung’s father would be furious to find out that he was sacrificing his youth, working himself to the ground, at a strip club to pay for his medical bills. His father would rather die than let Taehyung do something so selfless and potentially destructive for him.

“Yeah.”

“Let me help you.”

“No.”

“Please, Taehyung. There’s no reason for you to do this to yourself.”

“I have to. I couldn’t...If I didn’t earn it, then it’s worth nothing anyways.”

“That’s not true. That’s just you punishing yourself for...for what?”

“I couldn’t explain it to you. I probably couldn’t explain it to anyone.” Taehyung’s voice trailed off for a moment before he asked, “Do you believe in inevitability? That things are going to happen and there’s nothing you can do about it? No matter how hard you try to change it?”

Jeongguk didn’t want to drop it, knew he could help Taehyung if he’d just let him, but he let the change in topic slide. They would talk about it more when they were together. Instead, he contemplated his question.

Did he believe in inevitability?

It irritated him whenever Taehyung brought it up because it came with so much resignation. It felt like giving up and handing control over to the universe. It felt like not taking responsibility for his own life, choices, and mistakes.

Then again, he’d always thought that everything happened for a reason.

“No. But I believe in destiny.”

“What’s so different about it? Everything’s ripped out of your hands either way.”

“Not necessarily. If something’s inevitable, it’s bound to happen whether you want it to or not. But if it’s destiny, it gives you hope that, even if things seem bad now, there’s a reason as to why it’s happening. It’s a difference in attitude. Destiny still gives you control. You’re responsible for your own choices, but once they’re made, you know you made it for a reason. Inevitability takes all of that away. It’s dehumanising. And I’d rather be optimistic and believe the world cares enough about my life to guide me through the choices I need to make.”

The rain filled his ears, loud and natural. Nothing came from Taehyung’s side of the call. He must’ve reached his dorm by now.

“...I think destiny is kinda beautiful.”
He thought Taehyung was kind of beautiful.

“And I think inevitability is kinda frustrating.”

“Maybe I need to change the way I think about things.”

“Only enough to appreciate the things in life that are worth appreciating.”

He didn’t want Taehyung to change too much. But he was beginning to learn that, even when Taehyung did change, he still liked every little thing about him.

“How can you see the stars out there?”

He would never not indulge one of Taehyung’s whims. Peeking out from under the veranda roof, Jeongguk examined the sky. “A little. Light pollution still blocks out most of the sky, but there are a couple. Why?”

“I think about them a lot. The stars. How nice it must be to exist so far away from everything yet still have the entire world think about you and think you’re beautiful. Stars don’t have to pretend. But they can’t be too close to each other, either. And they can only cease to exist by fading out or destroying themselves. It must be lonely. And they don’t get to believe in destiny.”

Screw it.

“...I think you’re kinda beautiful.”

“Don’t say things like that.”

“I mean it.”

“No, you don’t. You think you do.”

The breeze had begun to play on his face, scattering raindrops across his cheeks and nose. The rustling of leaves roared in the wind, branches brushing together.

“I’ve known you for most of my life, Taehyung. I think I’d know whether I thought you were beautiful or not. And I do. The way you think about the world is beautiful. The way you see yourself in every star is beautiful. The way you’re not afraid to destroy yourself for the people you love is beautiful. But that doesn’t make it good. Because unlike the stars, you’re allowed to be close to other people. You don’t have to isolate yourself. And you don’t have to destroy yourself, either.”

This time, the silence scared him. He’d overstepped. He knew he’d overstepped, had told himself he wouldn’t. But Taehyung needed to hear someone say it, and he was lucky enough to be the first.

“Sometimes you shouldn’t say everything that’s on your mind.”

It stung. But he knew it wasn’t supposed to.

“That’s a little hypocritical coming from you.”

Taehyung laughed, then, and it made wearing his heart on his sleeve worth it.

“That’s true. I’ve never been very good at keeping my thoughts to myself. You, though...it’s rare for you to tell me what you’re thinking. So I guess...thanks. For- for being honest with me. And um, for saying those things.”
Maybe he hadn’t lost after all.

“Whenever you want to hear them, I’ll say them. I’ve got plenty more.”

“You’re ridiculous.”

“A little.”

“Are we...are we friends now?”

He thought about it for a minute. They did a lot of things friends didn’t do. They argued all the time, they threw insults back and forth, they didn’t talk to their other friends about each other, and of course, they’d started having an unfriendly amount of sex. But there were some things they did that friends did, too. They studied together, got lunch together, talked about their problems, and confided in each other. They trusted each other.

“Yeah,” he finally decided. “We’re friends.”

“Good,” Taehyung said through a yawn. “I like that.”

“I do, too. Was your night okay?”

“Mm, mhm. Saturday nights are good. Costume nights. I usually dress up like a kitten. Make more money. It’s nice.”

Jeongguk could only imagine.

“You’ll have to dress up for me some time,” he teased.

“If I did that, you’d nut before I got your belt undone.”

“Lucky for me, I don’t wear belts.”

“You’re right, they don’t really match the homeless gym rat aesthetic you’ve got going on.”

“You like the way I dress.”

“I like being able to undress you fast.”

“You’re shameless.”

“And you like that.”

“Yeah. I do.”

Taehyung chuckled softly, although it turned into another yawn. “What time do you get back tomorrow?”

“I’ve gotta do breakfast, and then I’m gonna take Junsoo out shopping and see if he’s interested in shooting hoops. So probably around three or four. Will you be home?”

“Should be.”

“Let’s grab a late lunch, then. And we can get some assignments done.”

“And by that you mean we’re going to attempt to get them done and I’m gonna end up bent over a desk again?”
He laughed, although that sounded pretty damn appealing. “We might make it to the bed next time.”

“Let’s aim for that. The desk is hell on my arms.”

“But the angle’s so nice.”

“Sadist.”

“Only a little.”

It only just occurred to him that this might qualify as a bit of a strange friendship.

“You know, if you want to be friends, we don’t have to fuck on the side.”

“But that’s my second favourite part.”

Confused, he asked, “Well, what’s your favourite part then?”

Taehyung yawned again before replying, “Mm, not telling.”

“Why not?”

“You’d make fun of me.”

“I promise I won’t.”

“No.”

“Taehyung, please?”

“...I like having my best friend back.”

Stunned, he said a quiet, “Oh.”

Taehyung hummed, low and delicate.

“I like having my best friend back, too.”

“You still kinda piss me off, though.”

“Oh don’t worry,” he assured him with a laugh. “You kinda piss me off, too.”

“Cool.”

Jeongguk waited for him to say something else, just looking out over the veranda and listening to the rain.

After a few minutes of silence, he realised that the noises in his ear didn’t come from the wind, but rather, Taehyung’s soft exhales.

“Tae...?”

No answer.

He’d fallen asleep.
Smiling, he considered hanging up but decided he’d rather keep him on. Keep him close.

He said one last goodbye to the rain, then headed back inside, call still going. Once he got back in his own room, he slid out of his jacket, shut his laptop, and climbed into bed.

The room went dark as he switched off the lamp on his bedside table.

“Goodnight, Taehyung. Sleep well,” he murmured to the phone next to him.

...  

“...and so I show up at work and Jang’s just standing there waiting f-for me, like he t-thought I wouldn’t f-fucking show -fuck, Jeongguk- and...”

Taehyung paused in his recitation, gripping Jeongguk’s shoulder as he caught his breath, nails digging into his skin. He didn’t mind; he more than made up for the little sting with they way he rode him, so determined to do all the work.

Running a hand down his smooth golden back, Jeongguk inquired, “You getting tired on me already? Usually you make it at least twenty minutes before you beg me to flip you over and fuck you properly.”

“Shut up,” Taehyung snapped, although the effect was somewhat lost as he circled his hips, clinging to him tighter. “I can do it myself.”

God, nothing would ever feel as good as Taehyung bouncing on his cock, so pretty with his eyes closed, lashes fanned over his cheeks, somehow trying and succeeding to hold a conversation.

“A-as I was saying, he was with this g-guy- shit, shit.” Taehyung’s hands dropped from his shoulders to his chest, bracing himself on Jeongguk’s pecs.

Rather comfortable, Jeongguk just reclined back to watch the show, occasionally lifting his hips to meet Taehyung halfway, enjoying the moans and whimpers he could tear from his throat. Still, he kept a hand on Taehyung’s waist to steady him just in case, although he’d proved familiar enough with the motions of lifting himself up only to sink back down on his cock without Jeongguk’s support these past few weeks.

“You sure you can do it?” he asked simperingly, carding a hand through his hair. “Thought you wanted to tell me about your night.”

“I am telling you a-about my night, you p-piece of shit- fuck-”

“Maybe if you’d talked first instead of throwing yourself on my lap the moment we got inside, you wouldn’t be having such a difficult time.”

Taehyung batted his lashes, feigning innocence. “But I couldn’t wait that long to get on h-hyung’s cock. My break is o-only two hours.”

He rubbed his thumb over Jeongguk’s nipple as he spoke, smirking at the hiss he earned.

“Stop that,” he growled, swatting his hand away.

Taehyung brought his hand back immediately, pinching and rolling the bud between his fingers. “Why? Is it because hyung’s sensitive?”
Jeongguk snatched his hand up and thrust his hips hard, relishing first the surprise and then bliss that washed over Taehyung’s pretty face,

“Fuck, Jeongguk, do that again,” he panted, looping his free arm around Jeongguk’s neck.

“Finish your story first.”

“Don’t wanna,” Taehyung whined. “Want you to fuck me.”

Jeongguk arched an eyebrow. “Well, that’s a shame, isn’t it? Finish your story. And don’t make me ask again. I’m not above bending you over my knee.”

Taehyung’s eyes darkened with desire.

“Actually, forget it. That’s not a punishment to you, is it? Because you love the sound of that. Love the sound of getting spanked for acting out, counting and crying so loud everyone on the floor can you hear you, don’t you?”

Nodding, he rocked back on his cock. “C-can we, Jeonggukkie? Please? I’ll be good after that, I promise.”

Jeongguk loved the sight of those soft golden thighs closing around his defined ivory ones, squeezing him so good as he clenched.

Still, he had to deny him. “No, baby. That’s too risky and you know it.”

Tears sparkled in Taehyung’s eyes and Jeongguk had to remind himself that they weren’t from pain, still conditioned to protect him.

“B-but-”

He pulled him close, pressing a kiss to the pout on his wet, red lips.

He would never get used to kissing him.

“Show me how good you can ride me and I’ll think about it for next time, okay?” he murmured against his skin, nosing along his jaw and down his throat.

“Really?” Taehyung asked, eyes wide, voice soft.

Sometimes, after a particularly difficult night at work or after a shitty time in class, they’d have sex and Taehyung would get...different than usual. He’d start out the same, mouthy, bratty, and altogether not giving a fuck, but after a while, his head would go somewhere different. Somewhere where he wanted Jeongguk to praise him, love him, punish him, and degrade him all at once.

“Really,” he promised before sucking a mark on his neck, never tiring of the way Taehyung’s skin blossomed beneath his tongue and teeth. “Now finish your story.”

Determination entered his gaze. Determined to be good.

“The man w-with Jang-ssi,” he began, bracing himself on Jeongguk once more. “Introduced himself an-and asked what I did. Told him I’m a student and I dance. Asked if...if I dance f-for the club.” Taehyung’s eyes shut again as he started to move faster. “Said yes, T-told me he was l-looking for p-pretty dancers. Owns a gay gentlemen’s club and one of their m-main dancers just quit. H-he stuck around and w-watched my set. A-after, he came up ‘n tipped me ‘n said he w-wanted to offer me a job. S-said his dancers make around two hundred m-million a year since they
d-don’t have too many c-competitors.”

Momentarily jolted out of the moment, Jeongguk whistled, “Damn, that’s a lot.”

Taehyung nodded, resting his head on Jeongguk’s shoulder as he took a minute to collect his breath.

He tried to keep himself from snapping his hips into Taehyung, even if he felt heavenly around him.

“What’s the difference between a gentlemen’s club and a strip club?” he inquired, unfamiliar with both environments.

“A GC is fancier,” Taehyung informed his clavicle. “High entrance fee. Membership, usually. Dress code. And...and sometimes the dancers h-have to double as escorts. Get paid to.”

Jeongguk couldn’t help the frown he knew appeared on his face. “Isn’t escort a euphemism for prostitute?”

Guilt filled Taehyung’s eyes. “I- kind of. But it’s safer. In this setting, at least.”

“But people are still paying you to fuck you.”

“I-in some cases, yeah.” Something in Jeongguk’s expression must’ve made him nervous, because he hurried to add, “You’d still get to fuck me for free, though.”

He nuzzled Taehyung’s messy dark hair. “That’s the last thing on my mind, angel. And really not what I’m worried about.”

“I’ll be safe,” he promised. “I just...if I split my week between this gig and my thing going on at Sin, I’ll be making so much more than I am right now. And I need that.”

“Tae, I’ve already-”

“And I’ve already said no,” he cut him off, although the words came out less harsh than usual. Almost as if he couldn’t muster the venom. “Oh, and about our date tomorrow-”

“It’s not a date.”

Taehyung lifted his head solely to glare at him. “Just using the word, don’t get your panties in a twist, golden boy.”

He didn’t mean to say it so sharply, and he felt bad almost immediately. But someone had to make sure the boundary they’d agreed on was still in place.

“Sorry.”

Taehyung gave him a pointed eye roll. “Whatever. As I was saying before I was so rudely and pointlessly interrupted, is that I have to train a new dancer at three. We should finish up right around five thirty-”

“Which is half an hour before I set our dinner reservations for.”

“Right, so I can either go do that, drive back to campus, pick you up, and head to dinner-”

“Which will take way too long.”
“Or - seriously you need to stop interrupting me- I can just meet you at the restaurant.”

“But then we’re wasting gas. You know, it’d help if I knew where we were going.”

Taehyung nipped his shoulder lightly. “Too bad. I said it’s a surprise and it’s going to stay that way.”

He’d been nursing his curiosity for a week now, and Taehyung still hadn’t given him any hints.

“Why don’t I just come with you then for the training? I’ll do homework or something while you, uh, teach a guy how to pole dance.”

“No.”

Exasperated, Jeongguk dropped his head back on the headboard. “And why not?”

“Because.” Taehyung started to attack his exposed throat as he spoke, ghosting over him with his lips and tongue. “You’ll distract me.” He secured his plump lips to a particularly sensitive spot on his neck, sucking and biting a little more aggressively than most people would, but Jeongguk loved it.

His feisty little kitten.

Tangling a hand in Taehyung’s hair, he said, “I’ll be quiet. I won’t even look at you.”

“As if you could help yourself. There’s nothing you like looking at more than me.”

He yanked Taehyung back by his hair, taking in his expectant dark eyes, long lashes, swollen lips, pretty little moles, and pink-tinted cheeks. And then he allowed his gaze to blatantly roam down his body, down his golden chest to the notes inked on his ribs and his soft stomach, tiny waist, and round hips, and the way his knees had begun to bloom red from being on them for so long.

“You’re right,” he agreed. “There’s nothing I like looking at more than you. But I’ll do my best tomorrow.”

And without giving him time to argue, he hooked his arms under Taehyung’s legs, turned, and dropped him down where he’d been sitting less than a moment ago, positions fully reversed.

Taehyung caught his lip between his teeth, blinking up at him.

“I love it when you do that,” he admitted.

Surprised, Jeongguk asked, “Do what?”

“Toss me around like a fucking rag doll. Take me however you want me. It’s hot.”

Kneeling between Taehyung’s legs, he tugged the honey-kissed skin of his thigh between his teeth before smoothing over the bite with his tongue. He continued to litter kisses up and inside his thigh just to hear the little whimpers Taehyung let fall from his lips.

“Want you to hold your legs open for me, baby,” he murmured against him.

For once, Taehyung didn’t put up a fight. Arms under his thighs, he held himself open for Jeongguk, leaking pink cock and clenching hole on display.

He liked that Taehyung wasn’t shy. Shy could be cute, but confident was magnetic. Taehyung
knew how sexy he was, and wasn’t afraid to show off. So while most people would’ve blushed in his position, Taehyung had the nerve to say, “You know, if you don’t fuck me, I’m more than capable of doing it myself. You can just sit there and watch me. That’s more than you’re doing right now.”

Jeongguk didn’t hesitate to land a smack on his thigh, although he could feel himself leaking out precome from the thought. They’d have to try it sometime.

“Adjust your attitude or the next one’s gonna hurt,” he warned.

One of Taehyung’s slender fingers dug into his skin, a red crescent blooming there for Jeongguk to see. “Make it hurt, then, hyung. Make me cry. But do it with your cock.”

His words sent heat straight through him.

“Fine,” he growled, lining himself up and sinking back into Taehyung.

The reaction was immediate. Taehyung sighed, head thrown back against the pillows. “Hard, Jeongguk. Want to feel it when I wake up.”

Jeongguk pulled back before thrusting into him, squeezing his thigh. “You’re so demanding, y’know that? Maybe one time I just want to fuck you without you making requests left and right.”

“Then shut up and do it,” Taehyung snapped.

Patience wearing thin, he decided to do just that. He gripped roughly onto Taehyung’s hips, snapping into him and setting a steady pace.

Taehyung felt incredible around him, so warm and tight, like he was made for taking Jeongguk’s cock no matter how many times they did it. But what got to him the most, made him want to take Taehyung apart and ruin him, was the way he looked. His dark hair a mess, skin coated in a light sheen of sweat, bruises, bruises from Jeongguk, both new and old decorating his neck, collarbones, hips, and thighs. How his lips parted as he panted, tongue occasionally flicking out to wet them. How his eyes fluttered shut as he got lost in the what Jeongguk made him feel.

He raised a hand to his cock, but Jeongguk grabbed it immediately, shoving it against the headboard.

“Don’t touch yourself,” he commanded. Then he brought his other wrist up along with it. “Keep them both up, understand?”

Taehyung locked them together prettily, nodding.

“Such a good boy,” Jeongguk praised, punctuating the compliment with another hard thrust, one that sent the headboard creaking. “Just for me, right, Taehyung-ah?”

“J-just for hyung,” Taehyung stuttered out, rolling his hips to meet Jeongguk. And he knew he meant it. Taehyung didn’t submit to anyone else the way he submitted to him.

Fuck, Taehyung was beautiful. The sight beneath him alone was enough to drive him crazy, something feral coming out when he saw Taehyung so open, feeling so good because of him.

He began fucking into him in earnest, wanting to pull every possible moan and whimper from his filthy mouth. Everything felt hot and electric, most intense in each place where their skin made contact, like the air before a storm. Tense with anticipation, and the release came in every shattered
sound Taehyung made and the way he arched into Jeongguk’s thrusts, wrists kept so obediently
above his head.

“So good for me, baby,” he breathed, driving into him deep. “So pretty on hyung’s cock.”

“W-wanna be pretty for you,” Taehyung admitted, struggling to form a coherent sentence. A faint
blush tinted his cheeks at the vulnerability in his words.

And finally he got shy, and over the weirdest things, but Jeongguk loved it.

“You are,” he reassured him, hiking his leg up a little higher. “So pretty. Prettiest I’ve ever seen.”

Taehyung’s lashes fluttered as he opened his eyes, so wide and deceitful. “Hyung’s pretty little
slut?” he asked, almost hopefully.

Sometimes, Taehyung stunned him. Especially during sex. He’d learned a lot about Taehyung
through sex.

Jeongguk slowed a bit, asking carefully, “Is that what you want, baby? You wanna be my little
slut?”

Taehyung nodded vigorously, trying to fuck himself on Jeongguk’s cock.

Cute.

“Sluts don’t get to come first,” Jeongguk warned him.

“Don’t care,” Taehyung said immediately. “I want to make you feel good.”

Attempting to be as gentle as possible, he eased out of Taehyung.

A heartbroken expression crossed his face, tears clinging to his lashes. So pretty and wet for him.

“W-wait, why are you going?”

“Not going. I just want you to come over here and suck me off like a good slut. Can you do that for
me, Taehyung-ah?”

Taehyung hesitated. “Can I lower my wrists?”

He really was the perfect submissive.

Jeongguk nodded, patting his own firm thigh. “Yes, angel. Good job, asking for permission. Now
come here.”

While Taehyung crawled over to him, he fistied his own cock, giving the large, swollen length a
few experimental pumps. His hand felt nice, but it was nothing compared to Taehyung’s ass or
mouth.

Taehyung settled between his legs, resting his head on his thigh as he replaced Jeongguk’s hand
with his own. Breath ghosted over his length, warm and inviting.

To his surprise, however, Taehyung grasped the edge of the condom he’d been wearing and
tugged. “Is it okay if I take this off? I wanna blow you raw. I wanna taste you.”

Jeongguk exhaled, low and thick. He had no idea how Taehyung said shit like that so naturally.

“Of course.”
With nimble fingers, Taehyung rolled the condom off and tossed it on the floor. Whatever. They’d clean it up later.

“Your cock is perfect,” Taehyung sighed, spitting into his hand before beginning to jerk Jeongguk off with it. The slide was so much nicer this way, wet and smooth.

And before he could order Taehyung to get on with it, he lifted his head and pressed a kiss to his tip. When he looked up at Jeongguk, he had precome smeared across his glossy lips.

“Fuck, you’re gorgeous,” he groaned, fingers curling in Taehyung’s hair.

The compliment seemed to fuel his desire to do well as he flattened his tongue against the base of Jeongguk’s cock, licking him to the head like an ice cream cone.

Suddenly, he’d never be able to look at their outing last week the same.

Finally, Taehyung took the head into his mouth, suckling around it and tonguing the slit. All of Jeongguk’s nerve endings seemed to rush to that spot, and he held Taehyung firmly in place. Slowly, more of his cock disappeared past Taehyung’s red lips as he took him in so well, cheeks hollowed and tongue pressed flat against him.

When he felt his length meet the back of Taehyung’s throat, he tapped his cheek.

Immediately, Taehyung’s gaze flicked up to him.

“You look so pretty like this,” he breathed, tracing the outline of his cock through Taehyung’s cheek with gentle strokes of his thumb. “My good little cockslut. Right, Taehyung-ah?”

Taehyung bobbed his head, nodding as much as he could. When he moved like that, he tightened around him and it made Jeongguk want more.

“Good. Now show me what that slutty mouth of yours can do.”

Without pause, Taehyung swallowed around him before sliding until just the tip rested on his tongue, only to take him all the way back to the hilt again. He set a steady rhythm, depththroating him as best as he could, which happened to be better than anyone else ever had.

Jeongguk knew Taehyung enjoyed being neglected and degraded in bed, but he was undeniably soft for him and couldn’t bear to watch the way he rubbed his thighs together just to bring himself some relief.

“Come up here a little.” He coaxed him forward, bringing him over to straddle his thigh. Smoothing a hand down Taehyung’s back and over the swell of his ass, he asked, “Would you like it if I fingered your pretty hole while you sucked my cock?”

Taehyung came up from depththroating him, looking utterly fucked out as he pleaded, “Please, hyung.”

He didn’t say please for many other people.

The spit that had gathered on his lips fell as he spoke, decorating his cock in sloppy strings. Taehyung flushed and hurried to smear it over his length, pumping him with even strokes.

Jeongguk sucked his finger nice and wet before circling Taehyung’s rim, teasing him. “That’s okay, baby. I don’t mind if you’re a little messy. Go ahead, drool on hyung’s cock.”
A whimper escaped Taehyung as Jeongguk eased his finger in, already slick from the lube they’d used earlier. He knew they were under a time constraint, knew that Taehyung had a class in probably less than an hour, but honestly, he didn’t really give a fuck.

Not with Taehyung’s mouth wrapped so temptingly around him, mewling and tightening his throat when Jeongguk slipped in a second finger. He thrust them in and out slowly before scissoring him open even more, stretching him out to take a third. It wasn’t really a challenge after he’d had his cock in him for the better part of an hour.

Taehyung had taken his command to heart, getting sloppy as he sucked him off, eager and messy. His messy baby. He’d noticed that, too. Taehyung liked things messy. He liked tears, and spit, and come. He particularly liked facials, a fact Jeongguk had found out last week when, the moment they got into his dorm, Taehyung dropped to his knees and ordered ‘I want you to fuck my mouth and come on my face’ which probably should’ve been his first hint as to what he was dealing with.

Maybe he’d paint Taehyung’s face today, then make him clean it up with his fingers and his mouth so he’d be thinking about it for the rest of the night.

Except they weren’t given the chance to make it that far.

A loud knock came at the door, startling Taehyung. He came off of him with a pop, deerlike eyes fixed on his door.

“Taehyung!” just about the last voice Jeongguk wanted to hear in the middle of a blowjob called. “I know you’re in there. The light’s on, and you’re a stickler about wasting electricity. C’mon, open up. I need to talk to you about something.”

He knew Taehyung wasn’t in the right headspace to think fast.

“I’ll hide in the bathroom,” he whispered, gathering up his clothes. He grabbed Taehyung’s as well, dropping them beside him. “Hurry and get dressed. Let me know when he’s gone.”

Taehyung blinked and nodded, slowly coming back to himself.

“C-coming,” Taehyung called, responding to the guy outside his door. Not exactly the context he’d wanted to hear that word in this afternoon, but beggars can’t be choosers.

An urge to kiss his head took over him, and Jeongguk wasn’t strong enough to deny it. So that’s exactly what he did, pressing a soft kiss on his hair before ducking into the bathroom.

Adrenaline coursed through his body as he locked the door and hurried to get his phone, boxers, sweatpants and black pullover back on as quietly as possible.

Hopefully the sound of Park Bogum’s voice would be enough to kill his boner, because he really didn’t feel like jacking off with that guy in the next room.

He heard Taehyung open the door, shakily asking, “W-what’s up?”

“Are you okay?” Bogum asked, concern evident in his voice. “You look kinda…” He must’ve realised exactly what Taehyung looked like because his next question was, “Wait, shit, were you getting off?”

The fact that Bogum knew what Taehyung looked like when he was getting off irritated Jeongguk more than it should have.
And Taehyung, his shameless little slut, responded, “Yep. Thanks for interrupting.”

“You know,” his voice dropped a little lower. “I’d be more than happy to help you finish.”

Anger surged through Jeongguk in hot waves. Bogum had no right to even touch him.

Taehyung giggled cutely, but said, “That’s okay, thanks Bogumie. I’ve got a class soon, anyway. Just, um, let me wash my hands.”

Jeongguk got the message, unlocking the door and hiding behind it to make sure Bogum wouldn’t see him when Taehyung opened it.

The minute the door shut behind Taehyung, Jeongguk growled lowly, “Don’t you dare let him touch you.”

Taehyung glanced at him, a mischievous smile on his face and a finger symbolising *quiet* pressed to his lips. He ran the tap loudly enough to whisper, “If he comes in here for any reason, shower curtain.”

Jeongguk nodded to show he understood, catching Taehyung’s eye in the mirror.

Taehyung winked once, dried his hands, and disappeared back out the door.

They started talking about Bogum’s cousin’s wedding again, moving farther into the room.

Unfortunately, his dick still hadn’t gone soft, no matter how much he focused on Bogum’s voice, because he kept hearing Taehyung’s sultry little purr intermixed in their dialogue. Still putting on a show for his number one fan.

Suddenly, he got an idea. Not a good one. But still an idea.

N

A minute passed, but to his surprise, Taehyung texted back.

**taehyungie**

i’m literally five feet away from you

Me

taaeee

thought you were talking to bogum
taehyungie

i am. i can multitask.
what do you want

Me

i’m still hard :(  

taehyungie

aww :(  

taehyungie

that’s so tragic :(((((  

Me

how do you switch
from begging for my
dick to being so mean

taehyungie

it’s a talent of mine.
one of many.

Me

help meee

taehyungie

jack off?? it’s not
that hard???
Me
i can’t while *he’s* talking

taehyungie
then let your boner die??
i’m not seeing the problem

Me
i can’t do that either.

taehyungie
and why not??

Me
because…

Me
you’re talking too

taehyungie
FFS.

taehyungie
you horny fuck.

Me
you should be flattered
taehyungie
you should be embarrassed

Me
taehyung pleeeese

taehyungie

No i’m not sexting you while
i talk to bogum about his
Cousins Wedding

Me

Yes you are.

taehyungie

i- i am?

Me

if you want to be a good
slut you are

taehyungie

fuck.

taehyungie

fuck fine

taehyungie

are you sitting?
Me
mhm

taehyungie
get your fat cock out then.
it’s a shame you couldn’t come
on my face like i wanted but this
will have to do

taehyungie
god, i wish you were back inside
me right now

taehyungie
you always make me feel so good

taehyungie
fill me up just right

taehyungie
i wanted to make you come with
just my mouth

Me
you almost did baby. you
were so good

taehyungie
almost wish we got caught

taehyungie
bogumie would get to see just
how good you give it to me.
watch you fuck me just like
he’s always wanted to

Me
fuck that would’ve shut
him up.

Me
and you only do that for
me

Me
right baby?

taehyungie
yes hyung

taehyungie
only you
no one gives it to me like you

so hot and rough

i love being your little bitch

Me
fuck tae that’s nice

am i making you feel good

hyung?

am i being good for you?

Me
so good baby

Me
i’m so proud of you, my pretty

cockslut

(be quiet when you come please)
Me
(was that quiet enough for you?)

taehyungie
(shit did you come already?)

Me
(WHAT DO YOU MEAN ALREADY
WE’VE BEEN GOING AT IT FOR
ALMOST TWO HOURS)

taehyungie
(don’t yell at me )

Me
(sorry i didn’t mean to )

Me
(also you’re four minutes late
to class)

taehyungie
FUCK.

taehyungie
i’m gonna book it. feel free
to leave whenever

taehyungie
bye
Me
uh bye?

Me
WAIT TAE

Me
DID BOGUM LEAVE

taehyungie

idk???

taehyungie

i sorta sprinted out the door???

Immediately apprehensive, Jeongguk gathered up a wad of toilet paper to clean himself off (poor Taehyung, at least he got to come), yanked his pants back up, rinsed his hands, and listened intently by the door. He didn’t hear any noise coming from within the dorm, so after giving it a minute, he quietly let himself out of the bathroom.

Big mistake.

“I knew it,” Bogum’s sharp voice cut over him, freezing him in his tracks.

Jeongguk involuntarily winced. “Fuck.”

“You two thought you were so sneaky, didn’t you?” He had his arms folded, toned muscles on display.

Jeongguk usually didn’t feel intimidated by other guys, but he hated that he had to look up to meet Bogum’s accusatory stare.

“But not really,” he said, aiming for nonchalance. “But we figured there was no need to expose you to that.”

Bogum arched an eyebrow. “Expose me to what?”

As if he didn’t know.
Still, Jeongguk didn’t exactly feel like coming out to Park Bogum of all people.

“I tutor Taehyung for his Gender Performance class.”

The incredulous snort he gave assured him that he wasn’t a great liar. “I could literally smell the dick on his breath, Jeon. And the condom on the floor isn’t really helping your case.”

Fuck.

Jeongguk massaged his temple, contemplating his options. “I- yeah, fine. We were sort of in the middle of something when you knocked.”

Bogum frowned. “So are you...I mean, it’s none of my business but…”

“No, I’m not with Taehyung, if that’s what you’re asking.”

He nodded, seeming satisfied with his answer. “Good. And it’s good that you know that. No one’s ever going to be with Taehyung. I think he’s made that pretty clear to the world.”

Jeongguk huffed a sarcastic laugh. “If by the world you mean yourself, Seokjin-hyung, and Choi Minho, then yeah, I think he’s made that pretty clear.”

Giving him a strange look, Bogum asked, “He hasn’t given you the talk?”

“What talk?”

“The one all of his fwb’s get. About not taking any of it seriously. Not expecting anything from him.”

“Um, not really? The first time we hooked up I told him I didn’t want anything serious and he seemed into that, and then it never really came up again. I mean, briefly in passing, yeah, but there was no glorified ‘talk’. ”

Bogum whistled, leaning against the wall. “You’re lucky, then. The rest of us had to individually sit through an hour long lecture where we bought him cake and hot cocoa and told him that we weren’t good enough for him.”

Jeongguk had to stifle a full laugh. “That sounds very Taehyung-like of him. I take it you’ve, um, done it a lot then.”

He shook his head, side-eyeing him. “Not really. Seokjin was his go-to. And then once they stopped, it’s like he suddenly forgot about all his friends. Despite what you guys think, we don’t stick around Taehyung to sleep with him. Minho and I genuinely like him. I was one of Taehyung’s first friends here, and I worry about him a lot, especially lately. And if you’re the person he’s decided he wants to be around right now, then I need to trust you to take care of him. He gets into trouble easily, and he’s kinda reckless. So just... look out for him, yeah? And don’t just treat him like a sex doll. He acts put together but underneath it all, he’s... well, he’s going through a lot. And if I hear one word about you mistreating him, I’ll break your pretty face. I don’t really care about the repercussions for the team.” And before Jeongguk could respond, Bogum clapped him on the shoulder and headed for the door, tossing a single, “I’ll see you in the locker room,” over his shoulder before shutting it behind him.

He didn’t ask one question about his sexuality.

Didn’t even act surprised.
Maybe it wasn’t as monumental of a thing as he thought. Not here, at least.

Maybe Taehyung had been right.

And Bogum had acted civil about the entire ordeal too, even going so far as to request he take care of Taehyung.

Trust him, if Taehyung would just let Jeongguk take care of him, he wouldn’t be struggling as much as he is now.

And apparently Taehyung had spared him the talk. He had no idea what that implied.

A slew of strange emotions began to converge on him, and frankly, he wasn’t prepared to deal with them right now. He’d been feeling weird about Taehyung since their talk last Saturday night. But he had a game tonight, and he couldn’t afford to mess up his headspace with unwelcome thoughts about Taehyung.

So, he shook his head to clear it, retrieved his bag from beside Taehyung’s bed, tossed out that stupid empty condom, and made his way out of Taehyung’s dorm.

He’d deal with everything else later.

Plus, Taehyung did his laundry last night so he had some putting-away to do.

“Geez, did you bring the coursework for all six of your syllabi?” Taehyung couldn’t keep himself from snickering as he watched Jeongguk struggle to zip his backpack.

“I didn’t want to be bored,” he shot back crossly, finally slinging the seemingly thirty-kilo bag over his shoulder.

“‘Bored’?” A hint of danger crept into his tone as he took a step closer to Jeongguk. “I’m allowing you to watch me dance and you have the audacity to claim you might be bored?”

Jeongguk’s eyes went wide with fear.

“No, no, that’s not what I meant! I just- you told me- you said you didn’t want me to watch…”

Taehyung tapped his foot. “And when have I ever once meant it when I told you not to do something? I tell you not to touch me, obviously I want you to touch me. I tell you not to feed me, obviously I want you to feed me. I tell you not to watch me dance, obviously I want you to watch me dance. For fuck’s sake, Jeongguk, it’s not that complicated.”

Jeongguk blinked, confusion filling his doe eyes. “But- then why would you say you don’t want me to? Why not just tell me what you want?”

Why not just tell me what you want?

Huh.

Taehyung shrugged, slipping his shoes on. “Because that would be too easy. C’mon, we wouldn’t have any fun if I told you what I want all the time.”

As Jeongguk snorted irritably at his response, Taehyung took a moment to appraise him. He’d
specifically asked him to dress up -since they were going to the ballet after all- and from there on, Jeongguk had decided they needed to do a nice dinner first because apparently that’s just a rich boy’s next thought, which meant Taehyung had to work a little harder these past few days to be able to cover his meal, but he didn’t really mind. It seemed like it would make Jeongguk happy and that was worth it for him.

The point was, he looked good. In a fitted black suit jacket, button up, and tight slacks, he looked every bit his edgy, wealthy self. But his dangling earrings coupled with his long hair were really what set Taehyung off, and he had to restrain himself from jumping him right then and there, ripping his outfit off of him before they could even leave Jeongguk’s dorm.

He, on the other hand, didn’t own anything very formal so he just settled for one of his own white collared shirts with little flowers embroidered on it, unripped black jeans, and one of Jeongguk’s suit jackets. It looked a little big in the shoulders, but he wasn’t in any place to be picky. In an attempt to class up the outfit, he added a pretty garnet necklace that belonged to his mom and small hoops in his ears.

Jeongguk pretty much upstaged him in every way, but as long as Taehyung got to look at him, he didn’t care.

“Wait, what are you bringing?” Jeongguk inquired, eyeing his bag.

Taehyung held the door open for him, answering, “My heels, duh. I can’t teach a guy to dance in heels if I’m not wearing them myself. And I get nervous keeping them at the club for too many days in a row, so sometimes they come home with me. Last night happened to be one of those nights.

“The same ones as last time?”

“Nah, I got a different pair the Monday after that. Wanted to give Seokjinnie something more fun to fuck me in.”

For some reason, he almost felt guilty talking about his other hookups with Jeongguk, which didn’t make any sense. He’d talked about Seokjin with Bogum and vice versa. But with Jeongguk, it sounded...wrong, somehow.

Whatever. He’d get over it real fast.

Although the way Jeongguk’s eyes hardened and he pressed his lips together got Taehyung thinking.

Maybe it felt weird to him, too.

“When’s your next game?” Taehyung asked as they took the lift down. He used to have the schedule memorised, but since being kicked off the dance team, he didn’t need to have it down to when the team refilled their water bottles. Jimin had replaced him as captain, and he couldn’t be happier for his best friend. He was texting Taehyung constantly, though, asking for advice and how to run things as if he hadn’t been helping him do it for almost an entire semester. Yet, somehow, he still neglected to inform him of game nights.

“Monday,” Jeongguk answered, although he didn’t seem very enthusiastic about it. A fact Taehyung wasn’t afraid to point out.

“You sound thrilled.”
“I-” His brow furrowed in thought. “I mean, we’re doing well. We should make it into semis without a problem. I guess...it’s just weird without you there, I don’t know. Like I have less to prove. I don’t feel like I’m working as hard.”

“Oh.” Taehyung shouldn’t feel as flattered as he did. “Find someone else to prove yourself to, then. I already know how talented and capable you are. Prove yourself to Bogum or something.”

He shook his head. “It’s not the same. I don’t know how to explain it. Bogum doesn’t piss me off in the same way you piss me off.”

“Damn, Jeon, when did you become such a smooth talker?” he mocked, ignoring the faint stutter in his chest when Jeongguk opened the passenger door of his Genesis for him, shutting it softly once he knew Taehyung had settled in.

Gentlemanly gestures would not work on him, thank you very much.

Especially not after the near-heartattack he’d given him with his almost-confession last week.

“Pretty sure I’ve always been a smooth talker, and you’re finally acknowledging it after fourteen years,” he shot back, even if he knew Taehyung had been making fun of him.

Neither of them could resist an argument.

“Yeah, you sound so fucking smooth when your breath’s hitching on every compliment you try and give as I bounce on your dick.”

“You sure like to talk about riding me.”

Taehyung shrugged. “I like riding you. I’d say seventy-percent of my mental capacity is typically devoted to imagining unconventional ways and places to ride you. What are your thoughts on train sex?”

Jeongguk laughed at the thought, before the mirth slowly faded from his face. “Wait, you’re not kidding are you?”

“Just trying to figure out your boundaries,” he replied, mischief in the bounce of his words. “Because, I, for one, am rather fond of exhibitionism-”

“Never would’ve guessed,” Jeongguk muttered.

“-so if you ever come to me with a fantasy, I’d be happy to carry it out.”

“My little kink fairy.”

Taehyung flashed him the cutest smile he could muster. “I try!”

Jeongguk glanced at him before remembering he was driving and swiftly focusing on the road again. “I thought we cancelled the cute thing.”

“Jeonggukkie, you can’t cancel my personality.”

“I can when it makes me want to kiss your nose.”

Panic coursed through him. “Yeah, alright, that’s the end of being cute, then.”

“Good.” Jeongguk’s grip on the steering wheel tightened, knuckles paling.
“Yeah.”

Taehyung tried to ease the awkward silence that had settled over them by asking, “So, um, got any plans for the break?”

Jeongguk lifted his shoulders, a bit of tension seeming to disappear. “Not really. I’ll figure something out once finals are over. What about you?”

“I’m going home.” He looked skyward, noticing the gathering clouds. “It’s been raining a lot lately, you’d think there’d be more snow.”

“Global warming and all that.”

He’d suddenly become less chatty.

“You’re mad at me.”

Jeongguk threw him a dirty side-eye. “I’m not mad at you.”

Taehyung crossed his arms. “Your face says otherwise.”

“Since when did you decide you were an expert on my facial expressions?”

“Since like, grade four? You might be completely muscle mass now but you’ve still got the same baby face, sorry to break it to you. I haven’t had to learn a single new thing about your expressions.”

Jeongguk then proceeded to have the nerve to roll his eyes at him. “Whatever, we’re here.”

Taehyung only just noticed they’d parked outside the club.

Time always moved faster with Jeongguk.

“Not gonna get my door for me again, golden boy?” he called after him as he turned the engine off and exited the vehicle. And before he knew it, his door was being held open for him, an exasperated look on Jeongguk’s face.

Taehyung blinked up at him, eyes meeting the broadness of his chest. “I-I was kidding.”

Jeongguk leaned over him to unbuckle his seatbelt and Taehyung couldn’t explain why he felt the need to hold his breath. And then his wrist was in Jeongguk’s hand and he was being pulled to his feet.

Somehow, his bag had ended up over Jeongguk’s shoulder.

“What kind of witchcraft do you practice?” he couldn’t help but blurt out.

Jeongguk looked at him like he was the strange one. “I have literally no idea what you’re talking about.”

“The- the…” Taehyung flailed his arms, searching wildly for the right words to express his emotions coherently. “I- forget it. I think I’m losing my damn mind.”

Jeongguk chuckled at that. “Wouldn’t surprise me.” He looked both ways before crossing the street, ever the rule-follower, still tugging Taehyung along by the light hold on his wrist. “You thought about that job offer any more?” he suddenly asked out of nowhere.
Taehyung took a deep breath. “Yeah. I think I’m gonna take it.”

“You sure it’s safe?”

He’d be a liar if he said Jeongguk’s concern didn’t endear him.

“I’m sure. I checked out all the websites and even talked to another guy who works there. It’s gonna be a good thing, Jeongguk. I promise.”

Jeongguk shrugged. “If you say so. I, um, I guess I’m happy for you. If it’s going to make you happy.”

“We’ll see, I suppose.”

They took the stairs down to Sin, metal ringing against the soles of their shoes. Taehyung had let Jang know in advance that he’d be coming in early, so the place was unlocked.

He held the door open for Jeongguk, informing him as they walked in, “It’s gonna look pretty dead right now but when it’s in full swing, it’s actually kinda cool.”

And it did look dead, with the tables empty and music not pouring from the speakers. But Taehyung knew where most of the light switches were located, so he could at least illuminate the space from some of the mounted reds and blues. It’s a shame he couldn’t get stage lights on, but this would have to do.

Jeongguk spun a slow circle, observing every inch of the club. “So this is where you spend every night.”

Taehyung followed his gaze to the crystal pole gleaming center stage. “Yep.”

“It’s cleaner than I thought it would be.”

“It’s a respectable establishment,” he sniffed. “Not like the dingy bikini bar you were probably envisioning.”

“I have heard that this place is like the crown jewel of Seoul’s gay nightlife scene,” Jeongguk admitted.

Taehyung examined the polished black floor. “‘Crown jewel’ is a little too much respect if you ask me, but to each their own. Go ahead and pick anywhere to sit. My trainee and I will probably be on stage.”

And of course, Jeongguk chose the table right front and center, plopping himself in the black leather booth like he belonged there.

It would be completely inappropriate of him to start teasing Jeongguk right then and there. And yet…

Taehyung perched on the edge of the table, remarking, “You look like one of my patron’s kids who they forget they had in tow, got too drunk, paid a dancer for a private room, and disappeared. Left all alone at daddy’s table.”

Jeongguk just arched an eyebrow. “I don’t think the dancers are supposed to hustle children.”

“If they’re overage, I can do whatever the hell I want,” Taehyung replied, leaning forward to toy
with Jeongguk’s earring. “Now be a good boy and get out your homework. Wouldn’t want you to fall behind in your classes right before finals because you’re too busy watching your least favourite person pole dance.”

Hands grasped at his hips, rough and unforgiving as Jeongguk growled, “Don’t test me, Taehyung.”

A ribbon of lust settled in his stomach. He grabbed Jeongguk’s shoulders and slid onto his lap.

“Why not? You’re so much fun to play with. My cute little golden boy. Barely takes a taunt to get you all worked up.”

Jeongguk’s hand trailed up his body leaving sparks in his wake before knotting in his hair. Lips brushed against his ear as Jeongguk murmured low and silky, “If I knew we weren’t going to be interrupted, you’d be riding me right now. I’ve let you get away with mouthing off to me too often. I’m going to punish you for it next time.”

And then he felt teeth scrape against his ear before Jeongguk bit the lobe, his tongue flicking out to lap over his earring. He knew Jeongguk didn’t miss the way he shuddered from his touch, smile on his lips as they ghosted along his jaw.

Taehyung caught Jeongguk’s bottom lip between his teeth, sucking on it until it turned red and slick. The hand in his hair tightened its grip and he released it, allowing Jeongguk to lull him into a sensual kiss. Jeongguk’s tongue held most of the control, guiding him whichever way he pleased, reigning in the hunger that Taehyung felt yearning for more, faster, harder within him. Sometimes they fought for it, and when Taehyung won, the kiss would turn heated, desperate, and messy, him more using Jeongguk’s mouth as a way to get as close to him as possible without telling him what he really wanted. But when Jeongguk won, he kept him in check, calming him, reminding him that not everything had to have the brilliance, speed, and force of fireworks. There was beauty in patience, a reward in savouring what’s in front of you.

And yet, they rarely kissed. Especially during sex. It happened maybe once or twice, but it stood more as a filler than anything else. It felt too intimate. Too genuine. They could feel too much of each other when they kissed. Emotions laid bare, insecurities lingered like gloss on their lips. He felt Jeongguk’s fear of being discovered. Jeongguk felt his fear of being loved.

It was too much.

He broke the kiss, chest rising and falling rapidly as he looked at Jeongguk and the dark desire in his eyes, just as breathless as him.

“I-”

And then he noticed that they had an audience.

A tall dark-haired boy lingered by the stage, cheeks pink, desperately trying not to draw attention to himself and gaze very clearly averted from them.

“Hi, honey!” Taehyung called out cheerfully, still fully seated on Jeongguk. “Are you my trainee for the afternoon?”

The boy slowly let his eyes wander their way. “Um, I think so? Are you V?”

He didn’t miss the way Jeongguk’s eyebrows shot up. Well there was that cover blown.
Taehyung pushed off of Jeongguk, getting to his feet. “That would be me, but you can call me Taehyung.” Sauntering over to the boy, he asked, “And you are?”

“Sehun,” he offered hesitantly, bowing his head to him.

“Cute.” Noting Sehun’s bag, he remarked, “I hope you brought something to dance in, babe, because those jeans aren’t going to cut it.”

His hands clenched on the strap. Poor nervous little thing. They’d have to break him out of his shell real fast. “I was sort of hoping we could do the tour first?”

“Oh, we are,” Taehyung purred. “But you should probably get used to walking around this place without too much on.” With that, he shrugged out of his suit jacket, setting it on the table. He slipped his shoes and pants off as well, taking the opportunity to stick his ass out for Jeongguk, who he could feel watching him. “Mind folding these for me?” he asked, tapping his clothes, stripped down to just his strappy white panties. They covered everything they needed to cover, thank you very much. He left his shirt in place, though, allowing it to hang past his thighs.

Jeongguk contemplated his request, end of his pen tapping his lips. An assignment had made its way onto the table. “I don’t know, I’m kind of busy.”

Taehyung gave him his best pout. “Please, Jeonggukkie?”

A sigh escaped him. “Fine.”

“Thanks!” Turning back to Sehun and seeing him still fully clothed, Taehyung prompted, “Well? C’mon, there’s no need to be shy in front of me. We’ll be working side by side real soon. And you don’t have to be shy in front of Jeonggukkie, either, even though he’s the world’s biggest prude.”

A sharp smack landed on his ass.

“Rude,” Taehyung snapped.

“Don’t be a brat,” Jeongguk replied nonchalantly.

“Whatever.”

As Sehun undressed, Taehyung did his best to watch with disinterest. He didn’t want to make the guy uncomfortable but he also needed to adjust to having eyes on him as he took his clothes off. The moment his shirt came off, Taehyung could already guess which sort of patrons he would appeal to. He had abs for days and toned, muscular arms.

Taehyung elbowed Jeongguk. “He could give you a run for your money. Look at him.”

Sehun’s face flushed an even brighter pink at his lack of discretion.

Jeongguk barely looked up. “Then beg him to fuck you against the wall.”

Now they were just putting the poor kid through the ringer.

“Why would I do that when I like you the most?” Taehyung whined, trying to appeal to him and get back on his good side.

“Taehyung, if you don’t start behaving yourself, I’m going to go wait in the car.”

“Fine, fine, I’m going,” he muttered. “You look good!” Taehyung informed Sehun, referring to his
tight black shorts. “Did you bring shoes?”

As he spoke, he snatched his own clear heels out of his bag, brushing his thumb over their fluffy pink straps.

Sehun nodded and held up a pair of black starter stilettos for him to see.

“Perfect.” Taehyung gave his approval. Once they were both in their shoes, Taehyung motioned for him to follow him. “So, Sehun, tell me about yourself.”

“I’m, um, a student at KU. I’m twenty-two, in my last year of undergrad.”

“Damn, KU, huh? Congrats. What are you doing here, then?” He led him down the hall beside the stage.

“Dad found out I was gay and kinda pulled the money for my tuition. I’ve gotta make it up somehow and I’ve been dancing on the side of my studies for a couple years so I figured I might as well give this a shot.”

Taehyung rubbed comforting circles on his back. “I hear a lot of stories like yours around here. But that doesn’t make it hurt any less. I’m sorry you’re going through that. But I hope we can offer you more than just a job. We’re kinda like a family around here, and hopefully with time, you’ll feel like this is a safe space for you.”

With a soft push, he opened the changing room door.

“This is where we get ready before sets, take breaks when we need them, and get way too competitive in dumb games. Everything on that rack there is up for grabs; clothes, accessories, whatever. We share those. And Jang-ssi will give you a locker in case you want to keep your stuff here. I personally don't recommend it just because our shit is expensive and although I trust everyone, I don’t like risking it, but that’s entirely up to your preference. I store a lot of makeup here, though, and if you’re running low on anything, one of us will be happy to help you out. Other than that, there’s not much else to this room.”

Sehun didn’t seem too overwhelmed yet. “Cool,” he replied, following him back out into the main room. Taehyung led him over to the private rooms then, showing him each room, what made them different, what stayed standard.

“There’s only one room without security cameras in it, which is this one,” he said, holding back the beaded curtain to room number eight. “Not a single patron knows that, however, and it’s best if you keep it that way. I’m sure Jang-ssi talked to you about this, but what you do in these rooms is entirely up to you and how much you’re looking to make. Pretty much every guy who’s not one of your regulars is gonna be happy with a dance and pay what’s expected of him. But if you have a set of regulars that you’re comfortable with and that you know won’t exploit you, you can charge for other things, too. And if you’re planning to do anything super wild, I recommend you do it in this room. Unless you’re concerned for your safety in which, number one, try not to engage at all and get help, but number two, definitely stay in a room with a security camera in it.”

He’d become pretty familiar with room number eight in his time working there. Hopefully, Sehun didn’t have to get to know it nearly as well.

With another wave of his hand, Sehun traipsed after him, right back where they started.

“Alright, so obviously this is the main room. We’ve got our big stage here for the night’s main sets. Usually those will be done by the most experienced dancers, but we try and leave one of the
side poles open for a newbie every night. You’ve gotta sort that out yourselves, though. Seniority’s kind of a big deal here, so try and get close with the people who have been here the longest, which would be Kwangsu-hyung and Baekhyun-hyung. Oh, and me, I guess, but we’re already best friends, right Sehunnie-hyung?” Taehyung reached up to ruffle his hair as he spoke.

Sehun gave him his first real smile of the afternoon. “Right. So then, these poles…” he gestured to the ones decorating the floor.

“These ones are for semi-intimate shows. When you’re working a table rather than the whole floor, but they don’t want the full experience of a champagne room. You can still make pretty good money at these. Better, on some nights, because the stage is all about spectacle. This is more private, and it gives you a chance to charm with just more than your body. Half of our job is to chat these guys up, convince them to give us more money than they planned because we’re just so damn irresistible, you get it?”

“I think so, yeah.”

“Sweet. There’s a bar back there, and sometimes we carry drinks when we’re understaffed or a guy might tip you well if you go and get a drink for him. Requests for body shots aren’t totally uncommon, so be prepared. I think that’s about it on the floor. Come up here.” Taehyung hoisted himself onto the stage with as much grace as he possessed, still feeling a pair of eyes very much on his homework. “What do you know about pole dancing?”

Sehun’s eyes scanned the crystal pole center stage up and down. “The basics, I guess. Jazz was mostly my thing but I tried to pick up a few beginner moves when I started considering places like this.”

Taehyung hadn’t expected him to be a total beginner since Sin rarely hired people without dancing experience, so all of this didn’t surprise him.

“I just...I’ve never seen a full set. Like an actual stripper’s set. I have a feeling it’s different than how it looks in a pole dancing class.”

A soft laugh slipped past his lips. “You’re right, it is different. First of all, none of us are thirty-something year old white women. So most of the videos you find online aren’t going to be super helpful in how you should be moving your body. And the classes taught by men focus a lot on floorwork, which isn’t really what we’re known for here. But all of us dance differently. Baekhyun spends more of his time on the edge of the stage working the crowd than he does on the pole. I spend most of my time on the pole because I like showing off. I’ll usually intro on the floor then move up. In fact, my feet rarely touch the ground. I like flips and pivots because I think they’re more fun. It’s just about finding what works for you.”

Sehun nodded, although he was chewing his lip. “Could you, um, show me? Like, what one of your sets looks like?”

Taehyung relaxed against the pole, gaze slipping past Sehun to Jeongguk, whose attention had completely snapped to him. “After you show me what you know,” he decided, pushing off the pole. “I’ll play some music. If you need to get familiar with the pole while I do that, feel free.”

“Got it.” Thankfully, Sehun was agreeable.

He hopped off the stage and returned to Jeongguk’s table to get his phone.

“Thought you were doing homework,” Taehyung noted, flicking through his playlists.
“What makes you say I’m not?”

Slowly, Taehyung made his way around the table, dropping himself right back in Jeongguk’s lap, this time facing the stage.

“Just a feeling.”

“I hate to break it to you, pretty baby, but I’ve finished an assignment in both film study and cinematography.”

Pretty baby. Jeongguk’s pretty baby.

He liked the sound of that more than he should.

Taehyung turned, nosing Jeongguk’s neck. His scent was seductive, hints of plum and freesia overlayed with something masculine. A spice of some sort. “Is that so?” he murmured against him.

“Mhm,” Jeongguk hummed. “You’re awfully touchy today, did you notice?”

“It’s because I don’t usually get to touch you in public.”

“Well, it’s a good thing you’re getting it out of your system now, then. I want at least two feet between us at dinner.”

Taehyung pushed off of him, grumbling, “Yes, sir. You gonna watch us?”

Jeongguk examined Sehun for a moment, watching as he adjusted to the grip of the pole and the way it hooked on his shoes. “I’ll watch you. I don’t care much for pale muscular kids.”

“You realise you’re a pale muscular kid, right?”

“That’s why they’re not my type,” he snorted. Another tap landed on his ass. “Now go do your job. I don’t want to be late.”

“Yes, sir,” he repeated, connecting to the club’s bluetooth and enjoying the way Jeongguk bit his lip every time the word left his mouth. Smooth and sexy R&B poured from the speakers, bathing the club in an entirely new atmosphere. “Does this music work for you, Seun-hyung?” he called up.

“Yep, this is fine.”

A bit of confidence had entered his voice. Taehyung liked that.

“Then go for it, honey. And don’t worry- I’m not a very tough judge. I can talk you through it, too, if that’d be easier.”

Sehun nodded. “Yes, please.”

“Alright, first just show me how you walk.”

He found the rhythm of the music rather quickly, taking his time to walk around the pole, which in itself, was a very important step. A dancer’s relationship with their pole was important; they needed to keep their position aligned and maintain good posture, and the way the toes were pointed made a difference in how they presented themselves. Taehyung could tell Sehun was familiar enough with keeping in line, but his shoulders weren’t rotated back as far as they could be. Then again, he was probably more of a stickler about these things than most strippers because he trained
in other professional fields.

“Lovely. How does your sit look?”

An arm hooked around his waist. Taehyung shot Jeongguk a look, but allowed himself to be pulled back into his lap. He felt warm, heartbeat steady.

Sehun caught the pole and gave himself a little height before settling into a cross-legged sit, making sure to show Taehyung that it was hands-free. No flaws there.

“Very clean. What spins have you learned?”

“Fireman, back hook, and spin-to-stand. Those are the ones I’m good at, anyway.”

Those were pretty much all a beginner needed in their toolkit.

“Perfect. Show me.”

Sehun did as he was asked, executing each individual spin correctly. He made sure to give them the right amount of space they needed, and his muscles flexed handsomely as he moved. Taehyung could already tell that he was going to be popular.

He gave him some tiny applause. “I’m assuming you already know your floorwork and we don’t have to go through that? Legs, splits, grinding, all that?”

He lowered himself back to starting position. His nerves appeared to have almost vanished completely. “Yeah, I think I’ve got that covered.”

“Sweet! There are some more moves that I’d be happy to teach you sometime during the afternoons, but that can wait. Do you still want me to show you a full set or are you feeling satisfied with what we’ve gone through today?”

Sehun rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly, coming down to join them. “I kind of want to see a set. Just to know what it looks like around here.”

Taehyung tugged Jeongguk’s arm away from him, getting to his feet and unbuttoning his shirt. “That’s fine with me.” As he picked his phone up again, he said, “I’m going to show you a more floor-heavy routine because that’ll be easier for you to pick up on. It’s important for you to play to your audience as well, even with your music choice. I always check out the crowd before I give Hojin -that’s our dj- my songs for the night. If I see a lot of older guys, I usually lean more towards R&B. But if I have a younger crowd, I might throw in some sexy pop songs. Today, my audience is Jeonggukkie. And Jeonggukkie likes Billie Eilish. So-” he selected a song and tossed his phone back down on the table. “-that’s what I’ll be dancing to.”

The opening slide of metal on metal rang out just as he leapt onto the stage.

He started seated on the edge of the stage, legs crossed, tossing his head back as her grit-on-gold voice glided over the room. Working his legs in the air, fluid as water. A heavy pause in the vocal gave him space to stand and sweep his shirt off, bending provocatively to set it on the floor. And then as the beat rose, he spun into a slow handspring, grinding on the floor as he came down only to flip into a vertical rotation, spreading his legs wide before bringing them closed.

Arching his back, he pushed onto his hands and knees, sweeping his leg out then dropping to the floor, grinding as his cheek pressed into the glossed tile. The beat was pounding, insistent, deadly.
He’d memorised this set a long time ago.

Flipping up to sit braced on his heels, he dragged his hips in a tempting circle, carding a hand through his hair and biting his lip.

This was so much more fun when he had someone to impress.

Another rotation put him facing the pole, ass out as he bent down only to tease his way back up. He laid back and brought his leg with him in a vertical split before rising to one knee, tossing his hair.

Jeongguk kept his long and messy for the aesthetic. He kept his long and messy for the sex appeal.

Rolling to the ground, he brought himself up on the pole in a back curl, touching his toes just to prove he could. Then he pulled himself up to stand, straddling the pole for just a moment before pushing back. He kicked his leg out and then up in another vertical split, swaying his hips as he moved. Once he caught the pole, he hooked his elbow into a full floater spin, rotating his body and pulsing in and out with the beat of the song.

Catching Jeongguk’s eye, he spread his legs in a V before switching his hands to go into a closed inside leg hang. When his legs fell open again, he didn’t forget to run a hand through them, teasing himself briefly, then landing back on the floor in a squat. He twitched his hips to stand, caressing up his thighs.

He did this routine often. But it had never felt so high-stakes before. Jeongguk watched his every move with a predatory hunger barely concealed. His pen lay forgotten on the floor; he’d clearly dropped it.

What a shame.

Taehyung continued to slide his hands up his body, brushing along his nipples, up his throat, in his hair. Reaching behind him, he caught the pole once more, spinning through an extended skater before dropping to the floor. On his knees, he tossed his head back, nipping at the air, a coy smile on his lips. Then he crawled forward, tantalisingly slow, opening and closing his legs with every pulse of the song’s hi-hats.

When he rose up to his knees, he fell to his side and somersaulted back until he rested against the pole. From here, he made sure he held Jeongguk’s gaze as he braced his feet on the floor, legs open for him to see, twisting and spinning along with the lyrics of the song. His chest rose and fell as he touched himself everywhere he knew would get a reaction from him, tongue flicking out over his lips.

‘Come over baby. I think you’re pretty.’

A finger between his legs beckoned him. Jeongguk bit his own lip, taking an involuntary step forward.

‘I’m okay. I’m not your baby. But if you think I’m pretty…’

With a wink, he rolled back and grinded against the pole as he pulled himself up to stand. A beat of silence before the chorus.

‘You should see me in a crown.’

Glass glided through his hands as he caught the pole and continued to scale it, spinning as he went.
Pole between his legs, he spun faster, inverting from a jade, to an archer, to a music box in only a few counts. Not wanting to deny Jeongguk any view of his ass, he flipped into an Eros, holding on only by the crook of his knee as he spun. Lifting his leg behind his head, he went back into music box before rotating to the floor, coming out onto a headstand and flipping to land in splits right as the music stopped.

Luckily, he wasn’t too out of breath, although that set required an exhausting amount of upper-body strength. “Something like that,” he told Sehun as he got to his feet.

Sehun stared at him, shock written on his face. “I-I can’t do that.”

“Yes, you can. The only hard spin I pulled there was the music box. And I guess, if splits aren’t an everyday thing for you, then the jade might hurt, too. Other than that, though, I can probably teach you a similar set next week. I won’t give you mine because it’s mine, obviously, and I use it a lot, but we can come up with something together.” Taehyung bent down to retrieve his shirt, buttoning it up and actively avoiding Jeongguk’s gaze.

Now, Taehyung wasn’t shy. Not by any means. But what if that hadn’t been good enough to impress him? What if he’d been expecting more?

“Taehyung.”

A rough note had entered Jeongguk’s sweet tenor.

He swallowed, but kept his eyes fixed on his buttons.

“Is there anything else Jang-ssi wanted me to show you? Any other rooms or policy stuff?” Taehyung asked Sehun loudly.

The way Sehun kept flicking his attention between him and Jeongguk didn’t escape his notice. “Uh, no, I don’t think so. I think that was it.”

“Wonderful. You’re welcome to get dressed and head out then. When’s your first shift?”

Tension lay heavy in the air but he did his best to ignore it.

“Next Friday. Manager-nim was kind enough to let me start on a weekend night.” Sehun offered his hand to help him down without breaking a heel. Taehyung gladly accepted it, sliding off the stage.

He nodded. “That’s smart. Your debut will be a bigger deal, then. I’ll be working, too, so if you need anything, feel free to ask me.”

“Thanks, sunbaenim.”

Taehyung waved him off. “Taehyung-ah is fine. You’re older than me and I don’t really care about seniority in terms of years working here.”

Sehun gave him a shy smile. “Oh, okay cool. Sorry, I sort of thought you were older. I’m uh-” he glanced over in Jeongguk’s direction. “I think I’ll head out now.”

Suddenly, Taehyung felt the very strong need to be protected. “Are you sure?” he rushed to ask, practically tripping over himself to follow Sehun to the door. “You’re welcome to stay and ask any
questions-"

The look he gave him was nothing short of pitying sympathy. “No, I’m all out of questions. And I
think if I stick around any longer, your boyfriend might kill me.”

“She’s not my boyfriend,” Taehyung hastily clarified, even if he was only met with a look of
disbelieving skepticism. “But um, yeah, sure. Thanks for showing up. I’m excited to work with
you.”

“Me too.” Sehun gave him a short bow and disappeared out the door.

And he was left alone with a wild animal.

Slowly, he turned to face his executioner, still wholly unprepared to see Jeongguk sitting in that
leather booth like he owned it, legs spread wide, one arm thrown over the back, and a dangerous
gleam in his eyes.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Taehyung decided feigning ignorance was his best bet.

But Jeongguk had no interest in playing games.

“Why don’t you tell me?”

Taehyung took a few tentative steps closer, checking his phone. “Our reservations are in-”

“Half an hour,” Jeongguk finished for him. “Which means we have plenty of time for a little chat.”

“I was actually thinking about stopping by the store if we had a few minutes. I need to get-”

“It can wait.”

Oh, he really wasn’t in the mood to play.

Taehyung set his phone down, attempting to locate his oppositional attitude. “You’re being rather
snippy with me all of a sudden. Did I do something to make little Jeonggukkie mad?”

Jeongguk’s jaw clenched. “You know exactly what you did. And you’re going to tell me.”

Leaning against the table, he examined his nails. “I haven’t the slightest idea what you’re talking
about.”

“Taehyung.”

As if saying his name would make him behave.

He located his pants, unfolding them and shaking them out.

Jeongguk watched his every move, gaze sharp and heated. “You’re so lucky I don’t have the time
to take you on this table.”

Taehyung didn’t feel particularly lucky. In fact, he’d never had table sex before.

“Can’t get it up that fast, old man?” he mocked him.

Quick as lightning, Jeongguk’s hand was in his hair, forcing him to his knees, pressing his cheek to
his thigh. A very obvious bulge pressed back. His unfolded pants fell to the ground.
“That’s not really the problem, sweetheart.”

Taehyung turned his head slightly, mouthing along the outline of his erection.

Merciless, Jeongguk yanked him back.

“Don’t,” he growled. “You’ll just make it worse.”

Now that he was here, he felt no inclination to stop.

“But I didn’t get to finish the job yesterday,” Taehyung whined.

Jeongguk’s pretty pouty lips curled into a wicked smile. “I didn’t realise you were so desperate to make me come.”

Taehyung made sure to breathe right over his hard-on as he said, “I always want to make you come. Wherever. Whenever. I’m not picky.”

“Oh, is that what you want? Want to suck me off until I forgive you for acting like such a slut up there? Showing off just because you knew it’d get me going?”

He’d never wanted anything more.

“Please, hyung? You can use my mouth however you want, make me do all the work or use me as your little fuckhole. I’m sorry for showing off, I want to make it up to you.” Taehyung nuzzled his bulge, brushing over it with his lips.

But Jeongguk yanked his head back, something sadistic shining in him as he said quietly, “Well, that’s too bad, isn’t it, Taehyungie?” And suddenly he was standing, leaving Taehyung to blink up at him from his knees as he remarked, “Put your pants on. I don’t want to be late.”

He’d never felt more humiliated, turned on, and frustrated at the same time.

“What are you even trying to punish me for?” he snapped, snatching up his jeans and getting to his feet. “Because I know it’s not about the dance.”

“Let me know when you figure it out,” Jeongguk tossed over his shoulder, zipping all of his assignments back into his bag.

“You’re so mean,” Taehyung spat, angrily yanking off his heels and shoving his legs through his pants. He’d had to borrow Jeongguk’s shoes, too, not in possession of anything remotely formal. His feet were a little bigger but he made it work, jamming those on as well.

Jeongguk appraised him, some of the cruelty fading from his eyes. “You used to throw tantrums exactly like that, y’know.”

“Did not.”

“Did too.”

And although he was extremely mad at Jeongguk for making him get on his knees for no reason, he slipped his arms through the sleeves of his suit jacket as he held it out for him.

“At least let me hold your hand,” Taehyung complained. “That’s not gay, that’s just friendly.”

Jeongguk slung both of their bags over his shoulders, shaking his head as he strode over to the
door. “I’m not holding your hand.”

“Oh, so you’ll call me your pretty baby but you won’t hold my hand?” He hurried to catch up.

“Never said you were *my* pretty baby.”

“But you’ve called me your baby, your good boy, and your slut, so I feel like I get to hold your hand.”

Jeongguk’s steps faltered for a second, but he rushed to hold the door like nothing happened.

“I’m not holding your hand, Taehyung,” he stated again, more firmly this time.

Taehyung just rolled his eyes as he passed, resisting the urge to kick the door between his legs just to watch him jump. “Whatever.”

“Am I supposed to lock up?”

“Nah, Jang-ssi should be here right around six.”

“Cool.” Jeongguk pulled the door shut and followed him up the stairs back onto street level. “You know, my friends all think I’m dating someone.”

“Why’s that?” Taehyung asked carefully, not sure if he wanted to know the answer.

Jeongguk avoided looking at him as they crossed the street. “Because of the amount of time we spend together. Obviously, I don’t tell them that I’m hanging with you.”

“Obviously,” he echoed.

“Even Yoongi got on my ass about it,” he continued. “Said if I don’t stop leaving the dorm and coming home at ass o’clock in the morning, then he’s throwing my key out the window.”

“That’s nice of him.”

“Yeah...my dad was being a dick too last weekend, asking me constantly about girls. Oh, and Junsoo noticed the scratches you left on my back -thanks for that by the way- so now my whole family definitely thinks I’ve got something going on. I’m kinda scared honestly. Like, I’ve never brought a girl home and I think my dad’s starting to figure it out.”

Taehyung paused, hand over the door handle to his Genesis. “And if he did? If he figured it out?”

Jeongguk hesitated, too. “I-I don’t know. It would depend. On how he acted, really. If I didn’t think he would disown me and toss me out on the streets, then yeah, I’d come out. But that’s not very likely. I felt for that guy and his situation. I don’t want to end up like that.” He slid into the driver’s seat, leaving Taehyung no option but to follow.

“But he was still happy,” he said quietly, buckling his seatbelt. “Money doesn’t equal happiness, Jeongguk.”

“That’s not it. I don’t know if it’s worth severing my relationship with them just for them to know who I prefer to sleep with. I don’t want Junsoo to lose his big brother. And my stepmom needs me to act as a barrier between her and my dad.” Taehyung had to admit, his reasoning was admirable.

“Maybe I should just get a girlfriend and fake it,” Jeongguk sighed, frustrated. “At least ask someone to come with me for dinner or something. I bet Lisa would go, and my parents would like her.”
A tide of something painful and constricting rose in his throat and coiled in his stomach. He suddenly found it hard to swallow. “Yeah,” he managed. “They probably would. And then when they start talking about you not marrying anyone, you can just ask her. And when they start talking about you not having any kids, you can just ask her. Easy. Totally simple. What a way to live your life. Your future’s really looking like what you’ve always talked about it being.”

Jeongguk side-eyed him from the driver’s seat. “Why are you suddenly so pissed about it? It’s not your life.”

Taehyung bit his lip. “You’re right, it’s not. Forget it. Do whatever’s going to make you happy, Jeongguk. It’s none of my goddamn business.”

“Just tell me why you’re angry.”

“I’m not. I’m over it.”

“Yeah, you sound over it.”

“Are you going to be happy?” The words tumbled from his lips.

Jeongguk thrummed his fingers on the steering wheel. “I don’t think it matters.”

Taehyung couldn’t bring himself to look up from his lap as he muttered, “It matters to me.”

Another heavy silence passed between them, this time layered with open-ended questions and the never-ending threat of miscommunication.

Finally, Jeongguk shattered it. “Don’t say things like that.”

“I mean it.”

“I don’t care. I want to be friends with you, Taehyung. Don’t ruin it.”

Ignoring the hurt his words echoed in his chest, Taehyung just said, “Yeah. Sorry. Forget it. Like I said, none of it’s any of my business so I’ll just keep out of it.”

“That’s probably for the best.”

“Can we just move on? I know arguing is sort of our main pastime, but I’d like to get along with you tonight.”

Jeongguk hesitated. “Yeah. Of course. I, um...I’d like that, too.”

Luckily, they didn’t have much time to spend sitting awkwardly, as they arrived to the evening’s designated restaurant soon after.

Taehyung feared for his wallet a little bit seeing the modern glass and wood exterior of the building but felt reassured knowing he’d worked for the money to eat here. He wanted to have a good night.

And once again, Jeongguk was there opening his door for him, playful smile fully restored.

Oh, he thought he was so funny. Taehyung whines about something once and all of a sudden it’s a thing. Fine. He can use this to his advantage.

Taehyung tried to return his smile, but knew it didn’t work from the way Jeongguk started
laughing at him, shutting the door and leading the way inside.

“You seem familiar with the place,” he commented as they headed in.

Jeongguk shrugged. “I like it. You’ll see why.”

Even as they were greeted by their hostess, showing their table, and brought water, he still didn’t get it. The place had a cheerful, contemporary atmosphere of neon lights on dark and light woods and unassuming black walls decorated with elegant monochrome photographs.

And then their menus were placed in front of him, and finally, he got it.

“Wait, it’s- it’s cheap,” Taehyung spluttered, not believing the prices listed next to the delicious-sounding entrees.

“You really think I would ask you to come to some stuffy steakhouse with me?” Jeongguk seemed almost offended. “I’m not an asshole, Taehyung. And besides, I hate places like that anyway. The food here is great.”

Taehyung snapped his menu shut, glaring at him. “No, you are an asshole because you didn’t tell me it was going to be cheap. I worked extra hours this week to have money to eat.”

To his surprise, Jeongguk looked crestfallen, doe eyes wide and apologetic. “Oh, shit, I didn’t even think about that. You said you were surprising me so I wanted to surprise you, too. I’m so sorry, it really didn’t even cross my mind.”

He couldn’t be mad at him. Not when he looked like that.

“It’s fine,” he mumbled. “It just means I won’t have to take on as much next week. Which is good because, y’know, finals. I should maybe study for a class or two.”

Jeongguk still didn’t look completely done beating himself up over his mistake, but chuckled nonetheless. “Maybe one or two. Any of them you’re actually looking forward to?”

Taehyung thought about it for a minute. “Yeah, actually. My jazz final. It’s my favourite style of dance, and since being off the team, it’s like the only time I get to choreograph and perform real routines. I’ve been working on this routine for most of the semester and I’m really excited to showcase it. Plus, it’s competitive, and I enjoy a healthy competition. I’m also not too worried about my Dance Pedagogy final.”

“Your what? What’s a pedagogy? That sounds like it should be illegal.”

Trying not to snort his water, Taehyung answered, “It’s dance instruction and research. So my final is just teaching a class and then writing a self-reflection. And thanks to the work I did with you guys, I’m not nervous about teaching anymore.”

“That’s great,” Jeongguk replied enthusiastically. “I’m glad you got something out of those lessons, too.”

“Yeah. Are you guys still working with the dance team? Like, did Jimin pick them up or something?”

Jeongguk shook his head, long hair escaping its position behind his ears. “No,” he said, tucking it back. “Coach Yun and Coach Hwang kind of got into a fight about it, actually.”
“What do you mean?”

“Well, Hwang told him you were removed from the team but said Jimin could pick up the practices since he was the new captain. Coach didn’t like that. He told her he’d requested Kim Taehyung, and that he didn’t give a shit who the current captain was. And then she got pissy, saying you’d violated every code of conduct imaginable, but Coach said if she really cared, she would’ve tried harder to keep you on the team and help out with your situation. Her attitude kinda reached its boiling point then and she stormed out, saying the dance team wouldn’t be practising in the gym and yeah, that was sort of the end of it.”

Warmth rushed through him, fondness for the basketball coach and his loyalty.

“I’ll have to thank him,” Taehyung murmured, shyly tracing the rim of his glass. “But clearly you guys don’t need the practices anymore.”

Jeongguk leaned back, closing his menu. “I guess not. We’re having a pretty good season. But I kind of miss the Monday practices. They were the only time that the whole team felt like it was truly together. It was nice.”

“Come up with a supplemental activity,” Taehyung suggested. “Something that none of you are really good at, but requires teamwork to do.”

“I’ll think on it,” Jeongguk agreed.

“What about you? Any finals you’re looking forward to?”

“Film 129, Avant-Garde film,” he answered instantly, entire face lighting up. “Oh, and cinematography! We all got to shoot individual short silent films and we’re going to be presenting them film-festival style. I’m pumped. I worked really hard on it and I’m actually pretty proud of the way it turned out. I got to film in a bunch of neat locations and I liked the added challenge of silent film because it meant it was up to us to convey our message, theme, or story with the cinematography itself rather than the words of actors.”

Taehyung’s heart swelled with something unnamable when Jeongguk talked about the things he loved. A beautiful shine entered his eyes, and his lips were pulled into the most stunning smile, nose scrunched so preciously.

“Can I see it sometime?”

Jeongguk blinked. “See what?”

“Your film.”

“My- you want to watch it?” Surprise was written across his face, an uncharacteristic shy quality to his voice.

Taehyung felt himself smile, warmer than he would’ve if it were voluntary. “Of course I want to watch it. It’s something you poured your heart into, you’re proud of it, and it’s important to you. Why wouldn’t I?”

“I...I guess that makes sense.” Jeongguk ducked his head, examining his closed menu. “Um, I’ll show you the next time you’re over. If you want. I don’t want to cut into your sex schedule.”

“I’d prefer to watch your film than ride you for an extra ten minutes.”
Jeongguk looked up at him, nose crinkled in amusement. “Now you’re trying to seduce me.”

Taehyung leaned forward, teasing, “We can even talk about which cameras you used, and the process you went through to settle on filters, and how long it took you to decide on what angles captured the sequence perfectly, and—”

“If you keep talking, I think I might fall in love.”

They both froze as soon as the words left his mouth.

“I’m joking, obviously,” Jeongguk hastily amended his statement.

“Duh.” Taehyung laughed it off, beyond grateful when their waiter finally showed up. He waited for Jeongguk to order and then seconded whatever he got because, honestly, he hadn’t really read the menu.

“You didn’t even look.” Jeongguk sounded scandalised as he called him out.

“I- yeah, alright, I didn’t look. You distracted me!”

“And here I was, thinking I’d picked a place that you’d actually find food you really liked, only for you to not even read the menu.”

Taehyung lifted a guilty shoulder. “We’ll come again. I promise. Besides, I usually like everything you like, so it’s fine.”

Jeongguk’s eyebrows shot up in skepticism. “And what exactly did I order?”

“I...have no idea.”

“Unbelievable,” he snorted.

Taehyung reached across the table, flicking his forehead. “Now you’re just being difficult for the sake of being difficult.”

“Ow!” Jeongguk complained, massaging his temple. “You shouldn’t flick people in restaurants.”

“You shouldn’t be a dick in restaurants.”

They passed the rest of their meal in much of the same manner. Casual banter, as usual, composed the majority of their conversations, but sometimes they hit on other things that sort of spun Taehyung’s world off its axis. Jeongguk just had such a complex way of thinking about life that, even though he hated to admit it, he found himself wanting to be a part of that. He had so much optimism and found purpose in every little thing. Taehyung wondered how he managed to be so pessimistic about his own life. He advocated for hope and love, and yet didn’t think he deserved either. It was heartbreaking, and frustrating, and inspiring all at once. This side of Jeongguk felt new to him. The Jeongguk he’d known before had been so idealistic, in awe of everything and nothing. He existed in a single state of wonder. But the Jeongguk in front of him had grown up. He contemplated his role in the universe and struggled with the concept of identity. He wanted to belong, but didn’t know what he wanted to belong to. He felt an obligation to be the person everyone else thought him to be, but feared losing himself in the process.

Jeongguk was beautiful, and so much more than the person Taehyung had been trying to reduce him to in his own head for years.
Their drinks and meals came and went, and although it tasted delicious and certainly lived up to the standard Jeongguk set, Taehyung couldn’t tell you what it was. He’d been too engrossed in listening to Jeongguk speak to even pay attention to the food he was putting in his mouth, movement more mechanical than anything.

“Hey, I meant to tell you—” Taehyung’s attention refocused with those words. Jeongguk was rubbing the back of his neck, a sheepish smile on his face. “Your dance earlier was incredible. Like, obviously it was sexy as hell, but beyond that, there was artistry behind it. Performance. I’ve seen strip shows and pole dancing stages, but that...that had substance to it, and I respect that a lot. Plus, you have to be so physically fit to pull some of that stuff off and I was really impressed. I wanted to tell you right after you got off stage, but my horny brain kind of interfered with my normal brain, so sorry about that.”

“Oh.” He hadn’t been expecting a compliment. “Um, thanks. That was one of the first sets I made. Obviously, I’ve added to and modified it since this is my third year doing it, and I can do a lot more with my body now than I could back then. But it’s still a fun one to perform. I just wanted to give Sehun-hyung a standard, and show him how you can work with your sets as you get better. Although,” he added as an afterthought, “I was perfectly happy with your horny brain’s reaction.”

Jeongguk shook his head, but he still looked a little embarrassed. “You deserve more than just me telling you how much I want to fuck you. You hear that a lot, and not just from me.”

“But I only care when it’s from you.”

The words left his mouth without consulting with his head first.

“Oh…” Jeongguk set his water down, frowning.

Trying to cover his mistake, Taehyung tacked on, “It’s just because you’re the only person I actually sleep with, so y’know, obviously I’d care.”

“Right.” Suddenly, Jeongguk narrowed his eyes in confusion. “Wait, I’m the only person you sleep with?”

“I mean, yeah. I know you’re probably hooking up with other people but—”

“I’m not,” he interrupted. “I mean, there’s no reason for me to. Why would I have anyone else when I can have you?”

Taehyung stared at him as he knew a visible blush rose to his cheeks.

*Why would I have anyone else when I can have you?*

The question shouldn’t tear him to pieces as much as it did.

Unable to look him in the eye, Taehyung cast his gaze around the room, desperately hoping their waiter would appear with their bills.

The universe took pity on him for the first time in his life, waiter seemingly materialising out of nowhere to hand two checks off to them.

Thankfully, they were able to laugh at a bird attempting to steal an empty bag off the sidewalk so the awkward silence didn’t last too long. Once they got to his car, however, Jeongguk realised they had a problem.
“I don’t know where we’re going,” he reminded him, drumming his fingers on the hood.

Taehyung grinned, mischief in his eyes. “But I do.”

“That doesn’t help me at all.”

Sensing his chance, Taehyung leaned across the hood, propping himself on his elbows to look up at Jeongguk through his lashes. “Gonna let me drive your fancy car, golden boy?”

Jeongguk reached down to ruffle his hair, cooing sugar-sweet, “Not a chance in hell, baby.”

Taehyung braced his hands to roll his entire body on the hood, kneeling as he tugged on Jeongguk’s shirt like a toddler. “Please, Jeonggukkie! I promise I’ll go slow! And if we stand here arguing about it any longer, we’re going to be late. I don’t want to ruin the surprise, please? Please, please, please?”

He sighed, long and hard, a sure sign of his resignation. “God, you’re so damn lucky you’re cute. Fine. Drive. And get off the hood, what kind of animal are you?”

Taehyung caught his keys as Jeongguk tossed them to him, hopping off the car immediately. “Yay!” He grabbed Jeongguk’s shirt collar, yanking him close to press a kiss to his cheek. “Thanks, hyung!” And then he shoved him away, scurrying into the driver’s seat in glee.

“Please don’t kiss me in public,” Jeongguk sighed, sliding into the passenger seat. “And if you crash my car, you’re paying for it.”

Waving him off, Taehyung said, “Yeah, yeah, yeah. I get it. Be safe, not gay. Whatever. More importantly-” he inserted his key into the ignition, excitement bubbling up inside him as the car hummed to life.

He’d never driven a fancy car before.

Lucky for them, the restaurant Jeongguk had chosen was reasonably close to the Seoul Arts Center, so Taehyung didn’t have much of an opportunity to wreck his car. Still, he fell in love with the smooth glide of the vehicle immediately, and the way the wheel reset in his hands. Even when he parked, there was a little monitor to show him exactly how he should back up.

It was nothing short of heaven compared to his shitty 1998 Hyundai Sonata.

“Jeongguk, I think I might marry your car,” Taehyung declared as he removed the key, stroking the dashboard fondly. He twisted behind him to retrieve their tickets from his bag and stepped outside.

“I’ll officiate the wedding,” Jeongguk snorted as he emerged. And then he looked around, doe eyes wide with intrigue. “What are we doing at the Seoul Arts Center?”

Bold streetlights illuminated their path as they navigated the parking lot leading to the grand dome building.

“You’ll see,” he replied happily, leading the way up flight after flight of wide concrete stairs. Other people dressed in formal attire flooded the entryway; couples, families, elders, anyone and everyone.

Dance provided a space for people from every walk of life to converge. Taehyung had always thought there was something beautiful in such a clear conflux.
The lobby opened up in front of them, pooling warm light as box office workers accepted tickets. Taehyung grabbed Jeongguk’s wrist, tugging him into line as anticipation raced through him. He was practically bouncing on the balls of his feet but he didn’t care. Other people waiting in line shot him a few glances but they didn’t understand. This was a big deal for him.

Jeongguk reached out, holding him by the shoulders to steady him, bright bunny smile in place. “What are you so excited for?”

“The- the-” Taehyung pointed at the sign proclaiming the show right above the box office with photographs from the performance. “We’re here.”

A moment passed in which Jeongguk just read the sign, and when his gaze fell on him again, it was frustratingly amused. “The ballet?”

He didn’t sound nearly as excited.

“Yes!” he exclaimed. Then he thought about Jeongguk’s tone and added, “I mean, I thought you’d like it but if it’s not your cup of tea-”

Jeongguk squeezed his shoulders, and a reassuring calmness spread through him. “I love it. I can’t wait. How’d you end up with tickets?”

“My Gender Performance professor,” Taehyung admitted somewhat reluctantly. “He and his wife were going to go but something came up for them and they couldn’t. He sympathised with my situation and he was impressed by how much I’d managed to get my grade up, so I told him you were tutoring me. He gave me the tickets and said I should take you, and I thought that was a pretty good idea, so...yeah, here we are.”

“Tutoring you,” Jeongguk repeated, a smugness tinging the words. “Yeah. Tutoring.”

Taehyung swatted his arm. “Shut up. I will not have you making dirty jokes right before we watch a live performance of the Nutcracker put on by the Korean National Ballet of all companies.”

“Wow, if you’re telling me not to make a filthy joke, this must be serious.”

“IT-” Taehyung glanced at the ornate ballroom doors separating them from the theatre. “It is serious. I know it sounds kind of lame, but this means a lot to me. So, um, if you could just indulge me for the evening, I’d be really grateful. I’ll probably dork out and embarrass you and maybe cry a little, so I’m sorry in advance and I’ll let you handcuff me to your bed later as an apology.”

Jeongguk placed a stern hand over his mouth, but his eyes were still soft. “It’s not lame. I like seeing the way your face lights up when you talk about the things you love.” Huh. He’d been thinking the same thing earlier about Jeongguk. “And we’ll talk about the other thing later.”

Taehyung laughed, nodding to show he understood. He would behave himself.

After what seemed like forever of standing in line and Jeongguk telling him fondly to settle down, they made it to the front of the queue.

“University students?” the girl at the counter asked as she took their tickets.

“Yeah,” Jeongguk answered for them.

She eyed Taehyung in amusement. “Majors?”
“He’s dance, I’m a film major.”

A chuckle escaped her. “That explains a lot.” She scanned their tickets and handed back the stubs. “You’re good to go. Enjoy the show.”

Jeongguk led him inside. They picked their way down the steps to section B, row 5, seats 8 and 9. The seats were close enough to the stage for them to see everything, but far enough away so that they weren’t missing anything, either.

They were perfect.

“I might cry,” Taehyung whispered as they settled in.

“You said that already,” Jeongguk whispered back.

Helpful.

He maintained a reverent silence as he simply took their setting in with awe, eagerly watching the red curtain shielding the stage. Jeongguk let him be, occasionally sending a smile his way, but he respected the precedent Taehyung set.

A brief introduction came on over the soundsystem, and suddenly, the house lights went down, the curtain opened, stage lights came up in a kaleidoscope of blues, pinks, and whites, and the show began.

Dancers played the roles of the ballet’s beloved characters so seamlessly, Taehyung forgot the show had been performed any other way. He became engrossed in every glittering costume, every simple releve, every extended arabesque, every crystal of fallen snow.

And he absolutely cried during the Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy, his hand somehow making its way into Jeongguk’s, fingers intertwined together as he watched the ballet in rapture.

As the final snow-laden scene came to a close and Marie was crowned a princess, the red curtain descended to signal the end of the first act.

Taehyung could only sit, stunned, as he processed the magic he’d just witnessed. Finally, he remembered how to form words, and they just came pouring out.

“I’m so happy they decided to use Yury Grigorovich’s production, his choreography is beyond gorgeous. And of course, they set it to Tchaikovsky’s music, thankfully not trying to use any of that contemporary nonsense. And they used the original characters as well, you know, exchanging Clara for Marie as it should be because Hoffman said so, and they had a dancer play as the Nutcracker rather than having her carry around a doll which adds so much life to the stage. Oh my god, and the sets. Did you see the way they made the forest? I felt like I was in it and-”

He finally glanced at Jeongguk, only to see him watching him closely, smile even wider than it had been earlier.

“Stop looking at me,” Taehyung mumbled. “Sorry, I know I’m rambling.”

In a shocking display of affection, Jeongguk lifted his hand to his lips. “You’re beautiful.”

“Literally, shut the fuck up,” Taehyung retorted, completely at a loss. “Also, I thought you made it very clear you weren’t going to hold my hand.”
Jeongguk shrugged. “I changed my mind. And you looked like you needed a little emotional support, I thought the Sugar Plum Fairy was going to come offstage and offer you a tissue.”

Taehyung snatched his hand away. “You bully me, you know that?”

“I told you that you’re beautiful and you told me to shut the fuck up, so I think you’re the real bully.”

“What else was I supposed to say?”

“Anything else,” Jeongguk supplied, stifling a laugh.

Taehyung crossed his arms. “I’m not good at compliments. Especially coming from you.”

“I compliment you all the time.”

“Yeah, and it’s weird. There’s only so much you can say about me.”

Jeongguk propped himself up on his armrest, inquiring, “Would you like me to handwrite a list for you? It may take me a few days or weeks or months seeing as there’s about a million things I could put down, but I’d do it.”

Taehyung tried not to look at him, knowing full well he’d cave to those eyes. “Now you’re just flattering me for the hell of it.”

“Yeah, because I do that all the time,” he replied sarcastically.

Feigning a yawn, Taehyung said, “I forgot how exhausting having you as a friend is.”

They really needed to work on that friend thing.

Jeongguk elbowed him. “Hey, at least you’re never bored.”

“At least there’s that,” Taehyung reluctantly agreed.

Another announcement came over the soundsystem, telling them they had five minutes to get back into their seats.

“If you’ve gotta piss, I suggest you go now,” he informed Jeongguk.

“I’m fine, actually, thanks for your concern though.”

“Just trying to be helpful.”

Just as the lights began to go down again, Taehyung asked in a hesitant whisper, “Um, are you gonna...?”

“Gonna what?”

“...hold my hand again?”

Jeongguk didn’t say anything, but he felt the telltale brush of fingers against his, finally locking their hands together on the armrest.

They fit together well. As well as they always had. And now that Taehyung wasn’t internally freaking out over the ballet as much, he could focus on the sensation of having his fingers laced
through Jeongguk’s, filling him with so many memories.

Memories of being teenagers at the cinema, doing the exact same thing except they were fifteen and sixteen, not twenty and twenty-one, and they were either watching an action movie or some artsy romantic drama depending on their mood instead of a sophisticated ballet. But their hands remained the same, both stressing about whether they were sweating, both connected through the barely felt pulse of their heartbeats.

He’d liked to say he paid as much attention to the second act as he did the first.

But he also wasn’t entirely fond of lying.

Still, as he grew more comfortable with the whole hand-holding situation, he became just as absorbed in the ballet. By the time the lights were coming up for good and the dancers were taking their bows, Taehyung felt as though he’d accomplished a lifelong goal. He rose to his feet, regrettably freeing his hand from Jeongguk’s to give them the standing ovation they deserved, and to make sure he didn’t cross any of Jeongguk’s public boundaries.

Taehyung lingered in his seat a little longer than the rest of the audience, simply revelling in the sensation of being in a theatre right after an inspiring performance.

Someday, he hoped he would be on the other side of things.

Jeongguk waited patiently for him, hands shoved in his suit jacket pockets. The gesture was innocent, but the message was clear enough.

After seeing that performance, though, Taehyung didn’t really have it in him to throw a fit.

“So...what did you think?” he asked Jeongguk as they fought through the crowd to reach the doors.

“It was moving, honestly. I’ve never seen a ballet before, and now I feel like my standards for the next one are going to be way too high.”

Taehyung laughed, allowing him to carve out a route for him to follow. People tended to move out of Jeongguk’s way a lot faster than they moved out of his, which didn’t make any sense because Jeongguk looked like a squishy bunny and he himself had a severe case of resting bitch face, but whatever worked was fine by him.

“They probably are. Sorry, I’ve ruined your ballet expectations for good.”

“Ah, well. We all have to make sacrifices. It was worth it.”

Taehyung side-glanced at him, noticing the way the streetlights reflected in his eyes. “Yeah?”

Jeongguk returned his look, offering him a slight smile to go with it. “Yeah. Thank you.”

He didn’t like the way he could feel himself melting.

“Don’t thank me. Thank Han Kyosu-nim.”

“I don’t think he’d like me thanking him the way I want to thank you.”

Taehyung rolled his eyes. “We’ve been outside for less than two minutes and you’re already thinking about fucking me.”

“Actually, I was thinking about watching anime, cuddling, and kissing, but if you’d prefer-”
“No,” Taehyung immediately interrupted. “I mean, yes. I mean, um, I’d like that. I’d prefer that. The...the gooey shit. I want that.”

What the fuck? Since when did he get tongue-tied?

Jeongguk slung his arm around his waist, if only for a second. It still felt like heaven. “Cool. I do too.” The jingling of metal on metal caught his attention, and he almost missed as Jeongguk tossed his keys at him. “You drive.”

Taehyung grinned, spinning the keys around on his finger before unlocking his Genesis. “That ballet must’ve put you in a very good mood,” he remarked, sliding into the driver’s seat.

A chuckle escaped Jeongguk. “Yeah, something like that. Don’t expect it to become a regular thing.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t dare, golden boy.”

They made it back to campus in record time, thanks to Taehyung’s completely legal management of the speed limit and his absolute disinterest in any of the night’s other activities.

“My dorm or yours?” he inquired before going any further.

“Mine.”

That took Jeongguk less time to decide than he thought it would.

“Yoongi-hyung’s gone?”

“Yeah, he’s at Hoseok’s.”

He knew Hoseok still stood as a touchy subject between them, so he just nodded and drove towards Jeongguk’s side of campus.

Jeongguk’s assigned spot stood waiting for them, and he pulled the car in cleanly, careful not to risk so much as a scratch on his precious paint job. Figuring he wouldn’t need anything from it, he left his bag in the car and followed Jeongguk up to his dorm.

Thankfully, the floor was deserted. Most of the residents had probably caught on to their thing by now, but no one had mentioned it, and Taehyung didn’t want to make it more obvious than it already was.

Once inside, he kicked off his (Jeongguk’s) shoes, slid out of his (Jeongguk’s) jacket, and slipped off his pants.

“What do you have against pants?” Jeongguk asked, already on his bed and starting up his laptop.

Taehyung stared at him. It should be obvious. “Why wear pants when you could not be wearing pants?”

Jeongguk considered this for a moment. “Touche.” And then his own pants were on the floor. Taehyung nodded in approval. “What do you want to watch?”

“You’ve asked me a lot of dumb questions, Jeon, but that takes the cake.”

He slapped his forehead. “You’re right, what am I thinking? The correct answer is always going to be Anohana.”
“And if we finish that-”

“Haikyuu.”

Taehyung had gone five years without him.

And fuck, it was starting to hurt like hell.

The minute Jeongguk had Netflix open and had laid back on his bed, Taehyung practically rolled on top of him to be closer to the wall, tucking himself into Jeongguk’s side.

Jeongguk kissed the top of his head the moment he laid down, wrapping an arm around his shoulders.

Was this okay for friends?

Except, as he lay there and watched a group of friends come together to help Menma pass on to the afterlife, he realised something.

He had never just been friends with Jeongguk. They had been best friends. He’d had a crush on him most of his life. They were almost dating when they were sixteen. And then it had all been ripped away from them. So how was he supposed to be his friend now when they were literally having sex almost daily?

Taehyung had never been the one to struggle in his friends-with-benefits deals.

At least it seemed like Jeongguk was struggling with it too, kisses slowly travelling from his head, to his nose, to his cheeks, and then finally to his lips.

He had to tilt his head up to kiss Jeongguk properly, lazy, slow, and somehow more intimate. They weren’t kissing in the heated passion of sex, nor were they fueled by hormones and desperation. He just wanted to kiss Jeongguk because it was Jeongguk, and he wanted to be kissed back. He wanted someone to caress along his cheekbones so tenderly the way Jeongguk did. He wanted someone who laughed lightly against him when their noses or teeth bumped together just like Jeongguk did. He wanted someone to make him feel loved and cherished the way Jeongguk did.

He wanted Jeongguk.

But he knew he couldn’t have him.

And so, he would be content with this. He would kiss him until both of them were too tired to continue, and they fell asleep to the sounds of one of their favourite childhood shows, bathed in the glow of Jeongguk’s laptop screen as he burrowed into his side, nuzzling his chest and bunching his hands in the fabric of his dress shirt because both of them were too lazy to change.

He would do it.

And he’d do it without asking for anything more.

Because this... he was enough.

Chapter End Notes
ahhh sorry this one came out later than the others. there's going to be a slightly larger gap between chapters until i finish the fic because i have to write them all out. the ones before this one were already completed, so please be patient with me! i hope you enjoyed, thanks for reading!

i do twitter sometimes
The grey light of early morning filtered through the window of Jeongguk’s dorm when Taehyung woke up. It couldn’t be later than five. Although he wanted nothing more than to roll right back over and fall asleep, he knew Jeongguk didn’t want him to be here when Yoongi came home. As he’d become rather accustomed to these days, he did his best to escape Jeongguk’s hold on him and get to his feet, ignoring how peaceful he looked while he slept, features soft and unguarded. After a moment of searching around Jeongguk’s drawers, he found a pair of sweatpants he knew would fit him and slipped them on, retrieving the sneakers he’d left here yesterday.

And yet, hand on the doorknob, he hesitated.

The thought of leaving echoed in him, lonely and yearning for everything he already had here in this room.

Unable to help himself, Taehyung padded quietly back over to Jeongguk’s side and placed a gentle kiss on his forehead before turning to leave for real.

Except a hand caught on his wrist, tugging him back.

“Where are you going?” Jeongguk mumbled, bleary eyes fluttering open.

“Back to my room,” he whispered, preserving the peace of the hour. “Don’t wanna get caught.”

“S’cold out, though.”

Taehyung brushed his hair back from his forehead with the tenderness early morning granted him. “I’ll manage.”

“Stay?”

His heart jumped into his throat, choking, constricting. Jeongguk didn’t know what he was saying. His mind was bogged down with sleep, only thinking about how comfortable it felt to have someone’s weight alongside his own in bed.
Taehyung shook his head, easing his wrist away from him. “Can’t do that, golden boy. Go back to sleep.”

Jeongguk bit his lip but nodded. “Be safe, Taehyungie.” Reaching over the edge of the bed, he located a black mass and held it out to him. “And take my hoodie, at least.”

He accepted the gesture only to appease him, slipping the hoodie over his head. It smelled like Jeongguk. “Thanks, ba- thanks. Text me when you wake up again, yeah?”

“‘Course,” he promised through a yawn, already rolling back over.

The day he got to stay would be the day he got everything he wanted.

Forcing down dangerous thoughts, Taehyung retreated towards the door and made himself cross the threshold this time, locking it behind him. Locking himself out.

He had to take a moment to collect himself, just leaning against the door and trying to breathe.

He couldn’t do this.

He couldn’t pretend like he didn’t feel something for him.

But what else could he do? It wouldn’t be fair of him to tell Jeongguk how he felt because he barely accepted himself. He couldn’t ask Jeongguk to accept him, too. That would mean asking Jeongguk to choose between him and his family, and Taehyung would never tear a family apart.

Besides, Jeongguk just saw him as a fuck buddy, and maybe as a friend. That was their agreement. Taehyung had no right to suddenly catch feelings.

So, it was only fair that he had to trek back across campus to his own dorm in -1 degree weather at five in the morning, Jeongguk’s hoodie pulled up past his nose, arms tucked inside.

And instead of passing out immediately like he wanted to, he decided to finally reach out to the friends he’d been snubbing for a few weeks now.

dirty dancers gc

Me

hey ik you guys probably aren’t up yet but when you are, do you want to meet up for coffee? i’m sorry i’ve been kind of a shitty friend lately and i want to make it up to you both.
Knowing he wouldn’t receive a response for a couple hours, he plugged his phone in and retrieved his laptop, determined to finish his part on their final presentation for Philosophy.

It felt nice, having something to do that demanded almost all of his attention. He couldn’t let his mind wander. Couldn’t think about anything that hurt.

Sometimes he wondered if people hurt when they thought about him.

His mom always said he wondered too much, that he let his mind get the better of him and created problems that didn’t really exist. She didn’t say it softly. She rarely said anything softly. But she said it with conviction, and in Taehyung’s eyes, that meant so much more. She’d never been a soft person. A loving person, yes. But she loved with a fierce passion. She showed her love through subtle gestures and firm words, through warm cups of tea materialising by his bedside when he was sad and undeniable reassurances that different didn’t mean bad. She wasn’t afraid to tell anyone what she thought, and rarely could anyone argue with her. She carried herself with dignity, but had said over and over again she didn’t put much stock in the uselessness of grace. She didn’t want to be heard; she demanded to be listened to.

His dad always described her as the most beautiful force of nature. Like a hurricane in spring.

And Taehyung missed her the way he missed the rain on a hot summer day, something to soothe and temper the storm always threatening to overtake him. He didn’t want to burn out. But at this rate, he didn’t have any other choice. With every ember that sparked his fear doubled.

And if he fell in love with Jeongguk, if he fell in love with someone who was ashamed of returning that love, his fire would consume him.

He wondered how much it would hurt.

If it’d be worth the pain.

Better to go out in an agonising blaze than fade away into dull forgotten nothingness.

Yet, unlike his mom, he lacked the courage to truly pick either.

He wondered if she’d be disappointed.

Suddenly, he didn’t want to wonder anymore.

Tearing his thoughts away, he did his best to refocus on their presentation. He’d sacrificed several mornings and ounces of his dignity for this project and he wouldn’t belittle that by giving it a shitty overview.

Around eight, his phone vibrated with a text, but unfortunately not the one he wanted to see.

**Unknown**

Hello, is this Kim Taehyung-ssi?

My name is Park Minjun, we met briefly at Singwa Gateun and discussed a position for
you at my business. Pardon
my intrusion, I know it's
rather early. Jang Hanbin-ssi
gave me your contact information.
I was hoping to set up an interview
with you, preferably sometime
within the next week. If this seems
viable, please let me know.

He stared at his phone. Sometimes he forgot Sin had an actual name, and that Jang-ssi had a first
name. But this man hadn’t forgotten his name. That must mean something.

Me
Yes, sir, this is Kim Taehyung.
I would happily interview for a
position at your business. This
week is finals week at my university
but I’m free anytime after noon on
Monday through Wednesday, and after
three on Thursday and Friday. Thank you
for following up on our discussion.

Park Minjun-ssi
Excellent. Does two o’clock
tomorrow work for you?

Me
Yes, sir.
Park Minjun-ssi
I’ll look forward to it, then.
If you’d like, I’ll order you a
car.

There was a very fine line between genuine kindness and serial-killer kindness, and Taehyung
would prefer not to walk it.

Me
That’s very generous of you,
sir, but I can drive myself. I’d
rather not be an inconvenience,
especially for my own interview.

Park Minjun-sii
Nonsense, Kim Taehyung-ssi,
there’s nothing inconvenient
about it. If you begin working
for me, you’ll soon learn that
I make sure to treat my boys
well. Please allow me to send
you a car.

At least he said please.

Me
Alright, thank you, sir, I’m
very grateful. I’ll send you my
address. I look forward to meeting
Park Minjun-ssi

As do I. Have a lovely morning,

Kim Taehyung-ssi.

Me

Thank you, you as well.

See? He could be respectful when he needed to be. But that wasn’t nearly as much fun as calling Jeongguk sir.

Fuck. No.

He shouldn’t be thinking about Jeongguk. Some Jeongguk-less thoughts were seriously in order.

Thankfully, the texts he wanted to receive came through pretty quickly.

dirty dancers gc

sunshine-hyung

absolutely taehyungie

sunshine-hyung

what time?

diminie

YES BABY BOY YES

diminie

literally now please
Or that’s what he wished they said. Instead, they were more along the lines of:

```plaintext
diminie
i can’t today sorry
```

```plaintext
diminie
maybe tomorrow?
```

```plaintext
sunshine-hyung
today’s not good for me
either, sorry
```

```plaintext
sunshine-hyung
but yeah, we can probably
find a time tomorrow
```

```
Oh.
```

```plaintext
Me
i have an interview tomorrow
```

```plaintext
Me
but it’s fine, we’ll figure something out
```

```plaintext
diminie
yeah for sure.
```

And that was the end of the conversation.
He tried not to wonder too much about that, either. But…

What if they were mad at him? It would make sense, for Hoseok especially. Taehyung hadn’t told him anything about his life and he’d had to find out through leaked explicit photos of him. That can’t have felt good. Jimin had a right to be upset with him too since they hadn’t been hanging out as much lately. But Taehyung didn’t want to cut into his time with Hoseok and Yoongi, so he’d been trying hard these days to be considerate of their relationship. Besides, he barely felt wanted anyways. Whenever they hung out, he always ended up third-wheeling, and at that point, it seemed like his presence was more of an intrusion than anything else.

Maybe he wasn’t enough for them anymore.

His phone buzzed again.

jeon

hey i just woke up

jeon

sorry if this morning was weird i was half-asleep so just disregard anything i said lol

jeon

did you make it back okay?

Taehyung knew he hadn’t meant what he said when he asked him to stay. Yet it still hurt to have his suspicions confirmed.

Me

yeah fine.

jeon

uh okay cool
jeon

you wanna meet up in a few
and work on our presentation
together?

He needed to put some space between them.

Me

i finished my part already.

jeon

that’s great! we can still hang
though. a mario kart rematch
is still very much in order

Me

can’t today. i need to study and
my shift starts early.

jeon

oh that’s fine

jeon

actually no it’s not fine. why are
you mad at me?

Sometimes he wished Jeongguk couldn’t read him like an open book. Then again, he had fourteen
years of practice.
Me

i’m not mad at you. just tired.

Jeon

look, if this is about this morning, i
didn’t mean what i said

Me

yeah i know you didn’t mean it
when you asked me to stay. so
just forget it.

Jeon

wait…

Jeon

are you mad bc you actually wanted
to stay?

No need to rub fucking salt in the wound.

Me

i didn’t want to. that’s
why i got up to leave.

Jeon

obviously.

Jeon
i’ll leave you alone then.

Good. That’s what he wanted.

A coldness dragged at his chest. He shut his laptop and retreated to his bed, feeling a little disillusioned with the idea of being conscious. The emotionless dregs of sleep sounded safer. They didn’t want anything from him.

And yet, he combatted the cold with Jeongguk’s hoodie, curling into himself and wanting nothing more than to drown in his familiar scent. It clung to his hoodie, his sweatpants, his bed, his skin. Everywhere smelled like Jeongguk.

After willing away the urge to cry, he fell asleep in a matter of minutes.

~*~*~

An insistent knocking at Jeongguk’s door had him searching for the energy to roll out of bed, still feeling not entirely himself after his conversation with Taehyung. But eventually, he found it, as well as a pair of pants, and stumbled to the door.

“Oh, hey,” Jeongguk greeted Yugyeom, holding the door open wider.

Yugyeom rolled his eyes. “Yeah, ‘hey’ to you too. You cool if I come in?”

“Duh.” He stepped aside to allow Yugyeom entrance, shutting the door behind him.


Jeongguk nodded. “Yeah, he headed out this morning.” And then, “...Wait, fuck, no, hold on. I-how did you...?”

Yugyeom’s eyebrows shot up. “I live on the same floor as Taehyung.”

“Yeah, so...?”

“So I’ve heard him scream your name about a billion times in the past month alone.”

Suddenly, the room felt unseasonably warm.

A flush crept up his neck as he mumbled, “Oh. Uh, sorry about that.”

“It’s cool. I’ve gotten the scoop on his sex life for three years now. He screams loudest when he’s with you if that makes you feel better.”

Jeongguk felt both proud of himself and terrified for what this new knowledge implied.

The whole floor knew he was fucking Taehyung. He figured his floor knew, too, and processed the thought in his head, but he’d never really acknowledged it. The thought had just sort of lingered there until his brain found better things to be entertained by.

Frustrated, he rubbed his face and muttered, “God, is it even worth it anymore?”

“No,” Jeongguk sighed, sitting cross-legged on his own bed. “Is it worth pretending anymore?”

“That you’re not just as gay as the rest of us? Obviously not, I’ve been telling you for years. And clearly, some part of you is over the secrecy if you’re not afraid to do it where pretty much anyone can hear you.”

He had a point there. Over his years attending uni, he’d been extremely careful about his hookups, never doing it anywhere or with anyone who could expose him. And then Taehyung had stepped back into his life and suddenly, he had no problem letting his guard down a little more.

Almost as if Taehyung was the only person he felt willing to sacrifice himself for.

The only person he couldn’t live without proudly asserting as his own.

“Hey, Yugyeom?”

“Yeah?”

“How do you know when you’re in love?”

Yugyeom’s eyes shone with sympathy. “Exactly like that. Damn, you’ve got it bad, too. You look heartbroken already and he hasn’t even turned you down yet.”

“He’s turned me down a million times,” Jeongguk snorted. “Every time I try to give him a chance to actually tell me what he’s thinking, he brushes me off and pretends like it’s nothing. Like the past few months have meant nothing. So the message he’s sending is loud and clear: he’s not interested. And I can’t really ask him to be when I won’t even admit my sexuality to anyone besides you and the hyungs. Taehyung deserves to be shown off, to know that anyone would be lucky to have him. I don’t know if I can give him that.”

“Well, do you want to give him that? Would you be willing to risk it for him? Because you’re right; he’s not the type to just shut his mouth and keep it a secret. I think he would if you asked him to, but he wouldn’t be able to do it for long.”

Jeongguk glanced at him. “How do you know?”

“Literally everyone sees the way you two look at each other. It’s disgusting. And it’s only gotten worse. Even when you were fighting about anything and everything, the minute one of you thought no one was watching, you’d stare at each other with an honestly concerning amount of longing.”

Yugyeom shrugged like it was the simplest thing in the world.

“He did too?”

“Yeah?”

Jeongguk’s gaze dropped to the floor, trying to process this information. “Oh. I mean...I kinda thought maybe he felt something but I didn’t want to push it. Like this morning. He stayed the night, we didn’t even have sex or anything we just cuddled, but he stayed over and then when he was trying to leave this morning, I asked him to stay and he just sort of...stared at me. He looked scared. And then he told me he couldn’t, but he took my hoodie when I asked him to. And then later I texted him and he seemed really off so I asked him why he was mad at me and if it had to do with this morning. I panicked and told him I hadn’t meant it when I asked him to stay. And he
got...angrier? He snapped at me, and so I thought, y’know, maybe he’d wanted to stay and so I asked him that, too. But then he told me he didn’t and that’s why he left. So now I’m just confused. I wish he’d just tell me what he wants, but he’ll never do that, either. He’s afraid of asking for anything. He doesn’t like looking weak.”

Yugyeom seemed to contemplate this for a moment, finally confirming, “He got angrier when you said you didn’t mean it?”

“Right. He said he knows I didn’t mean it, so I should just forget it.”

“And he took your hoodie when he left?”

“And my pants.”

“Yeah, that’s got major boyfriend vibes. Obviously he was mad when you said you didn’t mean it. He probably felt happy this morning knowing you wanted him to stay but didn’t think that’s what you actually wanted because that would mean waking up together and risking getting caught. He was trying to look out for you by leaving.”

“Oh. Oh fuck. And now he’s mad at me.Fuck, I’m such an idiot.”

Jeongguk’s head was spinning. Taehyung had just been trying to protect him, and he went and made it look like he didn’t appreciate it and didn’t want him around.

“He’s probably thinking the same thing for thinking you actually wanted him to stay,” Yugyeom offered.

Strangely, that didn’t make him feel better.

Getting to his feet, he located his shoes, saying, “I’ve gotta apologise. Shit. Sorry, Yugyeom. I’ll take you out for samgyeopsal later, I promise.”

Yugyeom rolled his eyes but he was smiling. “I swear, if he replaces me, I’ll never forgive you.”

Jeongguk slipped on his Pumas and leaned over to squish Yugyeom’s cheeks. “No one could ever replace you,” he cooed, ruffling his hair.

Yugyeom swatted his hands away. “Yeah, yeah, whatever, go apologise to your man. I’m gonna wait for you to get back though because you’re delivering on that samgyeopsal offer asap, sorry.”

“I’ll be back in a few,” he promised. And then an idea came to him and he snatched up his keys as well. “See you.”

“Good luck!” Yugyeom called after his retreating back.

Once the door shut behind him, he hurried down the stairs out to the parking lot, started his car, and drove to the other end of campus, past the undergrad dorm, and down a few more blocks until he found what he was looking for.

The cafe looked busy as usual, teeming with people on Sunday morning. Jeongguk parked along the street, not planning to stay for too long, and ducked inside. Within minutes, he came back out, a cake box and a cup of hot cocoa in his hands, and safely secured both before getting in his car and making the short drive to Taehyung’s dorm.

There, he retrieved Taehyung’s bag from last night, the box, and his cocoa and headed inside.
Residents didn’t even bother looking at him strangely anymore. They knew. Everyone knew. Although he did spot Minho right as he was about to enter the lift and the guy just shook his head.

“I see you made a mistake,” he remarked.

For some reason, it didn’t sound as aggressive as usual, so he just grimaced. “Is it that obvious?”

“A whole cake and cocoa? Yeah, it’s pretty obvious. But you clearly know the way to his heart,” Minho snorted. “Good luck, man.”

Jeongguk stepped into the lift as the doors slid open. “Thanks, I’m gonna need it.”

A civil conversation with Choi Minho and Park Bogum in two days. Damn, he was killing it.

The elevator let out a pleasant familiar ding as he reached the fourth floor. It took some adjusting, but he was able to knock on Taehyung’s door and wait the agonising few moments for him to answer.

“Who is it?” Taehyung called, sounding exhausted and irritable.

This was about to become a whole lot harder.

“An idiot who’s very sorry and would like to apologise!” Jeongguk called back.

He heard an exasperated sigh and the pushing in of a chair. The door flew open.

Taehyung stood there glaring at him, still in his sweatpants and hoodie. They looked good on him, lazy angles highlighting the honey wings of his collarbone and the slant of his hip. And then Taehyung’s gaze dropped to the items in his hands, and his expression noticeably softened.

Still, he snarked, “What the hell do you want? I told you I was busy today.”

Jeongguk shuffled his feet, suddenly at a loss for words. Taehyung always did that, snatched them away along with his breath before he even got the chance to speak.

“I...um, I’m sorry. About what I said. Not this morning, but in my texts. I lied. I did mean it when I asked you to stay, but I panicked and thought you wouldn’t want me to say that, so I tried to take it back, and I ended up hurting you. I’m sorry. I realise now that you were trying to make things easier on me and I appreciate that. You’re um, kind of a more thoughtful person than you’d ever admit to, but I want you to know I recognise it, and I’m grateful. And I - I’m not trying to say anything when I tell you that I like waking up next to you. That’s not...I don’t know. I’m honestly struggling with a lot right now and I’m not going to dump it on you until I sort it out for myself a little more. Is that fair? I’m genuinely asking because I don’t know what’s fair and what’s not.”

Taehyung blinked, as if absorbing all of the words Jeongguk just threw at him.

“You...you like waking up next to me?”

Leave it to Taehyung to focus on the one sentence he almost didn’t say.

He wouldn’t lie, though.

“Of course I do. Who wouldn’t? Anyone would be extremely lucky to wake up next to you, Taehyung.”

“I-” Taehyung swallowed, fingers digging into his crossed arms. “Why are you telling me this? In
the middle of the hall where anyone can hear you, at that?”

“Because you didn’t invite me inside and I don’t really care who hears me. All that matters is that you’re hearing me.”

He sighed, eyes fluttering shut for just a moment before opening once more. “Yeah. I hear you. And it’s fair. I’m not asking you for anything, Jeongguk. So sort your shit out and talk to me when you do.”

That’s the most he could ask for. Nodding, he held out the cake and cocoa. “These are for you, by the way. To keep you going while you study.”

A genuine smile appeared on Taehyung’s face, reluctant but genuine nonetheless. One he rarely got to see. “Thank you, even if it feels like I’m being bribed for forgiveness,” he teased, accepting the items and his bag. “I probably won’t see you much this week besides our presentation tomorrow. So um, take care, golden boy.”

And to his utter surprise, Taehyung cupped his jaw to place a quick kiss on his cheek before retreating back into his dorm, door closing softly behind him.

Jeongguk felt as if he’d ascended to some astral plane, standing there for minutes or maybe hours just gingerly touching his cheek.

Taehyung had done the same thing as a joke a couple months ago but it felt so much different now. He’d been forgiven.

Mission accomplished.

And now he owed Yugyeom about twelve servings of samgyeopsal.

~*_~*

“If Kyosu-nim catches you sleeping during finals, she’s going to fail you,” Jeongguk whispered in his ear for the hundredth time that morning.

“Shit, Taehyung, sit up! She’s looking over here,” Seokjin hissed under his breath.

Immediately straightening up, Taehyung grabbed his pen just to look attentive, thankfully passing under the radar of their Philosophy professor’s sweeping gaze.

Everyone had given their presentations already, and although he wasn’t one to brag, theirs had been the best by far in terms of actual commitment. No one else had taken up exercising just to prove a point. His professor had said it was a very Taehyung type of experiment, and he’d tried his best to take it as a compliment. He wouldn’t know whether or not it was until they got their final grades.

Now, they were just finishing their written exams, and thankfully, he’d blown through his quick enough to squeeze in a fifteen minute nap, not daring to sleep any longer for fear of getting his score revoked. He’d have left already, but he kind of wanted to leave with Jeongguk and Jeongguk tested at the rate of a wheelchair-ridden snail. Slightly faster than the average snail, if he could just learn how to use the wheelchair.

Not that Jeongguk wasn’t smart- speed didn’t equal intelligence. He just second-guessed himself a
Taehyung caught him erasing and rewriting answers more than once on the same question, brow furrowed, tongue nervously pressed against his cheek.

Someone rubbed his shoulders. Taehyung glanced up only for Seokjin to whisper in his ear, “I’m heading out. I’ll see you guys later, yeah?”

Taehyung clasped his hand over the one on his shoulder and squeezed. “Yeah, bye Seokjinnie. Say hi to Namjoon-hyung for us.”

“Will do.”

And then he was gone, and Taehyung still had however long it took Jeongguk to finish to stress about his interview later. Maybe hanging out with Jeongguk would just mess up his headspace, though. He needed to go into this without any guilt or shame, and Jeongguk made him feel like what he did was wrong. This was a good opportunity, and he knew Jeongguk would try to talk him out of it.

So, although he’d spent the past half hour waiting for him, Taehyung leaned over and whispered, “I’m gonna go, too. I’ll talk to you later.”

He got to his feet, swinging his bag over his shoulder. When Jeongguk looked up at him, confusion filled his eyes, but he just said a quiet, “Okay,” before turning back to his exam.

Taehyung almost felt bad as he left the hall, but he forced himself not to look back.

Two hours later, he received a text.

**Park Minjun-ssi**

Your car awaits you outside.

I’m looking forward to seeing you soon.

Ignoring some of the guilt he felt whenever he thought about what his dad and Jeongguk would think of him, he replied accordingly, made sure he’d dressed well (possibly in some of Jeongguk’s stolen clothes but he’d never know), and headed downstairs.

A sleek black Cadillac idled by the curb, one Taehyung could tell was meant for him. No one around here drove a car like that.

The driver’s door opened and a woman stepped out, clad in a suit and shining leather shoes. “I’m looking for Kim Taehyung.”

Completely unfamiliar with the treatment, he stammered out a quick, “I- um, yes, that’s me.”

She gave him a curt nodded, opening the door to the backseat. “My name is Choi Sunhwa. I
frequently drive Park Minjun-ssi’s employees.”

“Oh, I- I see.” He didn’t know what else to say. Instead, he just got in the vehicle and watched as she closed the door behind him. Thankfully, Sunghwa wasn’t a talker. In fact, she didn’t say another word to him until she parked alongside an unassuming city block, a few streets east of Sin.

Sunghwa came around his side once more, holding his door open for him. “We’re here,” she announced unnecessarily.

“Thank you,” he said, stepping outside. At least the sun shone high in the sky, sparkling off the frost that coated the sidewalk and fallen leaves. “So, I just... head inside?” he asked, indicating the dark wooden door protruding from the brick wall.

“That’s the idea, yes.”

He was beginning to like her.

“Cool.”

Tucking his hands in his pockets, he tentatively approached the door. And then he thought no, fuck it. He was either going into this confident or he wasn’t going into it at all. So he removed his hands, pulled the door open, and...

Sort of lost his shit.

The place looked fucking gorgeous. High ceiling and dark hardwood floors decorated with plush merlot rugs, an ornate stone fireplace, leather armchairs and sofas, and stacked bookcases to the sky... not exactly what he’d been expecting.

“Um, hello?” he called out, taking another hesitant step inside.

“One moment!” another male voice replied from somewhere deeper within the building.

Taehyung lingered awkwardly by the door, unsure of what to do with himself.

“Sorry, I was fixing an issue downstairs,” the same voice apologised as a man emerged from a hall to his left. It took Taehyung a moment, but he finally placed his broad, flat-nosed face in his mind, pulling up distinct memories of a red-lit conversation and bills in his lingerie. One of his more coherent nights.

Bowing quickly, Taehyung said, “It’s not a problem, sir. This place is beautiful.”

Minjun smiled, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Thank you. This is only the first floor. You’ll probably get far more familiar with the basement.”

Still walking that line.

“But before all that,” Minjun continued on cheerily, “May I get you something to drink?”

His throat suddenly felt very dry.

“Just water, please.”

“You’re allowed to drink here,” he informed him teasingly. “I have someone driving you back as well, so you needn’t worry.”
Taehyung forced a chuckle, shaking his head. “I’m really okay, sir. It’s only midday. I may spend half of my time a little wasted but I like to save that for the night.”

“I’ve got you,” he replied with a wink, heading back down that same hall. “Water it is. Feel free to make yourself comfortable in the parlour.”

In the parlour. Right.

Crossing into the ornate room, he surveyed his options before selecting a spot on the burgundy sofa. An armchair felt a little presumptuous. Still feeling out of place and at somewhat of a loss, he crossed his ankles and took out his phone to check the time, noticing a text message.

jeon

hey sorry if i took too long
this morning. i didn’t mean
to annoy you or anything. i just
don’t have every theoretical
proposition of socrates memorised

jeon

but i know you don’t have any other
finals today and my avant garde
final finishes at two so if you want to
meet up we can?

Me

sorry i can’t. i’ve kinda got a thing
right now. good luck on your next
final though.

jeon

oh that’s cool. enjoy your thing(?)
and yeah thanks. you too.
“You know, it’s not exactly polite to be on your phone during an interview,” Minjun remarked, carrying a silver tray into the room.

Taehyung dropped his phone immediately. “I’m so sorry, sir. My- my friend is...he gets worried. Seriously, I’m really sorry.”

Minjun chuckled, a deep, throaty sound. “I’m just playing with you, Taehyung-ssi. I don’t really mind. This interview is more of a formality than anything. You seem a little skittish, though, and rather quick to apologise. Are you uncomfortable?”

Oh, how little he knew him. Apologise was barely in his dictionary.

“No, not at all. I just, well, honestly, I just really need this job. So, um, I’m a little terrified of screwing- or, um, messing this up. Wow, sorry, I can barely form a coherent sentence.”

Internally, he kept scolding himself. Everything about this was so unlike him. He just needed to get it together and charm the hell out of this guy.

“No need to be nervous, especially not around me,” Minjun consoled him warmly. “I’ll give you a little honestly of my own, how about that? I get a lot of worthless sluts banging on my door, emailing me day and night, begging for a position here. Dancers who have long since graduated and have been in the business for years. But you know why I want you, Taehyung-ssi?”

Ignoring the fact that he just inadvertently called him a worthless slut and no one got to say that shit to him besides Jeongguk (and only in the most loving way), Taehyung answered, “No idea, actually.”

Minjun leaned forward, eagerness in his eyes. “It’s because you’ve got star potential. Guys from all over already come to see you in that shitty strip club of yours.” Ouch. He happened to be rather fond of that shitty strip club. “And it’s because you’ve got something the rest of those boys haven’t even touched. And that’s passion, baby. You dance like the audience only came to see you, so you’d be damned if you didn’t put on a show. Coupled with your unmatched looks and charisma, you’d have the whole of Seoul in your palm if you came to work here. Our clientele is only composed of the wealthiest and most respected men of society. They come here to relax. They come here to spend money. They come here to spoil pretty little boys like you and maybe get a good night out of it, too. You see what I’m getting at?”

Almost, but a part of him didn’t connect his words to his own thoughts, however nearly flattering they may be.

“I just sat a four hour exam, sir, my cognitive abilities aren’t at their best.”

Minjun laughed, pouring a decanter of water over a glass of ice. “See, that’s just it. I like you, Taehyung-ssi. And I know our members are going to like you too.”

He tried not to see the euphemism in the sentence. He really did.

“You know, many of our employees get picked up by companies once they decide to retire from here,” Minjun added offhand.

That got his attention real fast.

“Oh?”

“Mhm. I’m on very good terms with recruiters for the Korean National Ballet, the National Dance
Company of Korea, the Korean National Contemporary Dance Company, even some international companies in Japan and the United States...I’m sure you get the idea. If I’m particularly fond of one of my boys and I know they’re looking for a little something more, I can be persuaded to put a good word in for them.”

Taehyung didn’t give a fuck about what persuaded implied. He only cared about the potential in this could give him.

“I do like the sound of that, sir.”

Minjun smiled. “I thought you might. You strike me as the ambitious type, Taehyung-ssi.” He tapped the rim of the water glass he’d filled. “Lemon?”

He didn’t necessarily care for lemon, but fuck it, he was feeling extravagant.

“Please.”

Once Minjun finished fixing his drink, he passed it to him. Taehyung took a sip. Yep, lemon water. He didn’t know why he’d expected anything else.

“When you’re finished with that, I’ll show you around. But first, I’d like to brief you on the rules and customs around here.” Taehyung nodded to show he was listening. “First and foremost: This is a gentlemen’s club. A respectable establishment. Which means I do not tolerate misbehavior from both the members and the staff. This first floor is reserved for daytime use. Here, men usually spend the day socialising, reading, playing games of chess—“

“The high society thing,” Taehyung substituted before realising he’d interrupted him. “Oh, s-crapsorry.”

Minjun waved him off. “It’s fine, Taehyung-ssi. You’re essentially correct anyway. We have staff on during this time but they’re mostly drink carriers, so you won’t have to worry about that. We open the basement at six o’clock nightly and close at five in the morning. We keep wide hours to try and accommodate the varied schedules of our patrons. I understand that you’re wanting to do this job in tandem with your gig at Singwa Gateun, which is fine with me. But I do expect you to prioritise this position. If we’re short a dancer on a night you’re working there, you will drop those hours and come here. Of course, I’ll pay you more for those nights. Certainly more than you’d make in a night there. Does that seem fair to you?”

Although it made sense in theory, for some reason, the thought of blowing Jang off for this job kinda pissed him off. But he knew he was being irrational, so instead he just nodded. “Yes, sir,” and took another sip of water.

“I see you’ve already grasped that rule without me telling you,” Minjun noted, sounding oddly proud.

“Which rule?”

“While in this building, you must address every patron and every staff member, apart from the dancers, as sir. It’s simply customary. Of course, the patrons are allowed to request you call them anything else, but sir should always be your go-to. On a similar note, all of our dancers take a stage name, but not your typical skank-name you’d see at a strip club.”

“I usually go by V at Sin,” Taehyung quickly informed him. “I didn’t want to pick anything explicit or degrading.”
“V.” Minjun tested it on his tongue. “Yes, I think that works nicely. Not a mouthful, easy to remember. Classier than most. Now that we’ve got that sorted out, I just need to ask you a few personal questions if you don’t mind.”

Again, personal wasn’t a word that came up for him often. He’d spill his entire life story to anyone kind enough to listen for a while.

“Not at all.”

“First of all, as I’m sure you know, we do offer an escort service for our members.”

“Yes, I recall.”

“And you’re aware that this means you’re consenting to sexual intercourse with men who may be unfamiliar to you, yes?”

Taehyung swallowed. “Yes.”

“Good. They pay well, and they all go through extensive screening before being allowed to join. We have a mix of both domestic and foreign patrons, all well aware of the rules. You may even recognise some of them as public figures. Which means you must maintain the utmost discretion with every one of your clients. I can already tell that you’re going to be popular, Taehyung-ssi, which makes this even more important. Every time you enter a room with a client, you must sign a contract to keep everything that occurs within the room a secret unless personal harm comes to you, understand?”

“Yes.” Was that likely?

“As I said, all of these men are thoroughly screened and tested, and of course, protection is both advised and expected. But I will require your STI results as well.”

“That’s not a problem. I can get them for you by next week.”

Minjun nodded. “Excellent. And is there anyone you’re sexually intimate with?”

His thoughts immediately flashed to Jeongguk and their favourite partner activity. “Um...yes.”

“One person? Two people? More-”

“Just- just one,” he cut him off.

Minjun crossed his legs, as if bracing himself for something.

“Then I’ll need his results as well.”


And almost as if he were expecting this reaction, Minjun gave him a sympathetic look but explained, “It’s just policy, Taehyung-ssi. I can’t risk anything, and I certainly can’t risk a lawsuit.”

“We use protection,” he clarified. “Every time.”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t chance that. It’s just a short trip to the clinic, it’s basically nothing.”

“I-” His mind began conjuring images of Jeongguk’s disgusted face when he asked him, and the conversation he’d have about trust. He’d have to tell him that it was for this job, but even then, he’d
still probably think he was some sort of hooker. And then he’d think about all of the people
touching him who wasn’t himself, and he’d think of him as dirty and used.

He wouldn’t want him anymore.

Taehyung almost laughed at himself. As if he wants you now.

“And...if I stop seeing him before I start working? Like, break it off with him?”

Minjun considered it. “If your results come up clean and you’re not intimate with anyone else, then
yes, I believe that would be fine.”

He didn’t lie when he said he would sacrifice anything for these jobs.

And Jeongguk, and whatever bullshit feelings Taehyung accidentally developed for him, were just
next on the list.

Jeongguk’s father would’ve loved him if he wasn’t gayer than a double rainbow.

“I’m impressed by your dedication,” Minjun added. “Not many people would end a relationship for
a job.”

Thanks for rubbing it in, prick.

“Well I’m not fucking in love with him. I’m in love with fucking him,” he said, perhaps a little too
harshly. “Sorry. Pardon my language.”

Now Minjun looked confused. “You’re a top?”


Relief crossed his face. “Oh, okay, good. I mean, not that it matters all that much, but most of our
patrons prefer submissive bottoms and I just assumed…”

He couldn’t tell if he should be offended or not. For the sake of civility, he chose not.

“I get it.”

“Can I give you the rest of the tour now?” Minjun suggested, trying to ease the brief awkward air
that had fallen over them.

“That would be great.” Anything to take his mind off of...well, everything.

... An hour later, after he had been showing the gold-plated basement with its beaded, sequined
everything, and its marble checkerboard floors, and its wide luxurious stages adorned with poles
seemingly made from cut diamonds, Minjun finally led him to the door.

“Is there a day you’d prefer to start?” Minjun inquired, leaning against the frame. His lean form
didn’t make it feel like he was trying to block him from leaving, though.

“I was thinking...well, I want to start as soon as possible, but I have exams all week and I’m booked
through with Sin. And then next week I’ll be in Busan visiting my dad until Friday. So, does two
Saturdays from now work?"

He felt bad pushing it off so much, but Minjun didn’t seem to mind.

Smiling brightly, he replied, “That works just fine for me, Taehyung-ssi. Just keep in touch, yeah?”

“Of course, sir.”

Minjun pushed off the frame to hold the door open for him, waving him out. “I’ll see you in two weeks, then! It was great getting to know you.”

Taehyung dipped his head as he exited the club. “You as well, thank you.”

And finally, finally, once the door shut behind him, he could breathe. In his own car, he took a moment just to get himself together, trying to come to terms with the job he’d just signed up for.

Really, it wasn’t so bad. He was just being a little bitch about it.

Pros: Way more money, way better clients, and the possibility of recommendations.

Cons: More rules, sex with strangers, and he needed to cut off Jeongguk. At least sexually. Because there’s no way in hell he’d agree to have the fucking test results conversation.

Oddly enough, it still hurt when outlined logically.

Obviously, the pros outweighed the cons. His heart just refused to get the message.

Whatever.

He’d get over it.

Feeling a little more collected, he checked his phone before hooking it up to his aux cord. Two messages lit up the screen.

dirty dancers gc

diminie

hey are we all able to make it for coffee today?

sunshine-hyung

definitely! i miss taetae :(

And yet, Taehyung couldn’t find it within himself to miss them. Not after the bullshit they’d been pulling lately, avoiding him at any and every cost for god knows what reason.
Me
it’s finals week. shouldn’t you
focus on studying?

diminie
i can take an hour to make time
for my favourite people, can’t i?

sunshine-hyung
i’m free for the rest of the afternoon

Me
well i’m not. i’d like to actually
pass my exams

diminie
since when do you care? you haven’t
given a fuck about your classes all
semester but the second we want to
hang out you’re suddenly a model
student?

Me
you think i haven’t given a fuck?
that i haven’t been working my ass
off all semester? that’s fucking rich
coming from the guy who’s spent more
time between min yoongi’s legs than
he has in class but please, continue to give me shit

diminie

oh, you want to get on /my/ ass about fucking too much? at least i’m not lying to you about who i’m sleeping with or sneaking around with jeon jeongguk behind your back because that’s fucking ridiculous right? because i wouldn’t fucking do that to you. i wouldn’t blow you off constantly to sleep with the guy i made you hate for half a decade and pretend like i’m not lying to you.

Taehyung stared at his phone in shock. He didn’t even realise his hands were shaking until the words started to run together on his screen, vision obscured by angry hot tears pricking at his eyes. How the hell did he find out? Who told him? They hadn’t seen each other besides in passing for weeks.

And then he realised.

Yoongi.

There’s no way Yoongi didn't know. He’s Jeongguk’s roommate, for fuck’s sake. Of course he knows, no matter how clever they think they’re being.

And now he’d hurt Jimin, but Jimin’s words hurt him more. He planned on telling him. He wanted to tell him and Hoseok, but they kept fucking pushing him aside, and Jimin had the audacity to say he was blowing them off. Like they hadn’t ignored a thousand texts from him in the past month.

sunshine-hyung

jimin i think he gets it. that’s enough

Me
don’t fucking defend me. you’re no
better than he is. I wanted to tell you
about Jeongguk. I wanted to tell Hoseok
about my job. I wanted the right to tell
you everything. And I would’ve told you
what was going on if you even bothered
to give me the fucking time of day but
apparently that’s just too much to ask so
you know what? Screw you guys. Have fun
taking turns sucking Yoongi’s dick or whatever
the hell it is you do. I have a semester to pass.

sunsine-hyung

don’t be like this, please Taehyung you
don’t mean that

diminie

no he means it alright. He always means it.
even when he’s being the world’s biggest
bitch he means it. So guess what? Screw
you too Taehyung. Screw you for lying to us.
screw you for only using me when
you need an ego boost. And screw you
for never once caring about the shit going
on in anyone else’s life. I hope Jeongguk’s
dick was worth our friendship.

He had the strongest urge to snap that he didn’t even get that out of this stupid exchange in the end,
but he didn’t have the energy anymore. Instead, he just threw his phone down on the passenger seat
and started the drive home in silence. He couldn’t spare the brain power to give a shit. He had
exams to study for and routines to rehearse. Jimin could take his bullshit excuses and shove them
up his ass.
Taehyung knew Jimin didn’t care, had gleaned enough from the whopping five times they’d spoken in the past month, but he didn’t have to say every goddamn thing he didn’t want to hear.

Even his dad hasn’t called him since the last basketball game he got to attend as dance captain. Or maybe he’d heard the news about his mounting failure, and had decided he didn’t want him after all. Apparently, he just wasn’t worth anyone’s time anymore. Then again, he’d been expecting this to happen for months. A part of him had wanted it to happen. He didn’t have the heart to cut everyone out of his life, but if they did it to him, good riddance. Less stress. Less guilt. Less uselessness to deal with.

He didn’t need friends. He didn’t need Jeongguk.

But he needed his dad.

And if he’d come to the conclusion that he didn’t love him anymore just because of some stupid pictures...well, maybe he had it coming. Taehyung wouldn’t love himself anymore either. Not that he ever really loved himself. In fact, he spent most of his time absolutely loathing himself for his disgusting choices, attitude, and entitlement.

The world didn’t owe him shit. So he should stop acting like he deserved anything besides what was given to him.

His mom would be ashamed of the person he’d become.

“I completely blanked on question twelve,” Lisa admitted the second they’d left the Performing Arts Center. The pathway stood relatively deserted, the exam ending at eight in the evening, and most students drove here. “I couldn’t remember for the life of me what a slug line is.”

Jeongguk tried to suppress his laugh, but it came out anyway, earning him a punch on the shoulder. “Sorry, sorry, it’s just...we literally started our script with a slug line.”

“I know!” Lisa exclaimed, frustration good-natured. “I recalled that pretty much the minute I handed my exam in. Would’ve been helpful if I had your smart ass whispering over my shoulder twenty minutes ago.”

“And risk revoking my score? That’s cute,” Jeongguk snorted. And then he noticed the way Lisa’s cheeks turned faintly more pink, hands clasped together in front of her. He really needed a filter.

“Is that all that’s cute?” Lisa asked boldly, although her gaze remained fixed on the sidewalk beneath her feet.

It had been three days since he heard from Taehyung. Three days since he started ignoring his texts. Three days since he started pretending he wasn’t home when Jeongguk came around to check on him.

But his choice to finally break his silence didn’t have to be for Taehyung. It could be for himself.

Trying to control his voice and the nerves racing through him, Jeongguk kicked up a leaf and cleared his throat. “Um...hey, Lisa? I need to tell you something.”

Bitter wind snatched at their hair and clothes, but he wouldn’t let the chill discourage him. Still, the way her eyes went wide in anticipation didn’t lessen his guilt.
“What is it? You know you can tell me anything.”

Jeongguk found himself counting every crack in the sidewalk as they passed. “It’s kinda personal. So um, if I- you know, if I tell you...you won’t go around telling every- everyone else, right?”

Slowly, it seemed to dawn on her that they weren’t about to have the conversation she’d been dreaming of. And yet, she showed more concern than disappointment, rubbing his bicep in comfort.

“Of course I won’t tell anyone, Jeongguk,” she promised, brushing her blonde bangs back.

He nodded, but his throat felt tight. He couldn’t speak. He just continued to walk in silence, the words replaying over and over in his mind, both hidden in the back of his throat and bursting at the tip of his tongue.

Lisa squeezed his arm. “It’s really okay, Jeongguk. I’m here for you.”

He glanced at her, noticing the kindness in her gentle, shining eyes.

Kindness he trusted.

He stopped walking, and after a moment, she stopped too. Just curiously regarding him.

“I- fuck, sorry, I’ve never really said this out loud like this before.”

Most people who knew just figured it out and said it for him.

“I- um…” *Fuck it.* “I’m gay.”

“Oh.” She said it quickly, eyes widening even further in surprise. But she didn’t try to hastily cover the outburst. Instead, she seemed to consider it for a moment, and then nodded. “Okay. Sorry, I had no idea. I kind of look like an idiot now actually, but that’s not your fault.” She chuckled, giving him a warm smile. “That actually makes a lot more sense. And honestly, I’m honoured that you felt comfortable enough to come out to me. Thanks.”

Jeongguk blinked, nearly unable to come to terms with her acceptance. “Um, wow, no, you don’t need to thank me. I’m sorry if it felt like I was leading you on. I’m kind of awkward as it is, and then obviously I didn’t know how to tell you, and you’re a really good friend so I didn’t want to screw that up.”

Lisa patted his back, pushing him slightly to start walking again. “You didn’t mess up a thing, 05,” she teased him. “And I don’t want to push any boundaries, I’m just curious...are you and Taehyung...?”

Forcing himself to continue walking, he considered lying to her, but he didn’t really like lying, and she’d already proven herself trustworthy, so he eventually sighed, “I don’t know. I- it’s complicated. We were really close for a long time. And then that got all messed up and we were at each other’s throats for years. And now we’re talking again, and, well, we’re doing more than talking,” he admitted. “But I think I might’ve screwed things up? I’m not just interested in him to mess around with, I- he’s my best friend. Was my best friend. And I told him last Sunday, y’know, that I might have feelings for him again but I’m not sure yet and he seemed okay with that. But he’s been ignoring me all week and I don’t know what to do. I’m worried about him. Apparently he hasn’t been talking to Jimin or Hoseok either.”

Lisa crossed her arms against the wind, tapping her nails against the sleeve of her windbreaker.
“That’s weird. I mean, I guess they’ve been talking less since Taehyung got demoted. Honestly, the team’s not the same without him. Jimin is great as a captain, but it’s Taehyung’s presence that I miss, not his leadership. He brought life into the room, and could still joke around with us while teaching a four-minute routine. Jimin stresses so much about executing everything properly that he’s been kind of...on edge. Taehyung never let that stuff get to him. His attitude was more like, ‘Well, if I can’t figure it out, clearly there’s a different problem and this one isn’t worth worrying about.’ Jimin worries about everything. I would too, if I was in his position. Being thrust into the captaincy like that. Hoseok tries to help him out as much as he can, but we’ve wasted a lot of practice time just watching him sort shit out. There’s no way we’re winning the winter competition. From what Coach says, Taehyung’s routine was incredible, but she only watched him perform it, never recorded it or wrote anything down, and she’s too proud to ask him for it now. Hoseok’s scrambling to get something together with Jimin and Taemin. It’s all a mess, honestly, and I’ll be kinda glad when the season’s over. The first half of the semester was amazing. This second half has sort of sucked ass.”

She’d gotten rather sidetracked from their initial discussion, but Jeongguk let it pass, figuring she had about as many solutions to his predicament as he did.

“It was really shitty that he got demoted if you ask me. What he does off campus is his business. It shouldn’t influence his life here.”

“I know, right? Who cares if he’s a stripper, for god’s sake? That’s on him. And obviously, he didn’t want people to know for a reason. Whoever screwed him over with those photos is a major douchebag, and I’d happily give them a piece of my mind.”

His fondness for Lisa continued to grow.

“You and me both. The thing is, though, is that he doesn’t seem to care. Taehyung, I mean. At all. Not about who exposed him, not about his position, not about the team, and not about the shit he’s getting for it. The day it happened, he cared, but as soon as that day passed, it’s like he shoved it all aside and forgot about it. And I don’t get it. I’d be hunting that person down relentlessly. If not for revenge, then for closure at least. But not Taehyung.”

“You said it yourself,” she pointed out. “He thinks differently than the rest of us. Spends a lot of time in his own head. Maybe he chose not to care for a reason. It sounds like something he would do.”

“Yeah...maybe you’re right. It would be easier if he’d just talk to me.”

Lisa shrugged, remaining quiet for a few minutes. Finally, as they were nearing the library, she said, “I thought something might’ve been going on between you two but I brushed it off because I thought you were straight. When I walked into the guys’ locker room and you were hugging, I, um, caught the tail end of your conversation. And...maybe it’s not my place to say, but you sounded...happy, I guess. Heartbroken but happy. If that makes any sense. Happy to have him in your arms for a minute. What I’m trying to get at, is that I think he’ll realise you’re not just in it for sex or whatever deal it is you’ve got going on. He’ll hear what I heard two months ago, and he’ll realise how much he misses you. He doesn’t have it in him to shut you out forever. But you might have to push him to open up because we both know that’s not his thing.” She halted, gesturing towards the library. “This is my stop. Journalism exam in the morning. I’ve gotta study up on every kind of story published in the media ever, so wish me luck.”

Jeongguk offered her a smile and a wave. “Good luck. I know you’re going to ace it, don’t stress. And thanks for talking with me.”
“Don’t thank me for that, silly,” she brushed him off with a roll of her eyes, returning his wave as she took the left fork in the path. “See you later.”

“See you.”

He turned the other way, but spent a moment just looking up at the night sky, trying to figure out where to go from here. He’d just successfully come out to someone who wasn’t an immediate best friend.

He’d never done that before. If he didn’t count Park Bogum, which frankly, he didn’t.

And he felt bolder. Not bold enough to announce himself to the whole world. But better than he had an hour ago.

And he came to the conclusion that he should at least try to talk to Taehyung again tonight. He owed him that for whatever mistake he’d made.

…

“Taehyung?” Jeongguk called as he knocked hesitantly on his door, sliding the bag he held onto the handle. It wasn’t yet eleven, he should be home. “You don’t have to come out and talk to me if you don’t want to. I’m just letting you know that I’m leaving some food for you out here. I don’t know if you’ve eaten dinner yet, and honestly, I don’t think you have, so I just picked you up some jjajangmyeon. It’s hanging right on the handle.

Tonight would be his third night doing this. But he didn’t mind. The food disappeared every time, which meant Taehyung was listening. And that’s all he cared about.

“Um, I don’t know what I did wrong, and I’m sorry,” he continued, ignoring the pain welling up in his chest. “I know I’ve apologised every time I’ve come by, but I don’t know what else to say. I know this week is stressful, it is for me too. And I know you’re busy with work and studying. Just...can you at least tell me what I did? So I don’t do it again? I want to be better for you, I just don’t know how. You make me want to be better. A better person. A better friend. But I can’t do that if you don’t...if you don’t talk to me.”

His words were met with nothing but silence.

He felt sixteen all over again.

And Taehyung’s crushing silence pressed in from everywhere, a cold nothingness where he used to keep all of his trust. Where he used to keep his heart. And then Taehyung ripped it away and never gave it back. He still had it, five years later. He refused to let it go even though he made it so painstakingly clear that he didn’t want it. Was that selfish of him? Or was it selfish of Jeongguk to not ask for it back?

He’d never asked for it back.

He’d let Taehyung hold it for all these years, and he held it now, behind that door, slowly squeezing until it felt like a thousand needles had set in and he was bleeding him dry.

And yet, he still wouldn’t ask for it back.

Jeongguk leaned against the frame, forehead pressed against hard wood, eyes shut.
“Please, Taehyung. I can handle you yelling at me. I can handle you insulting me and telling me you hate me. But I can’t handle the silence. You don’t even have to open the door. Just...say something. Please.”

It felt as though a frigid concrete wall had been stacked up between them, fortified and soundproof. Not a word from Taehyung passed through. Not even a whisper.

He gave it a while.

Too long, if you asked anyone else.

But he thought that maybe Taehyung would open the door to grab the food and he could be there when it happened. Just to see him.

Eventually, though, Jeongguk realised he must be waiting for his footsteps to fade. And exhaustion crept into his calves, lulling him back to his own dorm.

He couldn’t stand out here forever.

“I- I’m going to go now,” he sighed to his phantom listener. “Have a good night, Taehyung. Please eat. And...I miss you. I’ll talk to you later. Hopefully. I have a game Friday night. Even if you’re not dancing, you can just come to support the team. I like seeing you there. And you can celebrate the end of finals with the rest of us. If you want. Sorry, I know how awkward this sounds. I’m not used to talking to a brick wall, but I’m learning. I’ll stop annoying you now. Goodnight.”

Jeongguk pushed off the wall and headed for Yugyeom’s room, giving Taehyung’s firmly shut door one last look before he knocked on Yugyeom’s. He’d come back and check to see if the food had gone on his way out.

Yugyeom let him in almost at once, sympathy etched on his face as he guided Jeongguk inside.

Although, perhaps if he’d stuck around just a bit longer, he would’ve heard the barely audible breaths coming from the other side of Taehyung’s door, trembling and contained to the point of near suffocation. He would’ve heard the faintest hiccup that gave away the silent tears staining the familiar sweatpants sitting against the wooden door, blocking out any light that spilled from within.

He might’ve even heard a soft voice whispering back responses to every little thing he said.

…”

“Would you cut that out?” Namjoon snapped, causing Jeongguk to immediately cease tapping his pencil against the table.

“Sorry. I didn’t even realise I was doing it.”

“Don’t be mean, Joonie,” Seokjin chided, peaking over the pile of books in front of him. Dark circles hung heavy and low around his eyes, but he still managed to maintain a better mood than Namjoon and himself combined.

Jeongguk sighed, stretching. “How do you do it, Seokjin-hyung? You’re a premed student, you intern, and you still manage to play flawlessly. What drugs are you taking and where do I buy them?”
Namjoon swatted him on the head before stuffing his nose back in his Philosophy notes. He had a different lecture hour than him, Seokjin, and Taehyung since he’d reached the four hundred level, and his exam was tomorrow. His score counted for a little more, as well, seeing as he planned to graduate next semester with a BFA in Philosophy.

“Ouch! It’s a genuine question.”

Seokjin flicked a page over in his human anatomy guide. “I just do, I guess. I’m not taking anything, or else I’d hook you up, sorry. I find little things to bring me joy, and most of those things are you guys, so...you’re really the source of my motivation.”

Namjoon glanced up at that, an adoring look in his eyes. “Really?”

“Yes, really,” Seokjin grumbled, although the corners of his lips twitched.

“I’m going to vomit,” Jeongguk declared. “You two are gross.”

“And you’re twelve, apparently,” Seokjin retorted. “We’re dating. We’re going to be cute. Get over it.”

Jeongguk grinned. “There’s that attitude.” But it didn’t last for long, smile slipping from his face as he attempted to refocus on his film study notes. Cinematic analysis didn’t exactly sound like the most enjoyable thing in the world right now, especially with the hundreds of technical terms he needed to memorise and thousands of films he needed to present as examples, but it was better than worrying, which was what he spent most of his time doing lately.

He preferred studying with Namjoon more than any of his other friends because he actually got work done when he sat down to study with him. Seokjin kept them on track, as well, so he didn’t make for a distraction. Yoongi was the worst to study with. Not because he didn’t take his exams seriously- he did. But he studied with Jimin and Hoseok in a way very reminiscent of the way Jeongguk studied with Taehyung. Unconventional, but oddly effective. Regardless, he had no desire to be in the same room as them when that happened, which unfortunately placed them in the library, since apparently Yoongi, Hoseok, and Jimin had to study in the dorm he shared with Yoongi today. He could only pray for his bed and the desk in the hopes that they would remain untouched.

Then again, he’d desecrated both of those places while studying, so he supposed he didn’t have much room to talk. But Yoongi didn’t need to know that. Especially now, with Taehyung’s silent treatment still in full effect.

Shit. No. He didn’t want to think about him.

Speaking of, it was nearing ten. He should probably head out and do that.

“I’ve gotta go,” he said, closing up his notes and sliding them back into his bag.

Seokjin held his spot with a finger while he looked at him. “What? Why? The library doesn’t close for another four hours.”

Jeongguk hesitated as he got to his feet. “I just...have some stuff that I need to do.”

One eyebrow perfectly arched, Namjoon inquired, “Does that something go by the name of Kim Taehyung?”
He froze, bag slipping off his shoulder and crashing to the floor.

“I think I’ll take that as a yes,” Namjoon decided.

“It’s not what you think,” Jeongguk rushed to explain, keeping a careful eye on Seokjin for his reaction.

He didn’t look surprised.

“Are you sure? Because I think you’ve been sleeping with him for nearly two months now, if my timeline matches up with Yoongi’s.”

It may just be the exam-fry and the heart-attack inducing amount of caffeine he’d ingested in the past week, but he didn’t get it. “What? What about Yoongi?”

Namjoon pointed at his chair. Getting the message, Jeongguk quickly sat.

“You were with us twenty-four-seven and then the minute you and Taehyung were supposedly friends again, we never saw you. And then a few weeks ago, Yoongi started talking about hearing Jimin and Hoseok constantly complain that Taehyung was blowing them off, and I started to realise that the times Taehyung blew his friends off lined up perfectly with the times you dipped out on us. We all agreed that it was kind of strange. But we wanted to give you the benefit of the doubt, so we figured you were either just catching up or the timing was very coincidental. Until Yoongi came banging on my apartment door begging me to bleach his eyes. I found this a little concerning, as you might understand, so I asked him why. And he told me a very interesting story about walking in on you nailing Taehyung against a wall. The rest of the pieces sort of fell into place from there,” Namjoon concluded, folding his hands.

Honestly, he couldn’t recall a single time when he thought they’d been walked in on, but it didn’t surprise him too much. After all, they were loud when they had sex, and they tended to be solely focused on each other. He’d have to apologise to Yoongi.

“Well, um...I guess that’s that, then.” Jeongguk still didn’t see any hatred on Seokjin’s face, but he avoided direct eye contact just in case. “I- we didn’t, you know, we waited until you guys had broken things off.”

“I caught him one day,” Seokjin informed him. “Coming back from what I can now infer was your dorm. He looked and smelled like a pornstar, so whatever it is you guys did, I really don’t want the details. But I was over it by then. Namjoon had just asked me out so I had come over to get Taehyung’s permission. We talked and we’re good, even if he wouldn’t tell me that he was sleeping with you. Just...why did you feel like you needed to keep it from us?”

Jeongguk could only stare. It should be obvious.

“I didn’t think you would approve? After my history with him?”

Namjoon shrugged. “That’s entirely your business. It’s not our place to interfere. Although, if we thought you were just getting hurt by being with him, we would say something. But up until this week, you’ve seemed okay.”

He didn’t like where this conversation was going. “Seriously guys, I need to head out. I’ll talk to you la-”

“Sit your ass down, boy,” Seokjin commanded sternly. “And tell us why you’re rushing out of everything so quickly this week. I get it, it’s finals, but we’re literally studying right now, so that
“I-” Jeongguk glanced nervously between the two of them. “I- it’s complicated. I’ll tell you about it when I figure it out, I promise. But right now I just...I just need some time. And I need to get to a decent restaurant before everything closes.”

Seokjin looked at him as if he were some sort of foreign specimen, but Namjoon seemed to understand. “Fine,” he said with a nod. “We’ll talk about it later. But we will talk about it. Fair?”

He got to his feet again, retrieving his bag. “Yes, yes, I promise. Bye, guys. Good luck! I’ll see you later.”

They waved him out, Seokjin rubbing his back in support before pushing him towards the door.

... 

However, he discovered after half an hour of trying to find a restaurant that would prepare something Taehyung liked before his shift at eleven, that he was fighting a losing battle. In resignation, he picked up a tub of strawberry ice cream from the supermarket and hoped it would suffice.

Continuing his nightly self-torture, he knocked on Taehyung’s door as he tied the bag on the handle. “Hey, Taehyung. It’s me again. I hope you haven’t left already. I’m sorry I’m late tonight, I got caught up studying with Namjoon-hyung and Seokjin-hyung. I couldn’t get you any decent food before I knew you’d be leaving, so I only brought ice cream tonight. Sorry about that, too. If you come to the game tomorrow, I promise I’ll take you out for a real dinner. I just want to see you. I don’t really care how it happens. Um...I know you probably want to leave and I’m probably forcing you to hide inside because I did something to upset you and you don’t want to see me, so I’ll let you go. I don’t want you to be late for work. Have a good nigh-”

And then he noticed the light blue stationary sheet taped to the door.

_Jeongguk-

_Please stop bringing me food. I appreciate the effort,

but I don’t need it and I don’t want it, and I
don’t want you going out of your way for me,
either. I just take it because I’d feel bad letting
it sit out. I’m not mad at you. You didn’t do
anything wrong. But please don’t come by
anymore. You were right- sometimes you have to
sacrifice to make it. And I really need to make it._
I’m barely making it as is, and if I have you in my life, I’m not even going to get close. You make me regret and second guess too many of my choices. I can’t do that. Because if I do, I’m going to lose everything I’ve worked for. I’m sorry for being such a burden. These past few months especially, but in general. I’ve put you through hell and you haven’t asked a thing of me. You don’t deserve to have to put up with that anymore. So please don’t come around here. And really. Enough with the food. Thank you for everything. And keep holding your head up high, golden boy. Best advice anyone’s ever given me. See you.

Jeongguk tore the note from the door, reading it over and over, feeling his hands wrapped around his heart squeeze a little tighter every time.

He knew it. He’d even fucking acknowledged it, and yet he did it anyway. He knew that if he told Taehyung about his feelings, he’d disappear. He knew and he still said something. God, why couldn’t he keep his fucking mouth shut? All he wanted to do was hold onto him, cling to him and protect him from harm, but instead, he’d let Taehyung rip himself away yet again, leaving a gaping void that couldn’t be filled with anything else. He would know. He’d tried to fill that void for five years, and it had only just begun to close with the feeling of having Taehyung back; his smile, his scent, his touch. Everything. Everything that made him him. He healed Jeongguk.

The ink on the paper began to run, smeared with tears falling from his lashes and the tip of his nose as he stared at the page clutched between his trembling hands.

His forehead collided with the doorframe as he braced an arm against it, trying to control the wave of guilt and pain crashing over him, shakily exhaling and frantically inhaling, attempting to remember what it felt like to breathe.

Taehyung always helped him breathe when he couldn’t. Took his hand and laced their fingers together, talking him through the dumbest, most obscure topics just to fill the empty space with little reminders to breathe in and out interspersed in all his nonsense. And the promise that he was here.

I’m right here, Jeonggukkie-hyung. You remember that time we were climbing Appa’s alder tree and I got my pants caught on a branch? They tore as I fell, and you laughed at me for so long that you got all worked up just like you are now. C’mon, breathe in for me, hyung, I’ll sit on you until you do it. Yeah, like that. Good. Out now? Want me to hold your hand too? Hey, no, don’t be mean! I was just kidding! Oh? Is hyung smiling? You do want me to hold your hand! No, no, stop squishing my face! Hyung, let me go! You’re obviously better now, so you don’t need me anymore.
No, no, Eomma said you have to drink a glass of water before we can play again. Yup, the whole thing. Hey, stop! Hyung, my face is all wet now! I’m gonna get you back. Give me that glass!...

His voice washed over him, ten years younger, grounding him.

He was okay.

He could breathe.

Taehyung would hold his hand if he asked.

Except he wouldn’t anymore. Jeongguk had forfeited that right when he essentially told him he was ashamed to be seen with him. Which was so unbelievably far from the truth.

Nothing would make him more proud than walking hand-in-hand with Taehyung.

But of course, as it always goes, he only realised it the second Taehyung told him he no longer wanted anything to do with him.

Yet, he’d said it in the sweetest way.

The sweeter the rose, the sharper the thorns.

Sinking into him, watching him bleed without remorse as he wrote sweet nothings on a sheet of crisp powder blue paper.

Taehyung would say he’s being dramatic. And he probably was being dramatic.

Life would go on.

But empty phrases did nothing to sew reopened wounds.

Unwanted yet again.

Life would go on.

Nothing changed.

…

And despite being five years older than last time, he still found himself laying on his bed in the dark, staring at the ceiling, Lana Del Rey’s sugar-sweet melancholy croon dripping through his headphones.

Needless to say, Yoongi was less than impressed.

But he let it slide, excusing it as whatever helped him get into the right zone for the game tomorrow night. It would be the one that determined whether or not they’d progress through to semifinals, so they all needed to be in top form. Still, whoever decided to hold the game the Friday of finals week had to have something personal against student athletes.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Yoongi mumbled into the darkness as they both lay in bed, hours past the time they should’ve fallen asleep to perform their best.
Jeongguk tugged an earbud out. “I don’t know.”

“He got in a fight with Jimin and Hoseok,” he commented, although Jeongguk could hear the strain in his voice. “On Monday. Basically told them to fuck off and called them shitty friends. When all they’ve done is been there for him. I couldn’t tell you the number of days that Jimin has spent crying on Hoseok’s couch because he didn’t talk with Taehyung for weeks on end. And he wanted to ask for Taehyung’s help so badly with all the dance stuff but he felt too guilty, like he’d stolen his position or something, so he never said anything. And Hoseok was hurt that Taehyung didn’t tell him a single damn thing about his job. I knew before Hoseok did, for fuck’s sake. And no matter how you spin it, not reaching out to them was a shitty move on Taehyung’s part. They’ve been with him through everything. And now he’s just cutting people off left and right. And I’m going to guess something similar happened to you.”

“He told me he didn’t want to see me again,” Jeongguk whispered. “From a note. After a week of silence, he wrote me a note. And stuck it on his door for everyone to see like it didn’t matter. Like he was just handling a chore. But...he didn’t even sound mad. He sounded sad. And tired. Just like he always does. So fucking tired. It’s just that this time, he was tired of me. He said I didn’t do anything. But he still doesn’t want me. So...so he’s never going to want me. Why does he shut everyone out? Why does being loved terrify him?”

Yoongi sighed, arm draped over his eyes. “I don’t know, Jeongguk-ah. He’s always been a bit of an enigma. Kid’s weird. He makes weird decisions. Says weird shit. And he doesn’t care whether the rest of us understand or not. But I do think he’s a little selfish. He hurts the people in his life indiscriminately and doesn’t look back. That’s not fair to his friends.”

Jeongguk shook his head, hair threatening to spill from its messy bun. “No. He’s not selfish. He’s actually really fucking selfless. I know he’s shutting everyone out because he thinks it’s the best thing for us. Not for him. He wouldn’t do that for himself. He’d feel too guilty about it. He sends all the money he makes to his dad and the hospital. And ultimately, all he really cares about right now is keeping his dad alive and debt-free. Nothing else is as important to him. And I want to help him. I want to help him so badly. But he won’t let me. Even if I could fix all of his problems, he won’t let me because he thinks he has to earn it. He’s punishing himself for god knows what reason. I just don’t want to see him hurting anymore, you know? I don’t care who I am to him as long as he’s okay. But he’s not okay. He’s so dead set on destroying himself. And there’s nothing I’m allowed to do about it.”

The room remained quiet for a long time. He’d just started to consider shoving his earbuds back in when Yoongi murmured, “Just because he doesn’t want you to do anything doesn’t mean you shouldn’t. His word isn’t law. And he’s not always right. He might need help and he’s too ashamed to ask for it. He’s not in a good spot emotionally or mentally. That’s not hard to see. He suppresses everything and lashes out. He’s isolating himself. And he’s not working in the safest environment, either. Shit like that, you know, sex, money, and drugs...it’s consuming. He’s gonna get stuck in it if he’s not careful. And it’s not a forgiving cycle...”

“He’s getting a second job,” Jeongguk voiced, numb. “He has to be an escort.”

“Isn’t that a prostitute?”

“Essentially.”

“You can’t let him.” Yoongi stated flatly. “No. Absolutely not. If Jimin and Hoseok knew, they’d tie him down and never let him leave until he promised not to do it. And I won’t condone it, either. It’s not my business, but the minute it affects the people I love, I’m going to have an opinion. And my opinion is no. There are better options.”
“I tried that already. He’s set on it, though, because he’s going to make a lot of money.”

“That much money isn’t worth his own self-worth. If he starts selling himself like a cheap whore, he’s never going to think of himself as anything more. That kind of shit goes to his head. You need to make him understand that there are other ways.”

“He thinks it’s all he’s good at.”

“Then he’s an idiot. He’s clever, charming, and talented. He’s one of the best dancers on campus. He doesn’t need a pole to show off.” Yoongi paused, then suggested, “How about this? He works at eleven, right?”

“Yeah?”

“If you don’t hear from him tomorrow or all day Saturday, you go there and make him listen. He can’t hide when he has to be in plain sight all the time. And that way you can check up on him and make sure he’s being safe and taking care of himself. Does that sound okay?”

Jeongguk mulled it over. “What if that just makes everything worse? He already told me not to come around anymore. I don’t want to cross his boundaries.”

“The minute he’s being a danger to himself is the minute he loses the right to boundaries. So if he seems okay Saturday night, then give him the option. But if he’s not okay, then you need to talk with him. Even if he’s kicking and screaming the whole time, you pick him up and you get him somewhere safe.”

“I...yeah, okay. Only if things look bad, though. I don’t want to give him another reason to hate me.”

“I don’t think he hates you, Jeongguk-ah.”

“Maybe not. But he wishes he did. He told me.”

“You probably wished you hated him too, right? Easy, painless, loveless. You wouldn’t be going through all of this right now. I’m sure it sounds nice.”

It hurt, yes. But he wouldn’t trade the pain for not caring about Taehyung.

“Sometimes.”

“I used to feel that way, too. Because I felt so shitty about loving two people at the same time. Best friends, at that. I didn’t want to hurt either of them, but I loved them both so much. But I gave it time, and I realised that I’d rather love both of them and have it hurt than give up either one of them. And then they started falling in love with each other, and I was afraid they would forget about me. But we managed to work it out, and I love both of them so fucking much. I wouldn’t trade the pain I went through to get them for anything, y’know?”

He knew exactly what Yoongi meant.

“Yeah. I do.”

“Good. We need to get some sleep, we’ve both got two exams and a game tomorrow. But...thanks for actually talking to me, Jeongguk-ah. I know it’s not your favourite thing to do. It’s not mine, either, if I’m being completely honest, but sometimes it has to happen. But now it’s time to pass the fuck out, and if you lay here worrying all night, I’m going to hit you over the head with a lamp.”
“Comforting,” Jeongguk snorted.
“I’m not kidding.”
“Oh trust me, I know. G’night, hyung.”
“Night.”

Jeongguk slipped his earbuds back in, praying that Lana Del Rey could lull him into some semblance of sleep, just enough to make sure he could function come tomorrow morning.

Thankfully, she pulled through, and he found himself drifting off into a fitful night’s rest.

But it would suffice.

…

They won the game. They were officially in the top four schools in the nation.

And yet, Jeongguk didn’t feel even an ounce of victory. His teammates all stood around him in a frenzy, whooping, cheering, high-fiving, and fistbumping. He just accepted the celebration numbly, unable to feel triumphant when he looked out over the dance team and brimming stands without spotting a head of wild dark hair and feline eyes gleaming with challenge.

Daring him to look away.

And now he had nothing to look at, much less look for.

He’d counted on Taehyung to ignite his competitive spirit, to make him want to prove his own skill and impress him. To make him finally admit he was good enough. And now that he wasn’t here, Jeongguk just couldn’t find that fire within him.

But it didn’t matter.

They won.

So he should spend the night dancing and drinking with everyone else, forgetting about his worries until sunrise. Yet the thought made him nauseous. He almost wished his exams weren’t over, if only to give him something to busy his mind with apart from Taehyung.

A hand landed on his shoulder. “Hey,” the last voice Jeongguk expected to hear dragged him out of his pity party.

He blinked up at Bogum. “Um, hey?”

Shifting from foot to foot, Bogum rubbed the back of his neck, asking, “You, uh, doing okay?”

“I’m fine, I guess. Are you?” He let his disbelief at having this conversation seep into the question, figuring Bogum must be hearing it anyway.

“Well, you know, I’m good. I guess. I mean, I’m glad we won.” Celebratory chaos continued to unfold around them, but they just stood against the stands, taking it all in. “But...has Taehyung been talking to you?”
“No,” Jeongguk replied shortly. “No, he hasn’t.”

Bogum nodded, sweat clinging to his forehead. He probably didn’t look much better. “Minho and I aren’t the only ones, then.”

“He’s not talking to Hoseok or Jimin, either.”

“Oh…” The news seemed to surprise him, brow furrowed. “Is he okay?”

“I honestly have no idea. I only have one class with him, and that was on Monday, so I haven’t seen him since.”

“I don’t have any classes with him, so I haven’t seen him all week, and he hasn’t been answering any of my texts,” Bogum admitted.

Jeongguk leaned against the base of the stands, waiting for everyone to stop throwing a party so they could go shower and change out. “He hasn’t been answering anyone’s texts,” he attempted to console him, even if it felt weird. “I don’t think it’s personal. I think he’s just going through something.”

“He’s always going through something.”

“Yes, maybe. But that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t be there for him.”

Bogum crossed his arms, moving to stand beside him and look out on the court. “You’re right. I just wish he’d let us be there for him. I’ve always tried to be there for him. I love him a lot. He’s never loved me back, but that’s okay. Not everyone is going to love you the way you love them.”

His words stuck in his head.

_Not everyone is going to love you the way you love them._

“I don’t think he knows.”

Bogum glanced at him. “Knows what?”

“Knows how much we all love him.”

“We tell him all the time.”

“I don’t. I’ve never told him.”

“Being in love with him is different than loving him,” Bogum sighed.

Jeongguk shook his head. “I’m not in love with him. But I do love him. I’ve loved him for most of my life. You’re right, though. Not everyone is going to love you the way you love them. I can’t be in love with someone who refuses to be in love. That doesn’t stop me from loving him. But I’ve never told him.”

“I used to hate you, you know,” Bogum commented. “Because I could see it. I didn’t know about your history, but I could see that you loved each other. That he loved you when he wouldn’t love anyone else. Least of all me. It made me angry. I couldn’t understand it. Why would he love the guy who’s been a dick to him all three years he’s known him? Why would he spend so much time obsessing over someone who did nothing but hurt him? And then the stuff about your past got out,
and it started making sense. And I realised...I couldn’t hate you because Taehyung didn’t choose me. That’s not fair. And it’s not fair to Taehyung, either. I’m going to love him regardless. And if I have to change the way I love him to do that, then so be it. I don’t want to hate you, Jeongguk. You’re a good guy. I don’t always agree with you, or the things you do, but that doesn’t make you a bad person. And you genuinely care about him. I can see that. And I can respect it. I’m worried now. More worried than I’ve ever been for him. He’s never gone completely silent like this. Not on everyone. And I don’t know if anyone else can get through to him besides you. He gets so lost in his own head, you know. But he listens to you. So...I guess what I’m trying to say is...please get through to him. Try anything, just make him listen. Remind him that he’s not alone, yeah?”

He could feel his throat starting to close again. “Yeah,” he forced out. “I- I was going to try and talk to him tomorrow night, but I don’t think I can wait. I’ll find him tonight and beg on my knees for him to listen if I have to...I used to hate you, too. I thought you were just some self-centered prick only interested in getting in his pants. But...you really love him. You want what’s best for him, and that’s all I want, too. You’re a good friend, Bogum, and he needs people like you in his life. Keep trying to contact him, please? Even if he’s not responding, he’s probably reading your messages. He needs those reminders. And thank you for being there for him. And for talking to me. That’s worth more than I could probably explain.”

“No problem. Thanks for being open-minded.”

A loud whistle blew across the court.

“SNU, bring it in!” Coach Yun called, waving an arm towards the locker room.

“There’s our cue,” Bogum chuckled, jogging off. Jeongguk followed him after only a second of hesitation.

After a brief speech, they were showered and changed out in fifteen minutes. His friends continued to review the highlights of the game against Yonsei, but they all stuck close to him as they walked out. Namjoon’s arm around his shoulder, Seokjin reaching up to play with his hair every now and again, Yugyeom cracking jokes, and Yoongi hovering off to the side in silent support.

This.

This is what Taehyung needed. To be surrounded by everyone who loved him.

If only he’d let himself have it.

Unfortunately, Jeongguk’s friends knew more than anyone else that his chances of speaking to Taehyung before his shift were less than zero, so they dragged him out for a celebratory dinner that ended up lasting nearly four hours. He couldn’t even get drunk like the rest of them because he had to drive to Taehyung’s club later, and he really didn’t want alcohol in his system when they finally talked.

If they finally talked.

But thankfully, Namjoon eventually drove him back to the dorm so he could get his car.

“Good luck,” Namjoon wished him, waving out his window.

Jeongguk leaned against his Genesis. “Thanks. I’ll text you when I’m home. Ideally, with him safely tucked into bed, but we’ll see.”

Namjoon nodded and rolled up his window, pulling out of the dorm parking lot.
Unlocking his own car, he slipped into the driver’s seat, and just as he put it into reverse, his phone started ringing.

The moment he read the caller ID, he knew he should ignore it. Should just drive to the club and pretend he didn’t call. But he also knew that if he didn’t pick up, his father might just send the police after him out of ‘concern for his safety.’

“What do you want?” he asked tonelessly.

“Hello, Jeongguk, it’s nice to hear from you, too. Oh? How am I? I’m doing just fine, thank you for asking. How are y-”

“I’m really not in the mood right now. I have better things to do, so please make it fast.”

He could hear his father’s long, disappointed exhale.

“Fine. Your mother-”

“Stepmother,” he interrupted through gritted teeth. “I love her, but she’s not my mother.”

“Everything is just an argument with you, isn’t it? Whatever. Your step mother, your brother, and I were simply wondering if we should be expecting you for the holidays.”

Jeongguk drummed his fingers against the leather of the steering wheel. He wanted to see his stepmom and Junsoo, but he didn’t want to spend a second longer around his father than he had to.

“I’m not sure yet. Don’t set a place for me at the table. But I might swing by to drop off presents.”

His father was silent for a minute. And then, “Junsoo really wants to see you,” he remarked quietly. “If not for us, then make time for him.”

“I will. Don’t worry about it. I’ll borrow him for an afternoon and take him to Hongdae or something. Whatever he wants to do.”

“Good...I heard you had a game tonight...?”

“Uh, yeah. We did. We won. So we’re off until after the break, and then when we come back, it’s the semifinal games and then hopefully the championship final.”

“Good...” his father repeated, sounding strained. “I’m...I’m proud of you.”

“Don’t say it if you don’t mean it,” Jeongguk snapped. “Wouldn’t want you to choke on the words.”

“I mean it. I’m proud of you, Jeongguk. You’ve put a lot into this. You deserve the victory. You’ve earned it.”

“And what if we hadn’t won tonight? Would you still be proud of me?” he asked before he could stop himself.

“Hypotheticals are a waste of time,” his father replied harshly. “You won. That’s what matters. But there are more important matches to win. Focus on those, not praise for something that’s already passed.”

“Yeah,” Jeongguk chuckled bitterly. “You’re right. I shouldn’t celebrate the single nice thing you’ve said to me in six years.”

“You get so hung up on niceness. Someday, you’re going to realise that not everyone sees the world through a lens of flowers and rainbows like you do. I’m not going to baby you, Jeongguk. I’ll
tell you when you do something that earns my praise. But you should just be expected to do things anyways, without thinking you deserve a reward.”

“I didn’t realise being nice was such a crime,” he said coldly. “And I don’t think I deserve anything, least of all from you. I don’t work my ass off at school for you. I don’t show up to practice first and leave last for you. I do it for myself. I do it for Junsoo. And I do it for Eomma, even if she doesn't see it. Not for you, though. It’s never been for you. I need to go now. Maybe I’ll see you next week. Maybe I won’t. Say hi to everyone for me, though. Goodnight.”

He hung up before his father could say anything else.

They’d gotten so close to civility.

Closer than they had in years. Maybe they were making progress.

Or maybe he was just a wishful thinker.

Regardless, he didn’t have the time to spend thinking about it. He needed to see Taehyung.

The drive took too long. Every light that stopped him felt agonising. He had no idea why he was even so concerned, but for some reason, he felt like if he didn’t get there now something bad would happen.

Finally, the lights along the streets turned neon with glaring age restriction signs on them, all advertising something raunchy and illicit. He couldn’t fathom how Taehyung surrounded himself in this atmosphere day in and day out; he could never do it. Then again, Taehyung didn’t have much of a choice.

Vaguely familiar red lights illuminated an elegant metal staircase spiralling downward into the street. Jeongguk parked on the opposite side and killed his engine, rushing across the street between the two lanes of traffic. He didn’t necessarily condone jaywalking, but the crosswalk was an inconvenient distance away and he sort of had places to be. Besides, a twenty-one year old jaywalking was about the least illegal thing going on around this part of the city.

Jeongguk took the metal steps three at a time, frustration exacerbated by the line he found awaiting him downstairs.

Fighting down the self-revulsion threatening to overtake him at his plan, he elbowed his way through the crowd and approached the bouncer.

“Any chance you can let me in quick? I’ll be in and out in ten minutes, tops,” he promised the guy, trying not to be intimidated as he had to look up to meet his skeptical gaze.

“Yeah, like I’ve never heard that one before,” he snorted, thick arms crossed.

Jeongguk suppressed a sigh, and instead dug out his wallet. Blaring music and magenta light seeped under the doors, muffling his voice low enough for him to say without fear, “I’m a friend of one of the dancers. I don’t remember what he goes by around here, but his name’s Kim Taehyung. Or we can do this the dirty way.” With that he flashed him the corners of three hundred thousand bills.

The bouncer rushed to cover his hand. “Dude, no, put that shit away. We’ve got a reputation to maintain around here. If you say you’re a friend of Taehyung’s, I believe you. No one comes around looking for him. Not by his real name, at least. Besides, you look like the kinda guy he’d hang out with. You’ve got twenty minutes.”
“Thank you,” he said, dipping his head gratefully and slipping through the door that the bouncer held open for him.

Inside…

The place looked drenched in chaos; glass and crystal coated every surface, tabletops gleaming under the kaleidoscope of lights, packed wall-to-wall with men, some seated, some standing, some crowding around the backlit violet bar and elevated stage. Three crystal poles adorned the platform, but others were dotted around the wide open space, clearly meant for more intimate shows, put on for the patrons seated on the comfortable leather sofas. The lights danced around, reflecting back and forth across the room, painting faux galaxies on the raised black ceiling.

It seemed like they had a full rotation of dancers tonight, guys in skimpy outfits attending almost every table. Some dressed in barely-there leather vests and shorts, some with ties around their necks and fingerless fishnet gloves on their hands with black heels to the sky while others wore shimmering lingerie in a rainbow of colours, jewelry dangling from every available body part. They danced in front of and on top of their clients, often touching each other, shedding aspects of their outfits, leading the men off somewhere, towards what he remembered as the champagne rooms from Taehyung’s little tour.

Jeongguk tore his gaze away from the spectacle, scouring the crowd for a familiar head of wild dark hair and a gold satin top. He felt incredibly out of place here. Most of the onlookers were older than him, and dressed in at least semi-formal wear, compared to his university-looking ass with his black hoodie and jeans, long hair a mess, not having dried completely after his shower. Whatever. He came here for a reason.

In an attempt not to draw attention to himself, he moved slowly and calmly through the chaos, keeping an eye out for anything remotely Taehyung.

Eventually, he realised he’d never find him like this, too lost in the pulsing mass of body heat and music to pick out anything distinctive.

But he did find someone who might be able to help him.

A mop of bright blonde hair caught his attention, attached to a somewhat familiar oval face. Jeongguk headed in that direction, tapping the dancer on the shoulder to get his attention.

“Baekhyun, right?” he asked, only loud enough for him to hear, which was still pretty damn loud considering their setting.

“Not around here, but yeah, that’s me.” Baekhyun squinted at him for a moment, purple light bouncing off the bejewelled collar around his neck. “You’re that Jeon guy, right? The one Taetae was with a few weeks ago?”

“Yeah. Is he here?”

Baekhyun surveyed the room, then shrugged. “I’d assume so. Is it any of your business?”

Jeongguk stuffed his hands in his pockets. “I need to see him.”

“Well, he’s probably a little busy right now. It’s the middle of the night.”

“So you haven’t seen him?”

Baekhyun shifted uncomfortably on his silver platform heels. “Seen him? Yeah. Last I checked he
was doing a group in one of the champagne rooms, but that was almost two hours ago. Pretty much his entire shift so far, actually. I haven’t seen him since.”

Apprehension coursed through Jeongguk. “That’s a long time, right? To be in a room?”

“Depends. If he’s just giving regular dances, then kind of, but if he’s putting out, then not really.”

He hated the thought of Taehyung selling himself so willingly.

“Does he do that a lot?”

Baekhyun only looked at him with pity. “Kid needs money. He’ll do just about anything to get it. Still, though, he should be finishing up. I’ll go check.”

“Hey baby! Pretty thing in the jewels! Gonna work that ass over here or do I gotta come getcha?” a guy called across the room, Baekhyun’s gaze snapping to him.

“Shit, never mind, I’ve gotta go. Duty calls.”

Jeongguk followed his line of sight, spotting a group of guys waving and whistling for him.

“Couldn’t you ask them to wait a minute? Just while you check on Tae?”

Baekhyun’s eyes clouded with sympathy, but he shook his head. “We’ve all gotta make money, honey. Just wait around. He’ll probably show soon. Jang gets touchy when he’s not out working his magic. Crowd falls at his feet the minute he steps out. Our little money maker. See you around, Jeon. Or hopefully, not.”

With that, he plunged into the crowd and left Jeongguk even more anxious than he’d been before he got here.

An idea began forming in his head, one he knew was bad, but couldn’t help but entertain it anyway.

He would give Taehyung another twenty minutes, even if that was far past the time limit he’d bargained with the bouncer.

If he didn’t emerge from the back hallway in that amount of time, he’d just have to go track him down.

Standing here, bathing in the atmosphere of Sin, he realised how easily one could succumb to the vices circling the dance floor, twining around the ankles, waists, and hearts of every patron. But the dancers especially, as they bathed here every night. Soaked up the heavy blue and magenta lights, desires spinning threads between their fingers that clung to every client; golden, enticing, and unforgiving. Of course they lacked pity. They watched men discard their inhibitions at the door nightly, only to treat them as trained toy poodles in need of pampering and discipline equally, awarding themselves the right to reward and punish as they saw fit, money and drugs being the bones tossed to them every time they pulled off a particularly impressive trick. There was no escaping such a tangled, morbid cycle because it had been plated in gold, crested in diamond, and sprinkled over with cocaine and ecstasy.

He had begun to understand.

Taehyung tied himself at the center of all of this and talked about it with no one. He felt isolated whether they stood beside him or not, because it wasn’t about them. It was about his experiences.
The injustices he’d suffered, the sacrifices he’d made.

He never said a word. Not a serious one. He joked about it. Made self-deprecating, mocking jokes calling himself a slut, a bitch, and a whore, and talked about all the ironic ways he might die.

But as Jeongguk stood here, he heard those words being tossed around every few seconds, thrown at the dancers who were supposed to accept them like compliments.

Of course Taehyung repeated them when talking about himself. It’s all he ever heard constantly.

And he’d enforced that. He’d listened to Taehyung, and called him those things himself.

He decided right then and there that he’d never say them again.

He didn’t care if it had become a kink. Taehyung didn’t need to hear them every waking moment of his life.

Instead, if he were ever lucky enough to get the opportunity to be with Taehyung again, he would only ever call him the nicknames he wanted to hear when being praised.


His pretty baby.

The minutes were ticking by.

Several dancers attempted to approach him while he waited, but Jeongguk just waved them off. There was only one stripper he came here for, and not to watch him dance.

Eventually, Taehyung’s time ran out.

Steeling himself, Jeongguk gathered his courage and headed for the back rooms. Eight entrances lined the hall, four on each side, sectioned off by red satin curtains and swaying trails of crystal beads, glimmering darkly. Music pooled from the speakers, low and sultry, enough to block out the cacophony of noise from the club but not overpowering.

Five of the rooms were vacant, curtains pulled back to reveal black and red leather lounges, shimmering gold walls, and a raised crystal pole in each one.

Which meant one of the three occupied rooms towards the very back had to have Taehyung in it.

Jeongguk held no desire to peek in and divulge the events taking place behind closed doors, but he also didn’t particularly have a choice. Hopefully, he could get his answer in a matter of seconds.

Ignoring the shakiness in his hands, he twitched aside the curtain of the first occupied room just long enough to see its occupants. Two seated men and two dancers. Neither of them were Taehyung. He swiftly dropped the curtain and moved on. The second room held one dancer and four men, doing something far more explicit than dancing. The dancer had pink hair, though, so Jeongguk passed that one by just as quickly, attempting to erase whatever he just saw from his mind.

Only one room left, then.

Quiet voices passed through the curtains, one murmuring, “Pretty little bitch,” just as another cooed, “Dumb slut, that’s right. Drool on my cock. You want a reward, sweet thing?”
Disgusted, Jeongguk peered through the curtain, only to freeze at the sight. Two men were seated on opposing leather sofas. A dancer kneeled between the long legs of one, rhinestones of his red skin-tight halter with its heavily jewelled black collar catching in the dim light, bouncing off the chains and gems composing his red and black...did those even count as underwear?

Both of the men clearly had their dicks out, one giving his a few lazy pumps while the other had his attended to by the dancer.

The dancer who was undoubtedly Taehyung, blinking up at the man with bleary, drugged-out eyes, and accepting a little pink pill off of the finger he extended to him, lapping down the length of his finger before swallowing.

Jeongguk understood Taehyung’s job. He understood the dancing, the flirting, the management of clients’ emotions and needs.

But this...this didn’t have to be a part of it. Taehyung didn’t have to get on his fucking knees for some sleazy old guy, popping pills off his fingers like candy.

Anger coursed through him, sharp and consuming.

“That’s enough,” he snapped, yanking the curtain aside. “Your time’s up. It was up thirty minutes ago.”

Taehyung turned to look at him, but his movements were unsteady, and he had to flash out a hand to balance himself on his patron’s thigh.

“What the fuck?” the guy hissed just as his friend rushed to tuck himself back in. “We’re kind of in the middle of something.”

“And that something is kind of over,” Jeongguk retorted.

Taehyung’s head lolled on his patron’s leg, and it took him a moment to squint at him. “J-Jeonggukkie?”

“Yes, angel. Just me.” Jeongguk marched into the room and gently grabbed Taehyung below his arms, lifting him into a standing position.

The guy Taehyung had been kneeling in front of shoved himself back into his pants, too, threatening, “We paid good money for him, and I’ll report him for not delivering, no matter how angry his little boyfriend gets.”

Jeongguk wrapped an arm around Taehyung’s slender bare waist, guiding his arm over his own shoulders. “You paid him to dance. Anything else that happens isn’t the club’s responsibility, and therefore, they’re not going to give a fuck about what you think he owes you. Seriously, go fuck yourself.”

With that, he made sure his grip on Taehyung was secure and led him out into the hall, sliding the curtain shut behind them and leading Taehyung to one of the empty rooms.

He should just drive him home, but after the amount of times he’d tried to crash his car last time, Jeongguk felt sort of afraid to take him anywhere. It would be safer to just wait it out, at least until he came to a little bit.

“Is there somewhere private I can take you to rest?” he asked directly, making eye contact with Taehyung to ensure he knew he was speaking to him.
Taehyung slung his other arm around Jeongguk’s neck, burying his nose into his collar. “Mhm,” he mumbled against him. “Change...changing room.”

Jeongguk gave up trying to let him walk and instead just picked him up, doing his best to preserve as much of Taehyung’s modesty as he could. “Okay, okay, up you go...” Taehyung wrapped his arms tighter around him, clinging on. “Where’s the changing room again?”

“Jeonggukkie,” he whined into his neck, fingers toying with the ends of Jeongguk’s hair.

“What?”

“M- miss...miss you. And...s-sorry.”

“I’m right here, Taehyung. And you have nothing to be sorry for,” he reassured him, hoisting him up a little higher to support him better. “But I need you to tell me where to go. I don’t remember, and this place looks different when it’s full.”

Taehyung giggled against him. Worried, Jeongguk pressed the back of his hand to his forehead. He was burning up. Then again, that would make sense if he’d taken anymore of those pink pills, which bore an uncanny resemblance to ecstasy.

Realising that he’d be no help in his current state, Jeongguk just carried him back out into the club. He spotted an unoccupied dancer lingering by the edge of the stage and hurried his way.

“Sorry, pardon me, but-”

“Dude, what the hell? You can’t just haul a dancer over your shoulder. I know V’s cute, but like, put him down.”

Jeongguk blinked, processing the words he said as the guy glared at him with sharp dark eyes and firm brows furrowed.

V? Oh, right.

He glanced at Taehyung, still burrowing into him as much as he could.

Taehyung’s stripper name. Still kind of a weird thought.

V...V for victory, he supposed, having not given it much thought the first time he heard the name. It suited him.

He shook his head to clear it. That didn’t matter right now.

“No, sorry, you’re misunderstanding. I’m a friend of Tae’s- er, V’s and I kinda need to get him back to the changing room so I can get him home safe, but I don’t know where that is and he won’t tell me.”

The guy eyed him up and down suspiciously, managing to look oddly impressive in tight pink shorts and a sleek silver tie over his toned chest. “What’d you say his name was?”

Did knowing a dancer’s full name get you a free all-access pass around here or something?

“Taehyung. Kim Taehyung. We grew up together, and as you can see, he’s kind of out of it right now, so I’d really like to make sure he’s okay.”

He nodded, signalling behind Jeongguk. “On the other side of the stage, there’s a door right before
the platform. Should be unlocked.” Then, he offered his hand. “Kwangsu. Let me know if you need anything else. Tae’s kinda our baby around here, so seeing him like this...man, it’s been going on for awhile now. Just take care of him, yeah?”

Surprised by the gesture, Jeongguk took it. “Of course. Thanks for the help, Kwangsu.”

Finally having gained some direction, Jeongguk checked on the status of Taehyung’s consciousness as he carried him.

“You still with me, Taehyung?”

“M’fine, Jeonggukkie.” Taehyung batted away his hand, words slurring together. “Y’know, y’called me angel earlier. Liked that.”

How Taehyung managed to pluck that specific memory out of his head was beyond him.

“You don’t need to flirt with me,” he sighed, locating the black door Kwangsu pointed out to him.

“Not flirting,” Taehyung protested. “Just...just saying.”

Jeongguk turned the silver handle, beyond thankful when it gave to reveal a clean changing room with cream countertops, floors, walls, and ceilings. A rack of clothes decorated the far wall while the one closest to them stood lined with lockers. A large mirror reflected out from above the counter, on which makeup had been strewn across every available space.

Best of all, the room was empty.

Carefully, he set Taehyung on the counter, watching as he crossed his legs with complete nonchalance and stared back at Jeongguk with hazy eyes.

“How we get some clothes on you?” He figured that was probably the best place to start.

But a pout immediately tugged at Taehyung’s red-glossed lips. “Y’don’t like my outfit? S’new.”

Taehyung looked fucking sinful in his outfit, actually, but Jeongguk had bigger things to worry about right now. He didn’t really give a shit about how sexy Taehyung looked when he was going through something like this. His job was to take care of him. Nothing else mattered at the moment.

“I like you in any outfit,” he supplied instead, knowing Taehyung would most likely feel hurt in his current state if he said anything else. “Can you tell me which locker is yours?”

Taehyung bit his lip, pointing vaguely across from him. His nails shimmered a tempting ruby red. Apparently, he’d taken to painting them.

Jeongguk followed his finger, standing by the bank of lockers. He tapped one sort of in Taehyung’s line of sight. “This one?”

A laugh spilled from Taehyung’s lips. “Nuh-uh. Cold.”

His cheeks were flushed a frightening shade of pink.

It took him too many minutes of Hot and Cold to figure out which locker belonged to him, and even longer to get Taehyung to recall the passcode. After ages, however, he dragged Taehyung’s black duffel bag out of the locker and plopped it on the counter beside him, tossing his white sweater, light jeans, and black underwear on the counter as well.
One more moment of rifling around, and he discovered a toothbrush and toothpaste. “Brush your teeth for me first, angel,” he requested, putting paste on the brush for him, wetting it under the tap in the counter, and passing it to him.

Taehyung didn’t throw a fit. He just did as he asked, swinging his legs and keeping his fist curled around one of Jeongguk’s fingers.

Almost as if he were afraid he’d disappear.

Once he had finished, Jeongguk washed the brush, put it back, and reached around behind him, untwisting his shirt and collar so they fell to his lap.

“Arms?” he requested gently, holding his sweater.

“I’m a big boy, I can dress myself,” Taehyung grumbled, snatching the sweater out of his hands. It took him a few tries, but he got it over his head and his arms through the sleeves. He even managed to get his underwear on too, although he struggled for a moment with his jeans. Any other time, Jeongguk would laugh at the sight of Taehyung trying to pull his skinny jeans over his ass, but for some reason, it didn’t seem as funny right now.

Jeongguk tugged him forward into a standing position and yanked his jeans up, catching him as he swayed. Once again, Taehyung pushed his hands away to finish getting himself dressed, but frankly, Jeongguk was just relieved he could do that much himself.

The moment his clothes were on, Taehyung sagged against him, gripping on tight to his hoodie. Jeongguk instinctively wrapped an arm around him.

“Missed you,” Taehyung sighed to his chest.

“I missed you, too.” He ran his hand up and down Taehyung’s back in lazy circles, other hand coming up to stroke his hair.

There were so many things he needed to say, but he couldn’t say any of them now. Not with Taehyung like this.

“Hot,” Taehyung eventually complained.

Wearing a sweater with wide stitches and nothing underneath. Of course he’d be hot, because Taehyung defied every semblance of normality.

Then again, the air in the changing room did feel stifling, weighed down with the heady scents of perfume and nail polish.

Still, Jeongguk didn’t feel safe driving with him in the car just yet.

“Can you wait it out a little longer?”

Taehyung shook his head. “Don’t you feel warm, Jeonggukkie?” He reached up, patting Jeongguk’s cheeks. “Mhm, very warm. C’mom, let’s go upstairs.”

A tug came on his wrist as Taehyung headed for the door. Thinking fast, Jeongguk grabbed his bag and everything in it before allowing himself to be led out of the changing room. However, Taehyung didn’t go far, taking a sharp left turn into an alcove he hadn’t noticed before. Soon enough, they were scaling a flight of stairs and Jeongguk had no idea where they were going.
For the thousandth time in his life, he was completely at the mercy of Taehyung’s whims, and for the second time in his life, he was completely at the mercy of Taehyung’s intoxicated whims.

Eventually, the ground levelled out into another hall, at the end of which stood a single door with a keypad beside it.

Without missing a beat, Taehyung dragged Jeongguk right to the door and plugged a four-digit number in, letting out a sound of delight as they heard a lock click open.

Latching onto the handle, Taehyung yanked the door aside to reveal an open rooftop. Inky midnight stretched overhead for miles, broken only by a faint hue of orange from the city. An old clothesline twined with fairy lights had been strung up, and a ratty blanket lay beneath it. Taehyung bent over by the door, and the lights flickered to life, little white glimmers to challenge the night sky.

Taehyung let out a long sigh, breath clouding in front of him with the cold, before dropping to sit on the blanket. Hesitant, Jeongguk set his bag down and sat beside him.

A low yawn came from Taehyung, who dropped his head on Jeongguk’s shoulder the moment it became available to him.

He didn’t mind. He would’ve offered it anyway.

“S’nice...isn’t it?”

Jeongguk looked out over the concrete rooftop, and the safe haven Taehyung had created for himself upon its stone expanse.

“Yeah. It is nice.”

Exhaustion dragged at him, but his priority was Taehyung. He wouldn’t fall asleep, even as his little dancer nodded off on his shoulder.

They sat there for a long time. Long enough for the chaos of midnight to pass in favour of the reassuring trickle of traffic, streetlamps, and closing businesses of early morning.

Within the midst of neon darkness, Taehyung must’ve woken up, hands curling around Jeongguk’s arm to hold him steady.

“Time is it...?” he asked, substances clearly still lingering in his system. At least he sounded coherent.

Jeongguk shifted his phone from his pocket without jostling him. His limbs felt stiff, aching with cold. “Three-forty.”

A few minutes passed.

“Hate it here,” Taehyung whispered. “But up here...it’s okay.”

“He wouldn’t want you to do this to yourself, you know,” Jeongguk told him quietly. He’d spent the past couple of hours thinking about how to put it. “Your dad. He’d want you to be safe and happy.”

“Yeah...” Taehyung laughed, cold enough to rival the frigid air. “But we can’t always get what we want.” And as if he’d said nothing, Taehyung stretched out, choosing instead to lay his head on
Jeongguk’s thigh. “You’re too good for me, y’know? You, n’Bogum, n’Jimin, n’Hoseok. All too good. All got your shit sorted out. Mm, not me. Probably won’t ever be me. Don’t wanna keep weighing you guys down. Being a burden. Source of all your problems. You’d be so happy without me, right?...Me too. I’d be happy without me too.”

Jeongguk felt a lump form in his throat from Taehyung’s words. Brushing his hair away to look at him, he pleaded softly, “Don’t say that. Don’t say things like that ever. Please. No one thinks that. Bogum, Jimin, Hoseok...they all love you so much. You’re not a burden to anyone.”

He felt fingers curl into his thigh as Taehyung turned to meet his gaze. A rare vulnerability shined in his eyes. “And what about you?”

“You’re not a burden to me, either.”

“No. You...you said they love me. What about you? Do you love me?”

Jeongguk knew the answer to that question. He’d known it for years. But after everything that happened between them, he still wasn’t sure if he was in love with the Taehyung from his memories or the one laying across his lap.

“I used to,” he finally settled on, unable to give him anything else.

Taehyung fell silent for a moment, thumb brushing over the texture of his jeans. “...Not anymore?”

Jeongguk twisted a strand of his hair delicately around his finger.

“I don’t know.”

“Thanks.”

Sensing sarcasm, Jeongguk said, “I’m not going to-”

“No, I mean it. Thanks. For being honest with me.”

“Oh.”

“I don’t know if I love you either. If that helps.”

He didn’t know what to say in response. The sounds of nighttime traffic answered for him.

“Do you think...I mean, if I weren’t here...would it change anything?” Taehyung whispered.

“Everything would be the same. Right? But...but you’d be happier. I’ve put you through so much. You should’ve just listened to me and stayed away. I’m never going to do anything but hurt you. I heard you...you know. Every time you came and talked to my door. I talked back. But you couldn’t hear me. And...and that’s sort of what my life feels like. Everyone talking to me, talking about me, saying things that I can hear. But when I go to say something back...I can’t. Like I’m underwater, none of my words breaking the surface. Because I won’t let them. All that gets through are the things that hurt. The insults, rumours, and heartbreak. Dropping in like stones. Sending ripples. Things I can’t touch. Can’t take back. No one hears me when I say anything else. And if...if that’s what my destiny is supposed to be...just, just screaming at a wall of water...I think that’s kinda cruel.”

“I don’t think that’s your destiny,” Jeongguk said quietly, continuing to card his hair through his fingers. Taehyung shut his eyes. “You’re so much more than you think you are, Taehyung.”

Thinking about his father’s words, he murmured, “You don’t have to do anything to be incredible.
You don’t have to work for every ounce of love. And I can’t imagine how lonely you must feel. But shutting out all of your friends and support isn’t going to help. It’s just making things worse. And I know that you know that, but you’re doing it anyway because you think that’s what we need. But that’s not true. No one would be happier if you weren’t here. You bring so many people together. You touch lives and fill hearts. Nothing can replace that. Nothing can come even close to matching that.”

His gaze wandered to the night sky. It was layered heavy with light pollution but somewhere to the north, he could just make out…

“Look,” he spoke softly, pointing up. Eyes fluttering open, Taehyung followed his finger. “Those two stars are right next to each other. Side by side. Not colliding. Not burning up. Not fading out. Still bright. Still beautiful. But they aren’t alone. Think about it. There are entire galaxies in the sky, and constellations, and clusters within them of stars so close together that they can light up the night. And maybe we can’t see them here. But I know that when you go home to Busan, you’ll be able to look outside and see them, right off your back porch. You live outside of town, the city can’t touch them. I bet your dad looks at them every night and thinks about you. You’re his star, you know. You always have been.”

Jeongguk glanced down to see tears on Taehyung’s cheeks, sparkling with his highlighter and the city lights. He brushed them away with his thumb, but didn’t tell him not to cry.

“He hasn’t called me since the last game I danced at.”

“Maybe he’s waiting for you to call him.”

“Or maybe he found out and he’s ashamed.”

“He’s never going to be ashamed of you. And I know that if he found out, he’d call you instantly to make sure you were okay.”

Taehyung reached up to trace along the pair of stars he’d spotted in the sky.

“I don’t know if I’m okay.”

Jeongguk collected another tear on his thumb. “You don’t always have to be okay. You’re allowed to break down, and feel like shit, and cry, and confide in other people.”

“I don’t...who can I confide in? I know you want to help but you don’t-”

“-get it,” Jeongguk finished for him. “You keep saying I don’t get it. And I don’t. I don’t get why you think you have to carry this burden all by yourself. I don’t get why you’re so insistent on punishing yourself.”

“Because it’s my fault,” Taehyung whispered, voice raw and ragged with grief. “When she died, Appa had to do all the work because I wanted to finish school, and I needed help with tuition if I got into uni. His health was already bad. We didn’t know what it was at the time, but he took on odd jobs at gas stations and factories, and that just made it worse. If I’d just stopped being selfish for a minute, maybe it wouldn’t have gotten so bad. Maybe he would still be happy. Sometimes I wonder if he’d rather have her. They were so in love. Maybe he’d be happier if I’d gone instead.”

“No, no, no,” Jeongguk rushed to soothe him, unable to even hear him say things like that anymore. “No, Taehyung. None of it is your fault. Things like that are uncontrollable, unpredictable, and unfair. There’s no fault involved. Your dad wanted you to finish school. He wanted you to be able to attend uni. That’s the future he wanted for you, and as your parent, he was
determined to deliver it. He would’ve gotten sick either way. Leukemia doesn’t just appear. And he
wouldn’t trade you for the world. He loves you.” When Taehyung didn’t say anything, he added,
“You’re going home over break, right?”

After a beat of hesitation, Taehyung nodded. “Yeah. That was the plan. I told him I’d be home
Monday night.”

“You should talk to him. About all of this. Because I can sit here with you for hours and tell you
how much he loves you, but it’s not the same coming from me. You need to talk with him.”

“...Maybe you’re right.”

Taehyung burrowed a little closer to him, nose brushing against his waist.

“Hey, Jeongguk?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Stop saying that. You don’t need to be sorry. I understand why you did it. I wasn’t mad.
Just...worried, that’s all. And...hurt. I care about you a lot. You know that. And when you tell me
you don’t want to see me…”

“That was insensitive of me,” Taehyung mumbled into his hoodie, rolling over to face the sky
again. “I wasn’t thinking.”

“It’s okay.” And he meant it.

“Thanks for feeding me all week.”

He chuckled, ruffling his hair. “It’s no problem. I’d feed you every week.”

Taehyung blinked, gaze flicking to meet his.

“Do you want to come home with me?”

“Well, I figured I’d drive you back, seeing as-”

“No,” Taehyung interrupted him. “Like...for the week. Come back to Busan with me…”

“Oh.”

Taehyung seemed to spot something in his expression because his eyes went wide. “You don’t
have to,” he hurried to say. “I just...I don’t know, never mind. Forget it-”

“Wait, no, I- I think I might like that. If...if your dad won’t mind.”

His heart was racing. He just prayed Taehyung couldn’t feel it.

“Really?”

“Yeah,” he decided after a moment of checking to see if he was sure. “It’ll be like old times.”

Taehyung pulled himself into a sitting position, hair messy, makeup running.

Yet still beautiful.
“Can you forgive me? For the way I acted this week? And the way I’ve acted for the past five years?”

Jeongguk saw the fear of rejection in his eyes. Gently, he reached out and caressed along his cheek, saw the way his fear lessened and he leaned into his touch.

“Of course. I forgave you a long time ago. And I forgive you now. But only if you can do the same for me.”

“I forgive you,” Taehyung said softly. “You’re my best friend.”

For some reason, the thought didn’t satisfy him the way it used to.

“I don’t want to be your best friend.”

That same fear resettled in his eyes. “Oh, sorry, I-”

Jeongguk found his hand, holding it tight.

“I want to figure out what comes next.” The words were hushed, but he didn’t let any hesitation in them. He needed Taehyung to know he was serious.

Taehyung’s lips parted in surprise. “Oh,” he repeated, breathless. “I- I want that, too.”

The confirmation sent a rush of warmth through him, a sensation only being with Taehyung brought on.

“But not now. Not when we’re both exhausted, and you’ve been under the influence for hours. We’ll talk about it more later, okay?”

Slowly, Taehyung nodded. “That’s...that’s fair.”

But Taehyung’s eyes never left him, searching for something.

“Can I kiss you?”

Jeongguk wanted nothing more than to pull him close and kiss him until the sun rose, but he couldn’t. “Not now. Not until after you’ve slept.”

Taehyung bit his lip, but he didn’t protest. “Okay.” Still, he bunched his hand in the fabric of Jeongguk’s hoodie, clinging to his bicep.

“Do you want to go home?”

He cast his gaze around the rooftop and the sky once more beforing murmuring, “My car...I can’t drive.”

“We’ll get it in the morning,” Jeongguk promised.

“Then...yeah. Let’s go back. I just need to tell Jang-ssi that I’m heading out.”

Jeongguk got to his feet, offering his hand to Taehyung who took it after a beat. Fingers interlaced, he followed Taehyung downstairs.

They found his manager in the changing room, a frantic look on his face that melted into relief the second he spotted Taehyung.
“Stop scaring me, Taehyung-ah!” Jang exclaimed, causing Taehyung to wince from the noise. “Sorry, sorry, I just...you make me so worried lately. I didn’t know where you went and I thought it was like the other time and-”

“I’m sorry I worried you,” Taehyung interrupted his rambling. “I’m not feeling very well so Jeongguk-hyung is going to take me home. Is that okay?”

“Of course, of course,” Jang repeated, smoothing over Taehyung’s shoulders. “Get better, okay? Call in sick if you need to tomorrow night.”

Taehyung nodded. “We’ll see. Thanks, Jang-ssi. Have a good rest of your night.”

“You too. Can I escort you to the door?”

“Sure.”

Jang saw them off, making sure no one bothered them on the way out. Not that anyone said a word to Taehyung the moment he dressed normally. The hierarchy in here was clear.

Although, the escort was nice simply because the bouncer who’d given Jeongguk twenty minutes couldn’t say anything about his overstayed welcome when the manager personally led them out of the club and to Jeongguk’s car.

“Drive safe!” Jang called as he retreated back to the other side of the street.

Jeongguk waved, and then helped Taehyung into the passenger seat. Of course, he swatted away his hand, grumbling, “I can put on my own seat belt. I’m not a baby.”

Rolling his eyes, he leaned back over him and clicked the buckle into place. “No, but you’re my baby. So stop complaining.”

Taehyung shot him a piercing look, but his nose twitched and suddenly he was smiling, ruining the effect.

“Cute,” Jeongguk remarked simply, sliding into the driver’s seat.

“Shut up.”

Within a few minutes, however, Taehyung fell asleep with his head against the window, only waking up after Jeongguk parked by his dorm.

“We back already?” he mumbled, yawning.

“Mhm.” He turned the car off and got out, disappointed when Taehyung managed to exit the car himself, bag thrown over his shoulder. “Let me walk you up.”

Taehyung regarded him cautiously, but gave his permission. However, once they took the lift up and stood in front of his door, Taehyung took a deep breath, asking, “Would you...mind...staying?”

Jeongguk didn’t want him to feel like requesting his company meant taking a hit to his pride.

“I was hoping you would ask,” he admitted.

As Taehyung let out the breath he was holding, his face softened. “Oh. Okay. Cool. Then, um…” He reached into his bag, digging around until he located his key and unlocked the door. “Come in, I guess.”
Jeongguk surveyed the room once Taehyung flicked the lights on, announcing, “We’re cleaning tomorrow,” upon seeing the clothes, library books, and notes scattered all over the place.

“Like you’re one to talk,” Taehyung snorted, dropping his bag to go fish for sleepwear. “Done any laundry this week?”

“Thought about it,” Jeongguk replied cheerfully. “Got kinda sidetracked, though.”

Taehyung tossed him the pair of sweatpants he’d stolen from him on Sunday. “How’d the game go?”

“We won,” he stated, sliding off his jeans and replacing them with the sweatpants.

“Told you you’d make it,” Taehyung reminded him through another yawn, shedding his clothes. “Congrats. I should’ve gone. I’ll go to the next one. Semifinals are kind of a big deal.”

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

It felt nice to talk about normal, everyday life with him. Something he could get used to.

“Nah, I want to. Hand over your hoodie.”

Jeongguk gave him a bemused look. “Don’t you have one from last week?”

Taehyung crossed his arms, eyebrows raised and everything. “Well, yeah, but it doesn’t smell like you anymore. I need a fresh one.”

He shook his head, but forfeited his hoodie, trying not to laugh. “Got an extra t-shirt, then?”

“And with that, he slipped his black hoodie over his head and breezed past him towards the restroom, leaving Jeongguk hoodieless, shirtless, and really fucking happy.

He’d missed him.

So, he did as requested and tumbled into Taehyung’s bed, pulling out his phone to text Namjoon.

Me
i’m back at tae’s dorm with him. he’s safe and we talked

His phone vibrated instantly.

Namjoon-hyung
Good, I’m glad. I’ll let Yoongi know that you’re staying there with him. Sleep well.
He heard the restroom door open and the overhead light flicked off.

Jeongguk set his phone on the bedside table, shifting over to leave room for Taehyung.

“Sorry if I knee you in the stomach,” Taehyung apologised as he climbed over him, tucking himself between Jeongguk’s body and the wall.

“You didn’t but I wouldn’t care either way,” Jeongguk informed him, rolling over so they were face to face.

Taehyung’s warm eyes shone back at him in the darkness. “Still too good for me,” he sighed, reaching over to tuck a lock of hair behind his ear. The gesture was surprisingly gentle. “I’m really sorry. For the things I said in that note. I don’t know how you can-”

“Shh.” Jeongguk caught his hand, pressing a kiss to his knuckles before releasing him. “We talked about it. I’m okay. I’m just glad I’m here with you now.”

“Me too.”

“So let’s get some sleep, okay?”

“Yeah. That sounds nice,” Taehyung agreed. And then he dipped his head to rest against Jeongguk’s chest, wrapping an arm around him, legs draped over his own.

Feeling a smile on his lips, he pulled Taehyung closer, burying his nose in his hair and shutting his eyes, content for the first time in a week.

“M’not gonna leave when I wake up,” Jeongguk mumbled. “Just so you know.”

“Good,” he hummed against him. “I don’t want you to.”

They fell asleep like that, bodies intertwined.

And after five years of feeling lost, Jeongguk realised he’d finally found his home, having had it with him all along.

Chapter End Notes

all i’m saying is i never consented to write anything except angst and porn. but i threw in some fluff there as an apology. thanks for reading! i’ve been pretty amazed by this fic’s reception, to be honest, it’s been way more popular than i expected. i’m actually pretty proud of this trash baby, so all the kudos/comments/bookmarks/shares are really appreciated. thank you!

twitter happens. might fuck around and became an au prompt account but who knows
If I Touch My Hand Against Yours

Chapter Notes

i tried to write fluff as taekook finally figure things out~
title from taehyung's inner child (stream on!)
(ps: all outfits taehyung wears in the club)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Taehyung awoke abruptly to the roiling of his nauseous stomach, head spinning like a carnival ride. Panicking, he shoved the blankets off of him and tried his best to get over Jeongguk quickly without waking him, just barely making it to the restroom before vomiting up the meager contents of his stomach into the toilet. He stayed there for a minute, retching and dry heaving until nothing else came up, braced against the porcelain bowl.

A hand landed on his back, rubbing slow soothing circles between his shoulder blades and down his spine. He didn’t have to look up to know Jeongguk had squatted down beside him. Careful fingers tucked his hair away from his face.

“You’re okay,” he murmured. “Get it all out.”

Another ill wave washed over him and he threw up once more. He could feel the sweat of sickness on his forehead, throat burning and sore.

Coughing, he squeezed the porcelain rim with trembling hands.

“Is that everything?” Jeongguk asked gently.

He nodded, shutting the lid and flushing down his mess. Jeongguk rose to his feet and wet a washcloth only to kneel down beside him again, dabbing at his mouth.

“Stop.” Taehyung weakly pushed him away. “It’s gross.”

Jeongguk just gave him a look, unimpressed. “Like I haven’t cleaned you up after a night of underage drinking before.”

Taehyung tried to scowl at him, but that much movement made him feel sick again. “I’m an adult now,” he mumbled.

“And I’m still going to take care of you,” he replied simply.

He shook his head, shakily getting to his feet.

Following suit, Jeongguk reached out a hand to hold him steady, and kept holding him as he opened a new toothbrush, arms wrapped around his waist even as he brushed his teeth vigorously, determined to rid his mouth of anything that might still linger. At least he wasn’t actually sick, and this had become a fairly familiar routine by now, cleansing himself of all the toxins he ingested the night before.
Taehyung could feel Jeongguk’s body pressed against his own, warm and solid, certain, as he held him. Jeongguk’s chin tucked over his shoulder, hands resting over his stomach, mumbling sleepy, near incoherencies just to give him something else to focus on.

He wanted to feel this forever.

Once he washed up and thoroughly rinsed his mouth with water, he leaned back against him.

“What time is it?”

“Don’t know,” Jeongguk hummed. “Early.”

“Back to bed?”

Jeongguk nodded, nose brushing his hair. “Definitely.”

He didn’t let go of him even as they left the restroom, single hand on his waist guiding him back under the covers. As they lay down, Jeongguk pulled him close against his body once more, chest to chest.

His eyes fluttered shut but Taehyung couldn’t stop looking at him, and the smooth planes of his cheeks, his jaw, his beautiful dark lashes, the little mole under his lip, the way his pink lips parted as he drifted off.

Taehyung trailed a hand along his cheek, unable to help himself.

Jeongguk was here.

Jeongguk was here with him, sleeping in his bed, holding him, promising not to leave.

It felt wrong, somehow. Wrong because he’d always left, and Taehyung didn’t want to fall asleep in case he tried to do it again.

“I can feel you staring at me,” Jeongguk mumbled, blinking his eyes open. “What’s on your mind?”

Taehyung opened his mouth to say something, but couldn’t force the words out. He just shook his head. “Nothing.”

Jeongguk’s arm returned to its place around his waist as he said quietly, “I know it’s not nothing. You can tell me. I want you to get some more sleep and I know you won’t if you’re thinking.”

He still knew him too well.

Hands moving of their own accord, Taehyung caressed along his jaw, down his neck and chest, planting his hand where he could feel his heartbeat. Steady. Reassuring.

But it sped up when he touched him.

“Are you gonna leave?” he whispered.

Jeongguk clasped his own hand over Taehyung’s, orange light from outside reflected in his pupils.

“You really think I could leave? When you make me feel like this?”

He wanted to say something beautiful. Jeongguk deserved something beautiful.
But whenever Taehyung tried to say what he really felt, no one ever heard him.

Instead, all he could say, knowing he’d be heard, was, “You say the sappiest shit sometimes.”

Yet Jeongguk didn’t get mad. He smiled and squeezed his hand.

“You like my sappy shit.”

“Sometimes.”

“All the time.”

“Half the time.”

“And the other half?”

Taehyung pretended to consider the question.

“I tolerate it.”

He liked it.

Jeongguk placed a gentle kiss on his forehead.

“That’s all I can ask for.”

“Hey, Jeongguk?”

“It always terrifies me when you start sentences like that, you know.”

“Why?”

“Because every time you start a sentence like that, it ends up making me question my existence or breaking my heart. And I really don’t feel like having an existential crisis or being sad again,” he answered as if it should be obvious.

“Oh…” Taehyung didn’t really understand how he gave him existential crises, but he did understand what it felt like to fear a broken heart. “Sorry. I, um, I was just going to tell you that I’m sober now. And I brushed my teeth.”

Jeongguk’s thumb brushed over his knuckles. “Thanks for the clarification? I was there, you know. You smell very minty.”

“No, no, I mean...you know...I got some sleep. And I’m sober.”

Taehyung blinked, trying to convey his message.

Jeongguk just blinked back.

“For fuck’s sake, I want you to kiss me, you dickwad,” Taehyung sighed in exasperation. “Or tell me that I can kiss you. I’m not picky.”

“You’re charming, you know that?” Jeongguk chuckled, but he pressed his thumb to Taehyung’s bottom lip, stroking along it.

“Yes, I’m a fucking enchantress. Are you going to kiss me or not?”
“What would you do if I said no?”

Sensing a challenge, Taehyung immediately pulled his best pout, looking up at Jeongguk through his lashes as teary-eyed as possible. “I’d be sad because hyung doesn’t wanna kiss me anymore.”

Jeongguk’s eyes widened in panic. “No, no, Taehyung, you know I can’t handle it when you do that.” He pressed a hasty kiss to his lips, nose bumping against his own. “I’m right here,” he breathed. “And I’m going to kiss you until you fall asleep again.”

His smile returned almost instantly. Content, he leaned in and captured Jeongguk’s lips in a real kiss this time.

And it felt like heaven.

Every time they kissed, rare as it might be, it felt like every sharp cut they’d left on each other with dagger-like words was being washed over with cool, soothing water, repairing wounds and old rivalries.

They played it safe for a minute. Longer than they normally did. Just little pecks exchanged between the two of them, smiling against each other, sharing air. The same way they started kissing years ago.

But eventually Taehyung wanted more. He was the first to want more back then, too. He’d kissed Jeongguk teasingly for the first time when he was twelve. Jeongguk had been thirteen. But it was Jeongguk who turned beet red when Taehyung kissed him to distract him from his game.

He’d just wanted attention. It was innocent and fast and inconsequential.

And then a year passed. They didn’t mention it again; Taehyung, because he didn’t think it was a big deal, Jeongguk, because he blushed a bright pink every time he thought about it.

But when Jeongguk turned fifteen, they suddenly started kissing more often. Taehyung gave him a voucher for free cuddles and kisses as a birthday present because he didn’t have money to buy anything, and Jeongguk, although shy at first, ended up taking full advantage of it. Mostly the cuddles, but on weekend nights when Jeongguk stayed over and they’d been snuggling for a long time, he would stammer out a request for a kiss and Taehyung was more than happy to deliver. Just a brief peck or two.

Until Taehyung wanted more. Until they were both fifteen and Taehyung celebrated by sitting on top of Jeongguk, keeping him glued to the couch as he told him he wanted to kiss him for real.

And with enough convincing, he did. Kissed him with his hands on Jeongguk’s shoulders, Jeongguk’s on his waist, nervous but excited. Kissed him until he heard a key jingling in the front door lock and he practically flew off of Jeongguk’s lap to sit beside him, both pretending like nothing happened as his dad returned from visiting his mom in the hospital.

It had been a bittersweet time in his life.

But he wanted to kiss Jeongguk for real now.

His lips skated along Jeongguk’s, teasing, nibbling, until Jeongguk finally relented and let him in. He wanted to spend hours just memorising the way he tasted. The way Jeongguk kissed him felt calm and controlled, the sort of kiss he needed in the early hours of morning, like a cup of chamomile tea and honey.
Jeongguk gripped him tight, though, ever contrastant with his relentless push and pull. Kissing him slowly but holding him right up against his body, making sure Taehyung can feel the heat radiating from his bare chest, hands warm in their place on his hips.

Taehyung liked the feeling of his hands on him, always had. Better when he could feel his calluses on his skin. So as he sucked gently on the tip of Jeongguk’s tongue, he shifted closer, tugging up the fabric of his borrowed hoodie.

Warm hands slotted into place on his waist almost immediately, as if Jeongguk unconsciously sought out his skin. His lips were so soft, so incredibly soft against Taehyung’s own, not ruined by years of slathering them in lipstick and gloss every night only to be kissed off by strangers.

“Taehyung,” Jeongguk sighed against him, kissing along his jaw and down his throat.

He’d never said his name like that. Like a prayer.

Something took over him. Their bodies were moving as one. Taehyung knotted his hand in Jeongguk’s hair, holding him in place while he marked him up and made him tremble under his tongue and teeth.

His neck had looked so empty this past week.

A low moan escaped him when Jeongguk sucked on the sensitive part of his throat, near his pulse-point. He felt Jeongguk caress up his arm, tugging his hand from his hair to lace their fingers together. Taehyung squeezed when Jeongguk latched his teeth on him particularly hard, and he always eased up, lapping over his skin as an apology.

At some point, just needing to feel him closer, Taehyung wrapped his legs around one of Jeongguk’s, eliminating the warm, heavy space between. He’d never admit it, but there was something comforting in clinging to those bulky thighs. He just hoped Jeongguk didn’t flex, because he wanted to keep this makeout session PG-13 for once, and his self-restraint was only so strong.

Unable to take it anymore for fear of devolving into a mewling mess, he tugged Jeongguk up with his free hand and reconected their lips, pissed and undoubtedly endeared by the way he could feel Jeongguk smiling against him. Cocky little shit.

They were both breathing heavily, barely coming up for air, but neither of them minded. He’d rather share an ounce of air with Jeongguk then have the whole open sky to breathe without him. And perhaps he was being too sentimental, but he’d missed this.

Taehyung gripped Jeongguk’s hand a little tighter as he rolled on top of him, guiding it into place on his waist so he could feel his shoulders, his biceps, his chest. Taut with muscle but still elegantly slender.

He liked that about Jeongguk. Liked that he was strong, but graceful. He knew his own strength but rarely used it. And he wasn’t afraid to be vulnerable.

Taehyung could learn a thing or two from him.

He had no idea how long they kissed for, not really paying attention to anything else besides the way Jeongguk’s lips moved against his and the sensation of his skin beneath his fingertips. But eventually, their kisses slowed, passion changed to comfortable lethargy, and they fell asleep like that, Taehyung clinging to Jeongguk, covering his body like a blanket, and Jeongguk’s arms wrapped around him like a shield.
“No, you don’t need twelve shirts for a six day trip, you dumbass,” Taehyung sighed, yanking shirts out of Jeongguk’s suitcase.

“I like being prepared!” Jeongguk protested indignantly. “What’s so wrong with that?”

“What’s wrong with it, is that I’d prefer you pack zero shirts.”

Jeongguk ruffled his hair under the guise of snatching a shirt back. “Devious little-”

“Careful.”

“Lovely, beautiful angel,” Jeongguk changed courses real fast, batting his lashes innocently.

Taehyung just snorted, smacking him in the knees with a white t-shirt.

“As much as I’d love to indulge your muscle kink-”

“I do not have a muscle kink.”

Jeongguk arched an eyebrow, but continued. “-I have a feeling your dad would prefer I don’t go walking around his house shirtless.”

“I think he’d get used to it.”

Taehyung had finally called him up this morning, discovering that Jeongguk, thankfully, had been right; his dad was just waiting for him to call. He didn’t want to intrude on his life, saying that university students needed their space, and he was trying to respect his.

Someday, his wandering mind would be the death of him.

Regardless, he’d been more than happy to agree when Taehyung asked if he could bring someone with him, always subscribing to the more the merrier ideology.

“What are you packing?” Jeongguk asked, head burrowed in his closet.

“Uh, the essentials? Clothes, toothbrush, extra hair ties for you, lingerie, jazz slip-ons because I want to practice in the sunroom-”

“Lingerie?” He peeked out from the closet. “Why would you need lingerie?”

Taehyung stared. “You think we’re going the whole week without action? Hell no, I’ve fantasised about you fucking me in my own bed for years, I’m not just letting the opportunity pass me by.”

Even as he said it, though, he remembered the conversation he’d had with his potential new manager and realised maybe they’d be having less fun than he thought.

Jeongguk’s eyes went wide. “No, Taehyung! What about...Your dad is literally going to be in the next room.”

“Well, you’ll just have to be quiet then, won’t you sweetheart?” Taehyung purred nonetheless,
snatching the jeans out of his hands, folding them, and dropping them in his suitcase.

A snort escaped Jeongguk as he tracked down another pair of jeans. “Oh, I’ll have to be quiet? That’s cute coming from my little pillow prince.”

“You take that back right now. I’m not a fucking pillow prince. I give you way more than you give me.”

“Sure, Taehyungie. I’ll take a video of you moaning like a virgin next time I go down on you, then, and you can decide.”

Thoroughly offended, Taehyung spluttered, “I do not moan like a virgin!”

Jeongguk just chuckled, irritating him further by not giving him a proper response as he turned back to his suitcase.

“Jeongguk! Take it back!”

“You want me to take it back, princess? Fine, you don’t moan like a virgin. Are you happy now?”

Strangely enough, the retraction of his statement didn’t make him feel better in the slightest.

“No,” he muttered, plopping down on his bed.

Jeongguk rolled his eyes.

“Are you done yet?” Taehyung snapped. “I have work in an hour and you need to drop me off.”

“Almost. And Taehyung, I really think you could benefit from a night off-”

“No.”

Jeongguk closed the lid of his suitcase, planting his elbows on it to look him in the eyes. “Why not?”

Taehyung sighed, falling back eagle-spread. “Because I didn’t finish my shift last night, I’m not working all week, and my next check is due in eight days.”

“I really think a break would do you some good. How much is each installment?”

“About six million.”

“For fuck’s sake, every month?”

“Well, yeah. I’d rather do one hundred payments of that and be done in eight years -nearly five now- than do a bunch of smaller ones for the rest of my life.”

“Why? It’s going to kill you.”

“Because the longer I drag it out, the longer my dad has to figure out what I’m doing.”

“Taehyung…” Jeongguk sighed from the floor. “There are other options.”

“Oh, really? Please, feel free to drop your brilliant ideas, then.”

“Let me help you.”
“No.”

“Please.”

“No, Jeongguk.”

Sitting up, Jeongguk said, “Look, I heard you last night. I did. I understand why you think you have to do this, but your logic is flawed, and you don’t count as an objective source. I can get the money for you in a month, tops.”

Studying the ceiling, Taehyung repeated, “No. It’s not happening, Jeongguk. And not just because of what I told you last night.”

“Then, what?”

“If I take that much money from you, I’d feel like I used you, and we’d both be in your dad’s pocket. And...I don’t want to ruin your chances to have a good relationship with him.”

“It’s a little late for that last thing.”

“No,” Taehyung insisted, sitting up. “It isn’t. He’s an asshole and I hate him, but you could still have a good relationship with him. He loves you in his own way. But he won’t if you help me.”

“Taehyung, if his love is subjective to the things I do for you, then it’s not worth it.”

He’d never thought of it that way.

“But...wouldn’t you rather sacrifice the superficial things for something lasting?”

“Exactly.”

“What?”

“The superficial things. Money, luxury, a relationship that isn’t anything more than blood...why would I hold onto those things when I could have something lasting?”

Taehyung met his gaze, surprised by the gentle conviction he saw there. “With...with me?”

Jeongguk gave him a patient smile. “Who else?”

He still couldn’t believe it. And yet, somehow, Jeongguk made him want to compromise.

“Tell you what.”

“Hm?”

“You can come to work with me tonight. Just hang out, drink, people watch, it’s fun. And I’ll only work the stage and the main floor. That way you can keep me in check, and you’ll be there if I do something I shouldn’t.”

Regarding him cautiously, Jeongguk asked, “Are you sure? If you need to do private dances, I understand.”

Taehyung shook his head. “After last night, honestly, I’m not really feeling up to it. I don’t feel like vomiting again tomorrow morning.”
“Isn’t the drinking and drugs optional?”

An unavoidable laugh escaped him. “That’s what they’ll tell you, but all those managers and recruiters...they’re sweet-talkers. Liars. If a patron buys you a drink, you’d better take him up on the offer, otherwise you’ll never see him or his wallet again. They don’t tell you this, but our business relies entirely on building relationships. Regulars who know you, who you can charm out of anything. But the deal is mutual. We get attached to them just as much as they get attached to us; moreso, unconsciously, if drugs and alcohol are involved. One pill, or a quick line, and then we’re addicted. We see them walk through the door, and we know we’re getting high that night. It’s harder to say no when you’re in it, I can’t really explain it. But imagine, you know, you feel like shit because you’re letting this guy twice your age call you a slut, but you also feel good because you feel wanted when he’s touching you, and then he offers you a way to feel ten times better...trust me, you’re not going to say no. It’s easier to come to terms with yourself when you’re barely conscious anyway...I don’t know if that makes sense, but...that’s the best way I can put it.”

Taehyung blinked and then suddenly he was being barrelled over, Jeongguk pinning him to the bed in the tightest hug, nose tucked into his neck.

“Um...can I help you?” he wheezed.

“If I lay on top of you, you can’t go,” Jeongguk insisted like a petulant child, muffled against his throat.

He stroked Jeongguk’s hair with the hand not pinned between their bodies. “I don’t think it works like that, golden boy.”

“I want it to.”

Taehyung could hear the pout.

“Get off of me, you big baby.” He pushed Jeongguk’s immovable body, attempting to suppress his laughter. “You’re like a boulder. You’re gonna crush me.”

“No.”

Jeongguk squeezed, constricting him with the arms around his body.

“Stay.”

“I can’t stay. But you can come with. That’s the compromise.”

Lips pressed against his neck.

Taehyung sighed. “I’m not staying. Kiss me all you like.”

Teeth came next.

“Hey, no biting!”

He gave Jeongguk’s chest another hearty shove, grunting when nothing came of it.

“Jeongguk,” he whined, out of options. “Please! I’ll give you a private dance later, I’ll blow you in the changing room, I’ll get you the hookup for banana cocktails-”

His head perked up. “You guys serve banana cocktails?”
“Not on the menu, but Seunggi will make them for you if I ask.”

Jeongguk pushed away, straddling him with a satisfied grin. “Deal.”

Taehyung arched an eyebrow. “You’d really rather have banana cocktails than a blowjob. I’ll be honest, I’m slightly offended.”

“But I can only have banana cocktails this one time.”

“Oh, and you think I’ll blow you anytime you want?”

Jeongguk’s eyes widened in alarm, knowing he’d fucked up. “No, no! That’s not what I was getting at! I’m very privileged to be on the receiving end of your blowjobs, Kim Taehyung, thank you very much for your generosity!”

Taehyung snorted, finally unbalancing him with a good shove. “That’s what I thought.”

Catching himself on the bedside table, Jeongguk brought his hands together, bowing deeply.

“Drive me over to my dorm,” Taehyung instructed, already getting to his feet. “I need to shower and shave super quick, and then we can go.”

“Don’t you wax?”

“Obviously I wax, but I like to be spotless, okay?”

Jeongguk ruffled his hair as he passed, snatching his keys off the hook. “Princess,” he hummed under his breath.

“I heard that. Just you wait, the moment I’m done with this gig, I’m not shaving my legs for a year.”

“You realise that’s normal, right?”

“It’s a big deal for me!” Taehyung complained, waiting by the door as Jeongguk zipped his bulky travel bag shut.

“Should I just bring this?” Jeongguk asked, hoisting the bag up as if it weighed nothing.

Absolute hellbeast.

Taehyung leaned against the door, doing his best to ignore Jeongguk’s flexing bicep and veined forearm. Fuck, he could drool on those all day. “Well, yeah,” he said, pulling himself together. “I figured you’d just crash at my dorm tonight so we could leave early.”

Jeongguk curled his arm a little, smirk going unnoticed by Taehyung who was altogether preoccupied with something else.

Smooth, milky skin, to be precise, straining in the sexiest way possible as the muscles underneath glided to lift his heavy bag in the air, veins rising just barely from his forearm, and damn Taehyung wanted to run his tongue along his skin, and-

“Are you done yet?” Jeongguk arched an eyebrow, tapping his foot.

Taehyung snapped to, blinking rapidly. “What? Yes! I mean...what?”
Jeongguk flexed to accentuate his point.

Taehyung licked his lips. And then he blushed, finally realising what he meant. The pleasant burn of humiliation warmed his chest as he swiftly rose to his own defense. “I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about. Can we go already?”

Shaking his head, Jeongguk muttered, “Insatiable,” but led him out the door.

“We haven’t had sex in over a week!” Taehyung protested, following. “You have no right to call me insatiable.”

And then he quickly remembered where they were and shut his mouth.

“Sorry,” he whispered, guilt sweeping out every other emotion even if the floor looked empty.

Jeongguk hesitated, then said, “Don’t be. It’s fine.”

“It’s fine?”

“I’m not going to parade it, especially since we’re not...well, I don’t really know what we are, but I won’t ask you to hide it, either.”

*I don’t really know what we are.*

Yeah, that made two of them.

They hadn’t talked about last night’s events. Not really.

But Jeongguk’s statement still rang in his head.

*I want to find out what comes next.*

He looked so firm in his conviction when he said it. Unwavering. And Taehyung wanted to believe him. His mouth had worked faster than his head last night, though, when he answered so simply that he wanted it too. He should have thought. He should’ve told Jeongguk to wait. Wait for himself to be sure. And yet, seeing the way he stole glances at him as he walked, the smile on his face he stopped trying to hide, the way it all came so easy to him…

Maybe Jeongguk was sure.

A sudden warmth spread through Taehyung, powerful as a summer breeze, but for once it didn’t carry the promise of rain.

Still, he told Jeongguk, “If you want me to hide it, I will. I must’ve earned at least a graduate degree in secrecy by now. I can call you a bitch right here. I don’t mind.”

Jeongguk rolled his eyes, taking the stairs two at a time. “You just want an excuse to call me a bitch. I think I’m good, Taehyung, thanks though.”

He shrugged, hurrying a little to keep up. “Just being polite.”

~*~*~

Sin looked absolutely packed by the time they arrived, line going all the way up the stairs even if it
was barely a quarter to eleven.

“Is it always this busy?” Jeongguk asked in disbelief, sticking close to Taehyung who ignored the line and walked right past.

“It’s a Saturday night, honey, what do you expect?”

He felt a little like a kid, grasping on his mom’s sleeve as she navigated busy downtown streets. Except now he was twenty-one and clinging to Taehyung’s jacket like a lifeline.

The same bouncer from last night leaned against the door, pinning Jeongguk with a hardened look that softened the minute Taehyung came into view.

“You’re a little early, baby,” the bouncer commented.

Taehyung flashed him a wink. “Gotta get Jeonggukkie here all set up for the night. Golden boy’s gonna watch me dance.”

The bouncer chuckled. “Lucky you, huh?”

It took Jeongguk a moment to realise he was being addressed.

“Oh! Um, yeah.” He glanced at Taehyung, whose eyes were already on him. The look gave him confidence. “Lucky me, indeed.”

Taehyung grabbed his hand, saying to the bouncer, “Don’t mind him, he’s the sentimental type. See you later, hyung.”

“See you, Taetae. Have fun.”

With a wave, Taehyung tugged him through the doors.

The club looked just as chaotic as it did last night, if not a little less since the drinks hadn’t been flowing for nearly as long and only two dancers occupied the stage. Still, the lights cut through the dark room in bright neon beams of magenta and blue, LEDs illuminating the seats, bar, and lining the glimmering black floor.

Jeongguk let himself be pulled through the club as Taehyung beelined for a leather booth in the center of the room, elevated enough to see the stage but not so close as to get caught up in everything.

“Make yourself comfortable,” Taehyung suggested. “I’ll have Seunggi send a drink your way, and I’ll be out in a few.”

With that, Taehyung all but disappeared, leaving Jeongguk defenseless and alone in the middle of a strip club. Having no other options, he hesitated before settling into the booth, the leather surprisingly cushy and comfortable. This spot definitely felt nicer than the one he had sat at during Taehyung’s training, and the view was unbeatable. He’d wager a guess that the regulars knew which seats were best for what perks, and spent the next fifteen minutes or so observing the other clubgoers, seeing what kinds of men settled into which seats.

The younger guys flooded the booths closest to the stage, he noticed, while the older men typically chose seats framing the small round platforms dotting the room where extra poles had been put up. He supposed it made sense; while the older crowd had money to spend on keeping a dancer around all night, the younger guys were mostly just looking for a good view and cheap lap dances.
It still felt a little weird to think of this as Taehyung’s job.

But all other thoughts flooded from his mind when the dj’s voice came over the sound system.

“And now, coming to the main stage is a crowd favourite here in Sin, our resident brat and the youngest catch on the floor. You can try your luck coaxing this kitten out but don’t be surprised if he bites a little. They say V stands for victory, but tonight I think it stands for vixen. Please welcome the one, the only V!”

Immediately the crowd went into a frenzy. The lights blinked out for a moment, then came back in full red and magenta. A figure strutted across the stage, hips swaying back and forth, hypnotic, prowling like a tiger. And then a single white light filtered through, illuminating Taehyung in an outfit that left Jeongguk speechless. Falling around him like a veil was a beautiful black kimono embroidered with soft white blossoms. A frilled white halter and panties curved around his body like angel’s mist, lace stockings climbing his slender golden legs, pink ribbons tied around his thighs while a frilled collar framed his elegant neck, wearing the same fluffy pink heels he’d taught his trainee in. White cat ears nestled in his messy brown curls.

He’d mentioned something about Saturdays being costume nights.

Silver rings flashed as Taehyung wrapped a hand around the pole, facing upstage. A single beat of a song. He twitched his hips. And then the song truly kicked on, Charlie Puth’s dangerous I Warned Myself seeping through the speakers like laced wine.

He’d mentioned something about adjusting his music to suit his audience, too.

Taehyung took his time walking around the pole, except he made it seem as though the pole walked around him, owning the space and asserting his dominance over everyone and everything in the room. A vocal trill from the song and he dropped suddenly, dragging his hips down the pole. He turned and caught the pole with a heel, spinning in tempo, before inverting his body seamlessly, showcasing his legs in an airborne split. Something about his languid movement kept every eye on him, gliding through a dozen complicated motions Jeongguk would never be able to name. Dropping to the ground, he grinded against the floor, hands in his hair.

Jeongguk couldn’t look away. Taehyung’s eyes fluttered shut as he touched himself, hands roaming from his hair to his throat, and down. His eyes flashed open and he tilted his head, rolling his hips and toying with the collar of his kimono. A hand trailed along the inside of his leg, onto his thigh and up his body until he finally relaxed his neck, lips parted in exaltation as he drew the kimono back.

Men approached the stage in a rush, crowding around the edge and throwing bills at Taehyung, who just bathed in them, absorbing the money and attention.

Lips curled in a playful smirk, he tossed the garment aside and surged forward on his hands and knees. The hands of enthralled men reached for him, sliding money into every available strap of his lingerie, ringing the bell on his collar.

Unable to just idly sit by, Jeongguk got to his feet and raced for the stage, pushing through the crowd until Taehyung stood directly in his line of sight.

Another man currently held Taehyung’s attention, hand wandering down the man’s chest as he tucked thousands of won in his panties.

Jeongguk couldn’t take it, fire simmering low in his stomach at seeing Taehyung touch someone
else with so much intimacy.

He whistled.

And Taehyung cocked his head, caught his eye, and strutted his way, heels clicking in time with the beat. Hands reached for him. Jeongguk barely registered it as he pulled a couple hundred thousand from his wallet.

Vicious fingers knotted in his hair as Taehyung pulled him close and nipped at his ear, dragging the lobe between his teeth and swirling his tongue around his earring. Jeongguk slid a wad of bills into the back of his panties.

He was Taehyung’s.

And he liked that the whole club knew it.

When he pulled back, he was met with a pair of dark, burning feline eyes. Taehyung smirked, red lips taunting him before he did a bridge out of his position on the floor and flipped back to grip the pole. Jeongguk lingered by the stage, watching him arch his spine and spin slow, enticing circles. He spread his legs, adjusting his hands to rotate upside down and give the audience a fantastic view of his ass, shaking just for them.

Jeongguk had to remind himself that he did it for the bills piling up on stage, otherwise he would have snatched Taehyung up and took him home to ravish him alone.

He’d never been so turned on and so jealous all at once, although Taehyung had made him feel a concoction of both frequently throughout the past five years.

Legs twined around the pole, Taehyung dragged a finger under his halter, daring the audience to pay for its removal.

Money fluttered across the stage.

The top landed somewhere in the crowd.

Taehyung caught his lip between his teeth and spiralled to the floor again, tossing his hair as he surveyed the men all frantically vying for his attention. He kicked a heel up to caress along his inner thigh, brushing ever so teasingly against the front of his panties until more money fell at his feet. His bare honey chest glistened under the lights and the faint sheen of sweat on his skin, inked music notes just another layer to the seductive mystery he presented.

With a confident sway of his hips, Taehyung braced himself against the pole and stuck his ass out before grinding along the crystal. A flick of his wrist and he spun through the air again. Daring smile curling his lips, he arched his eyebrows and bit playfully at the crowd before releasing his grip and spiralling down.

Jeongguk enjoyed watching him toy with his onlookers, but knew he held no immunity to Taehyung’s seduction.

Hands still grasping the pole behind him, he shook his hair out, the bell around his neck chiming. Jeongguk could see the victory in his eyes the moment Taehyung decided to go in for the kill. He looped his hands higher on the pole behind him and swung his body around with his legs bent at the knees and spread. He arched his back and rolled his hips, eyes fluttering shut. The expression on his face conveyed pure lust and temptation, arms yanked behind him to make him appear chained, legs open and ready. His audience went wild. Pieces of paper collided with his skin.
Anyone with long enough arms to reach shoved bills in his panties and the straps of his shoes. Taehyung dropped to the floor, still on his knees, and slowly rolled his neck before blinking his eyes open and flashing the crowd one last devilish smirk as the music ended. His gaze landed on Jeongguk, who stuck his long fingers in his mouth and wolf-whistled, eyes never leaving Taehyung’s.

He felt as though the intense eye contact would set him ablaze, heart already pounding.

But then Taehyung’s manager materialised, collecting all of the money and fighting the crowd for his halter and kimono.

Taehyung stood tall and proud, taking Jang’s offered hand and allowing himself to be led off stage.

The normal lights came back up and the evening’s setlist played through the speakers.

Jeongguk shook himself out of his dazed stupor, slowly meandering back to his booth. A drink had appeared on the table. With a sip, he confirmed it to be Taehyung’s promised banana cocktail.

He felt a little breathless and lightheaded as he lounged back, almost as if he’d just woken from a dream. But he didn’t have long to readjust, someone sliding into the seat next to him.

A guy maybe a year or two older than him slung an arm over the back of the booth, golden shorts and necklaces shimmering under the lights.

“You’re too handsome to be looking this lonely,” the dancer purred, fingers toying with the ends of Jeongguk’s hair. “Want me to keep you company?”

Jeongguk’s eyes widened as he tried to stammer out a response. “Oh, um, um, no, thanks, I’m um, not here for—”

“Yejun!” a familiar velvet voice snapped. “Back the fuck up and go find some other guy to buy your skanky ass.”

He glanced up to see Taehyung glaring at the dancer, arms crossed and the makings of a venomous snarl on his lips. If looks could kill, the dancer, Yejun, would already be out back in a body bag.

“For once, could you shut your fucking mouth, and let someone else make a little money around here?” Yejun retorted. “Not everyone wants your fat ass and bad attitude. Like, we get it, slut, you’re poor and depressed. Boo hoo. It’s a miracle you haven’t killed yourself. Now move along.”

Jeongguk scooted along the booth and out of the dancer’s reach, anger coursing through him.

“Hey, don’t say shit like that to him. Ever.”

“Leave it, Jeongguk,” Taehyung said through gritted teeth, advancing on the dancer. “And as for you, don’t you ever fucking sit down next to him again, let alone touch him, got it?”

And only then did Yejun realise his mistake.

“Shit, Tae, calm down. I didn’t realise he was your boyfriend. Sorry,” he muttered, rising from the booth. With one last irritated glance at Taehyung, the dancer disappeared into the crowd, no doubt taking his advice.

“ Fucking entitled little—”

“Okay, okay, that’s enough,” Jeongguk soothed, grabbing his hand.
Taehyung stopped, but he was still glaring in the direction Yejun went.

“Sorry. It’s just...the guys in here are vultures. And...I’m not very good at sharing,” Taehyung admitted, lacing their fingers together.

“It’s fine. You’re sexy when you’re jealous. But still, he had no right to say that shit to you.”

He just shrugged it off. “Whatever. We’ve never exactly been the best of friends. That’s just sorta how things go sometimes. Anyways,” Taehyung leaned in, caressing along his jaw. “How’d you like my dance, golden boy?”

“Thought about dragging you off stage and fucking you on the bar, actually,” Jeongguk answered shamelessly.

“Ah, think of how much money we’d make,” Taehyung replied, a wistful look in his eyes. “Shame I’d probably be fired and you’d be banned. Why don’t we just say screw it all and become porn stars, hm?”

Jeongguk chuckled, trying to envision it as he unconsciously ran his hand down Taehyung’s spine, hooking it around his waist. “I’m pretty sure that’d be the icing on my disownment cake.”

Taehyung lifted a knee up to straddle him. “I love cake.”

Lips brushed along his jaw.

“I know you do, baby.”

A loud whistle cut through the room. “Hey, V, isn’t it? Come over here and dance for us, pretty thing. Got four seats with your name on them.”

Jeongguk hated each and every one of those men.

With a regretful sigh, Taehyung pulled back, fluttering his fingers as a promise to be there in a minute for the group of guys calling his name.

“Call for me if you need anything, yeah?” Taehyung requested. “A whistle will do the trick, we’re sort of trained to pick up on ’em. Seunggi will keep sending drinks. And um...if anyone bothers you, just say you’re a friend of mine, making sure I behave myself or whatever.”

Jeongguk cocked his head. “A friend of yours?”

A light flush, separate from the tint already on his cheeks, painted his skin a pretty pink.

“Or...anything works, really. Look, I’ve gotta go. Oh, and here.”

A wad of bills landed on his lap.

Confused, Jeongguk counted them and glanced up. “This is the money I gave you.”

Taehyung arched an eyebrow. “I know. I don’t want it. I told you that you’re never going to pay for anything from me, golden boy. Try and have fun. Make some friends. I’ll be by in a little while.”

And with that, Taehyung flicked under his chin and spun away, sashaying over to the group of guys catcalling him.
Jeongguk did his best not to watch. He really did.

But as the night dragged on, he realised that he’d accidentally signed himself up for literal torture in exchange for Taehyung’s safety. Which of course meant a lot to him.

Yet he became very aware of his own limits the later the hour got.

Taehyung went up on stage once more, right around two in the morning, and Jeongguk had forced himself to remain seated for the entire performance.

It killed him a little.

What killed him more was watching Taehyung parade around in his skimpy costume, letting men’s hands wander all over his body as he straddled their laps, grinding and playing with his hair. Sometimes, their eyes would meet across the club and Taehyung would increase the intensity of his dance, rolling his hips harder and bringing the hands of his current customer to his ass, encouraging them to join in his torment.

Jeongguk had to content himself with the knowledge that only he knew what it felt like to have Taehyung truly ride him, and these men had no idea how much better the real thing was. That, and the fact that if he really wanted to, he could have Taehyung crying into his mattress the minute they got home.

In an attempt to keep his composure, Jeongguk tried to take his advice and people watch. He spotted the three dancers he knew; Baekhyun, Kwangsu, and Sehun, the kid Taehyung had trained, but made no move to interact with them.

He was briefly distracted, however, when someone dropped into the seat beside him.

“Hey, Jeongguk, fancy seeing you here.”

Jeongguk blinked. “Oh, damn, hey, Chanyeol. What’s up?”

It took him a moment to realise he was sitting beside one of his teammates...in a gay strip club.

But Chanyeol just smiled, carding through his dark hair as he settled back in the booth. “Didn’t want to sit alone at home tonight so I decided to chill here while my boyfriend works.”

“Oh, I didn’t know you had a boyfriend.”

Actually, he didn’t know Chanyeol had any interest in boys.

Surveying the crowd, he gestured to a dancer twirling around a pole for a small crowd, blonde hair shining under blue lights.

Wait.

“That’s Baekhyun,” Jeongguk voiced out loud.

“You know him?” Chanyeol sounded surprised.

“Oh, in passing, yeah. He’s friends with…” Jeongguk shut himself up real fast. “With a friend of mine.”

“Hey, Chanyeol.” Someone else slid into the booth, as if he’d been summoned. Taehyung’s slender arms wrapped around his neck, tugging him close as he sat. “Having a good night?”
Chanyeol lounged back, clearly relaxed. “Hey, Taehyung. And yeah, you know, as good as we can, right Jeongguk? It’s a little hard sitting on the sidelines, but worth it.”

Jeongguk couldn’t help but snort. “I’m waiting for the worth it part.”

Taehyung rested his chin on his shoulder, pouting. “Are you not having fun? I’m still down for blowing you in the changing room. I don’t want you to be bored, baby.”

He was really sitting in the middle of a gay strip club with one of his basketball teammates on his left and his ex best-friend-maybe-sort-of-stripper-boyfriend on his right, being offered a blowjob. His life took a strange turn somewhere, but he supposed he wouldn’t change it for anything.

“I’m okay.” Jeongguk wrapped an arm around his waist. “I’m not bored. Just...out of my element, I guess. I’ll get used to it. I won’t get used to watching you grind on a bunch of random strangers, but I’m doing my best.”

Chanyeol chuckled. “That’s really all you can do. The first time I stuck around here for the whole night, I must’ve accidentally scared away a dozen of Baekhyun’s customers. Oh, by the way, you look good tonight, Taehyung. I like this costume better than the one you wore the last Saturday I came.”

Taehyung snatched up Jeongguk’s cocktail, musing, “What was that, three, four months ago? Yeah, the kitten get-up is way easier to move around in than that jacket, those booty shorts, and ridiculous heels, but I kept the pieces for other nights. Although, the one downside to the new look is the amount of guys calling me ‘baby boy’ all of a sudden. Like, bitch, if I really got you in bed you’d be praying to me for mercy, not lounging around while I stuttered and worshipped your tiny dick.”

“Says the subbiest sub I’ve ever met,” Jeongguk scoffed under his breath.

Legs crossed delicately, Taehyung remarked, “I’ve told you before, honey. I sub for you. I don’t just do that for anyone. I’m rather fond of making tops my bitch, actually. I like it when you beg.”

Jeongguk had trouble deciding whether that sounded hot or frustrating.

“We could try it sometime,” Taehyung breathed, warm and tempting across his ear. “I would dominate the hell out of you. Make you fall to your knees for me, golden boy. I’d love to see tears in those pretty eyes.”

Suddenly, he started leaning more towards the hot side.

Still, Taehyung got bratty when he thought he’d won.

“I’ll think about it, angel,” Jeongguk replied noncommittally. “But not tonight. Tonight I have to sit here and keep my mouth shut while guys who aren’t me pay you to shake your ass and look pretty.”

“Must be torturous.” Taehyung took another sip of his cocktail, leaving lip gloss stains on the rim. “Hm, shame my sympathy’s all but run out. I’m gonna do another round of the floor. And I’ll send Baekhyun-hyung your way, Chanyeol, if you want.”

“That’d be great. I’ll chill here with Jeongguk until he gets rid of me.”

As if he would get rid of the one person he could hold a conversation with in this place besides Taehyung.
“Cool. See you boys later.”

With that, Taehyung sauntered off, twitching his hips until he disappeared into the crowd of sweaty bodies.

Jeongguk needed answers. Turning to Chanyeol, the first words out of his mouth were, “You knew? For how long?”

“Well, I’ve been coming here for Baekhyun since last year, and he danced then, too, so at least a year.”

“Damn.”

He truly didn’t know what else to say.

Chanyeol leaned forward. “Can I ask you a question of my own?”

“Go for it.” Not like they had anything else to talk about.

“How long have you two been together?”

He choked on his cocktail.

Swallowing the sweet liquor, he clarified, “We’re not together.”

Chanyeol snorted, lights playing on his soft features. “Sure, Jeongguk. And we all totally believe the straight act you’ve put on for the past three years.”

“I-” Sitting where he was, he didn’t exactly have a position to defend. “You knew? Like, the whole team?”

“Speculation, but yeah. I mean, freshmen year you took pretty much any excuse to lay on Namjoon’s thighs, and no amount of ‘no-homo’ can provide a heterosexual explanation for that.”

Jeongguk felt a light blush rise to his cheeks, and he tried to focus on the club’s chaos as a distraction. “They’re nice thighs, okay, you should never pass on a bro’s thighs.”

“Jeongguk, he railed you in the shower every other day when you thought we’d all left and you’re really trying to bro-zone him to me?” Chanyeol’s skepticism raked over him.

“Huh.” Leaning back, he let the information wash over his mind.

Everyone knew.

And they’d known for the past three years.

“ Doesn’t change the fact that Taehyung and I aren’t together.”

With a light laugh, Chanyeol replied, “Seriously, you don’t have to pretend.”

“I’m not pretending,” he insisted.

“Oh, shit, you’re serious.”

And the message finally went through.

“Yeah, I’m serious. We’re just...friends, I guess.”
Jeongguk caught sight of Taehyung at that moment, getting lost in watching him bend over to retrieve the stack of bills a patron had just dropped, running his fingers up his stockings only to hook them in the cute heart-shaped rings of his garters, tucking the money into them.

“Yeah, just friends,” Chanyeol repeated, unimpressed. “You do realise that if you keep telling people that, and everyone finds out he’s still single, there’s going to be a fucking riot clamouring for his ass, right?”

Tearing his gaze away, Jeongguk sighed. “It’s crossed my mind once or twice, yes.”

“You know, even Mingyu said he’d tap it just to see what all the hype’s about.”

“After the way he treated Tae when all that shit came out? Not a chance in hell.”

“That’s what I’m saying, dude, you’ve gotta stake your claim. It’s cuffing season, after all.”

“I don’t think he really wants commitment for a Christmas present.”

But after the conversation they’d had last night, maybe Chanyeol was right. Maybe he should secure a label with Taehyung.

He supposed he had all week. With any luck, it would just happen naturally.

They talked for about an hour more until Baekhyun appeared at their table, taking Chanyeol by the hand and leading him off to do god knows what in a private room.

Jeongguk continued to down cocktails like water, not sure what else to do with himself.

Finally, a familiar weight settled in beside him.

“Hi, Jeonggukkie,” Taehyung hummed, gripping his bicep. “How are you doing?”

“Tired, horny, and slightly tipsy, so pretty much the same as usual but with alcohol.”

It felt nice to have Taehyung beside him.

“I didn’t drink all night,” he informed him with a proud smile.

“Babe, you literally drank out of my glass.”

Frowning, Taehyung retorted, “It was two sips. Let me have this.”

Jeongguk chuckled, nuzzling his cheek. “Fine, yes, I’m very proud of you. Can we go home soon?”

“That’s what I came over to tell you. I’m all changed and counted out for the night.”

“I probably shouldn’t drive;” he pointed out, leaving open-mouthed kisses along Taehyung’s jaw.

“I- ah-” Taehyung looped his arms around his neck, tilting to give him better access. “I know. I figured I’d drive- mm- I’d drive your car. We took mine back to the dorms thi- this morning, remember?”

Jeongguk felt a pleasant tug as Taehyung tangled a hand in his hair, guiding his lips down to his throat. He happily complied, pulling his collar between his teeth only to let it snap back into place before setting to work. The bell gave a soft chime. Taehyung needed some of his older hickeys renewed where the purple bruises had faded to light pink blemishes.
“Fuck, fuck, okay, wait,” Taehyung panted, eyes shut. “Let’s make it home and then you can do whatever you want to me, okay?”

With one last swirl of his tongue, he pulled back to admire his handiwork.

Little bruises littered his neck, ones he’d be seeing for the next week at least.

“You look so pretty like that,” he breathed. “All mine.”

Taehyung caressed his nape, curling his fingers around his hair. “All yours,” he repeated. “You wanna get outta here?”

“Please.”

A light laugh escaped Taehyung as he stood, pulling Jeongguk to his feet. The lights seemed to blend together a little more than they had earlier, and he nearly collided with twice as many people even though the club had cleared out considerably in the past hour.

Cool, crisp air hit him when they got outside, clearing his head a bit. Taehyung murmured something to the bouncer, then tugged him along.

Once they reached his Genesis, Taehyung leaned up against it and asked, “Gonna toss me your keys, golden boy, or do you expect me to just ride you home?”

He chuckled, extracting the keys from his pocket and tossing them Taehyung’s way. Although, he couldn’t keep his eyes off the way he rested against his car.

“Can I fuck you on the hood someday?” Jeongguk inquired, looping around to the passenger’s side.

“I thought you’d never ask. My schedule’s open all week.”

He spent the entire drive trying to refrain from making any stupid intoxicated comments, a task made even more difficult when every stolen glance at Taehyung only reaffirmed the idea that if he didn’t make it clear he wanted him now, someone else would.

But he managed to pull it off, and by the time Taehyung slid into his parking spot, Jeongguk felt considerably more sober. Still pleasantly buzzed but not so much to the point of incoherency, and he knew he’d be fine in the morning.

The second Taehyung stepped foot out of the car, Jeongguk wrapped an arm around his shoulders and thighs, lifting him in the air. He weighed barely anything.

“Jeongguk!” Taehyung exclaimed, clinging to him. “I know it’s a miracle but I do have two working legs.”

Carrying him bridal style through the entrance of his dorm, he responded, “Nope. You worked hard all night. And in those ridiculous shoes, too. My poor baby’s legs must hurt.”

Taehyung hesitated. “…They’re a little…sore,” he mumbled into his neck.

“That’s what I thought. Press your floor number, would you?”

The elevator doors slid open as Taehyung jammed the button for the fourth floor.

“We’re really just throwing all semblance of discretion out the window, aren’t we?”
“Yep.”
“...Why?”

Jeongguk thought about it, words tumbling to his lips that he wasn’t sure were ready to be said.
“I want you to know I’m serious. About wanting this with you.”
“You don’t have to be all extravagant just to tell me you’re serious.”

He shook his head, stepping out of the elevator. “I’m just doing all of the things I want to do, but haven’t done because I was too scared. So, if you’d let me, that’d be cool.”

Taehyung swung his bag around, digging out his key. “No one’s stopping you,” he pointed out, unlocking the door.

“And if I wanted to fuck you one last time before we’re at your dad’s?”

To his surprise, Taehyung paused. “We should wait,” he finally said.

Confused, Jeongguk asked, “Wait to be at your dad’s?” He set him down gently.

Taehyung avoided his gaze once he was on his feet, biting his lip. “No, it’s just…”

He didn’t want to pressure him. “Taehyung, it’s okay. I’m perfectly happy to just cuddle you and go to sleep.”

“No, no, it’s not that I don’t want to.” Gaze flicking up to the ceiling, Taehyung sighed. “Actually...I need to talk to you about something. And I didn’t want to. At all. But...if you mean it when you say you’re serious, then we should talk.”

Apprehensive, he nodded and sat on Taehyung’s bed. “Okay. Let’s talk.”

Taehyung lingered by his closet, opening it and examining its contents.

“I went to an interview for that job I was telling you about. The GC one.”

He remembered hearing about it, a place where Taehyung would make triple his earnings at Sin in exchange for a classier atmosphere and sex with patrons.

“And?”

Taehyung found a white t-shirt, still actively avoiding looking at him. “And I accepted the position.”

The news washed over him. He was really taking the job.

“Okay.”

Taehyung’s current shirt landed on the floor as he slipped on the new one, pants kicked off beside it. “I had to send in my STI results, obviously, but...they wanted all the data on any sexual partners, too...which is part of the reason why I backed off all week.”

Stunned, Jeongguk repeated, “You ignored me for a whole week just because you didn’t want to ask me for my STI results?”
Finally, Taehyung glanced at him, a mixture of guilt and frustration in his dark eyes. “Partially. I didn’t want…” Another glance at the ceiling, tongue flicking out over his lips. “I know you don’t agree. And I didn’t want you to think of me as a slut, or some cheap whore since I’m letting myself be used, because I know that’s probably what’s running through your head, but-”

“No, wait, Taehyung.” Jeongguk stood and closed a hand around his wrist, meeting his gaze. “I would never think that. What you do with your body is your choice. And yeah, it’s a little hard for me to think about you having sex with other guys for money, and you know there are other options, but if that’s really what you want to do, then I’m not going to stop you. I just want you to be safe and happy. That’s all I want. So whatever you need from me, I’ll give it to you. Okay?”

Taehyung searched his eyes for something. “I- You’re sure?”

It hurt, but, “Yes, I’m sure. You’re always going to be beautiful, Taehyung. There’s no need to worry about things like that. Especially not with me.”

A light punch landed on his chest. “Stop saying shit like that, you’re gonna make me cry.”

Jeongguk hugged his waist, tugging him back until he sat on the bed, Taehyung kneeling on top of him. “Cry all you want, I don’t mind.”

“No, I’m not going to cry anymore, shut up.” Taehyung reached out, hesitantly cupping his jaw. “You know what’s going to happen instead?”

“What?”

“I’m going to kiss you until you stop saying sappy shit, and then you’re going to fuck me until I really am crying. Got it?”

“Nope,” Jeongguk replied cheerfully, kissing his nose.

Taehyung frowned. “What do you mean, ‘nope’?”

“I just realised something.”

“And that is…?”

Jeongguk placed another kiss on his cheek. “That you, my darling, use sex as a defense mechanism and a coping method. So instead, we’re going to get a good night’s sleep so we can leave first thing when we wake up.”

Taehyung stared at him. “You’re wrong.”

“I’m sure you think so.”

He slid Taehyung off of him and onto the bed, standing so he could discard his shirt.

“I don’t do that,” Taehyung insisted.

“Yes, you do. Don’t want to talk about something? You fuck it out instead. Angry about something? You go and have sex to distract yourself. Feeling petty? You fuck someone else to make the other person jealous. You even use sex to bargain, Tae. And I know you’re using it as a defense mechanism right now to get out of having a real conversation. So, no. I’m not having sex with you. I’m cuddling you and I’m going to sleep.”

He shucked his shirt off, switching his jeans out for sweatpants from his bag.
“No, you’re not,” Taehyung snapped. “Get out.”

Jeongguk rolled his eyes. “Now you’re just being dramatic. So we have sex and we have avoidance. What other methods would you like to talk through?”

Taehyung’s glare could be felt from the other side of campus. “You’re not my therapist.”

“You’re right, I’m not,” he agreed. “And I don’t want to be your therapist, even if we both probably need one. But I’m not going to sleep with you just so you can avoid processing your emotions.”

A moment of silence while Taehyung bit his tongue. “Fine. Let’s get some sleep, then.”

He nodded, and they settled into bed without exchanging another word.

And perhaps Taehyung didn’t sleep as closely pressed up against him as usual that night. But Jeongguk knew he’d made the right choice.

…

A heavy weight was the first sensation he registered when his alarm went off at nine. Groaning, Jeongguk reached out blindly to turn it off, and the weight on top of him shifted.

“Make it stop,” a gravelly voice moaned, drumming against his chest.

Jeongguk blinked and looked down.

A full head of hair met his nose. Taehyung lay directly on top of him, clinging to his body like a koala, face firmly buried in the juncture of his neck and collar.

So much for sleeping as far away from him as possible last night.

Suppressing a chuckle, he silenced the alarm and wrapped an arm around Taehyung.

They exchanged a few minutes of sleepy silence, neither one of them awake but not quite conscious.

Eventually, Taehyung lifted his head, instead resting his chin on Jeongguk’s chest.

He looked so soft in the mornings; hair dishevelled, brown eyes bleary.

“Mm, g’morning,” Taehyung mumbled.

Jeongguk yawned, ruffling his hair. “Morning. Was my body really more comfortable than your mattress?”

Unable to fight at this hour, Taehyung just nodded and squeezed tighter.

Another great thing about mornings with him: his attitude had yet to manifest. In fact, he acted rather cute most mornings before the spite and sharp tongue kicked back in.

He felt the soft press of lips to his collarbone.

“C’mon, we’ve gotta get going.”
But Taehyung shook his head, peppering his chest, shoulders, and neck with kisses.

“Tired,” he complained. “Wanna sleep for a few more hours.”

“Baby, we’ve got a six hour car ride ahead of us. You can sleep all you want, but we’ve gotta get out of bed first.”

Taehyung blinked up at him. “Baby,” he repeated.

“You get hung up on the weirdest things,” Jeongguk informed him. “I’ve been calling you that for years.”

“...Feels different,” he murmured, slowly rolling off of him.

“Do you want it to feel different?”

Scrunching his nose, Taehyung sat up. “I don’t know. I’ll think about it while I shower.”

“Let me know what you decide. I’m going to throw on a shirt and run our bags down to the car.”

Taehyung just nodded, disappearing around the corner.

...

Half an hour later, they were officially on the road. It hadn’t taken much convincing to persuade Taehyung that his car would be the better ride, and although Taehyung had begged for more sleep, he seemed wide awake now.

“You know, I didn’t tell my dad who I was bringing,” he remarked, a thoughtful look on his face. “He’s in for a surprise.”

Jeongguk involuntarily groaned. “He’s going to kill me.”

“He’s not going to kill you, drama queen.”

“He hates me now.”

“Well, yeah, a little.”

Jeongguk pondered it as he switched lanes. “You think a houseplant screams ‘Please forgive me for being an absolute asshat to your son and let me earn my place in your family again?’”

Taehyung snorted his hot cocoa. “It’s a start. He’s particularly fond of Christmas cacti, so at least you’ll be in season. And...he doesn’t hate you.”

“For some reason, I don’t believe you.”

“No, really. I, um, I talk about you sometimes.”

Suddenly, Taehyung became very interested in the landscape out his window.

“Oh?” Jeongguk glanced at him. “And what do you talk about?”

“Just...just stuff. I mentioned something about us being friends again. He said something about my happiness lying in your hands or whatever, and you know, just normal-’”
“Wait, what?”

Taehyung shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “I told you, we talk. Anyways, he probably won’t be surprised to see you.”

“You think he’s gonna supervise us like he used to?”

A grin broke out on Tae’s face at the memory. “Oh, it’ll be even worse now that he definitely knows we’ve had sex. I don’t talk about a guy with him these days if we haven’t fucked at least once. He’ll be checking in every two minutes, asking if we need water or snacks.”

Jeongguk couldn’t help but laugh. Towards the end of their friendship, Taehyung’s dad must’ve caught on to the fact that they were more than friends, and spent every free minute ducking his head in Taehyung’s room to make sure everything they were doing passed as G-rated. They couldn’t even sit two feet apart on his bed without his dad insisting on joining them for a few rounds of whatever game they were playing. It was annoying back then, but reflecting on it, Jeongguk found it kind of endearing. He clearly cared about Taehyung a lot and just wanted to make sure he was making good choices.

“Hey, Jeongguk?”

A rush of anxiety ran through him every time Taehyung said that.

“Yeah?”

“I’m sorry. You know, about the way I acted before bed last night.”

“It’s okay. I’ve learned not to take your attitude to heart,” he admitted. “I know you don’t like talking about yourself, or stuff you’re going through, so from now on I’m going to try and wait for you to talk to me, okay?”

Taehyung dragged his finger along his seatbelt. “I, um...I want to try. To be more open with you, I mean. And with the people in my life. I think...I kind of fucked up something and I don’t know how to fix it.”

He had an idea of what this might be about. “What is it?”

“Well...it’s Jimin and Hoseok. Mostly Jimin, but I was still a dick to Hoseok. We got in a fight last week. A bad one, and over text, too. And now that I look back on it, it’s just stupid. It’s literally about us wanting to spend more time together and acting like little bitches about it. We kept blowing each other off passive aggressively, like, he’d ignore my texts so I wouldn’t meet him and Hoseok for lunch, and then it just got into this petty cycle, but the bottom line is that we want to see each other. I got mad at them for spending too much time with Yoongi, because I was just so lonely, y’know? Before you and I started hanging out, it felt like every time I turned to them, they’d say they were with him, and I just got tired of it. But then we started spending more time together and they suddenly wanted my attention, but I was angry so I told them I was busy, and it just reached this point where none of us were happy with each other but we missed each other so damn much and I just...I want my friends back. But after the shit I said to them, I doubt they want me. Jimin made it pretty fucking clear that he’s done with me. I could probably go beg Hoseok to take me back and he would, but Jimin’s over it. Oh, and he found out about us through Yoongi and called me a liar, which I guess is fair, but I was going to tell him when he gave me the fucking chance, which he never did, so what else was I supposed to do?”

Jeongguk mulled it over. “Have you talked since then?”
“Not one word.”

“I think you should call Jimin, then, and just say that you’re out of town right now but when you get back, you’d really like to talk and sort this out. Tell him what you told me; that you miss him and you’re sorry for the things you said. Explain why you shut him out and why you didn’t tell him what was going on, and ask for him to give you the same in return. Does that seem fair?”

Taehyung drummed his fingers on the window rest. “Yeah. It does. You’re good at this stuff, you know.”

“Only with other people’s problems. I don’t know a damn thing about my own.

With a laugh, Taehyung replied, “Isn’t that always how it goes?”

“Yeah, something like that.” He couldn’t help but glance over, admiring the way the mid-morning sunshine played on Taehyung’s face, casting a softness on his cheekbones while adding a bright glimmer to his eyes. “You’re pretty.”

Taehyung looked at him, an amused smile brightening his features even more. “And? So are you.”

Jeongguk caught sight of himself in the rearview mirror. All he saw were wide eyes, a big nose, and even bigger teeth.

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Mhm. Very pretty.”

“Stop.”

“Pretty eyes, pretty hair, pretty nose, pretty cheeks, pretty lips-”

“Taehyung, please!”

“Oh? Is hyung blushing?”

Jeongguk stared resolutely at the road in front of him, feeling a warmth rise on his face.

“No.”

“C’mon, I used to call you pretty all the time. You were my pretty hyung. I’d hold your hand just to feel prettier.”

“Wait, is that why you were holding my hand all the time?”

“Among other reasons.”

His eyes strayed from the road again. “Other reasons?”

Taehyung gave him a pointed eye roll. “Jeongguk, I had the fattest fucking crush on you for years, of course I wanted to hold your hand.”

Suddenly smug, he inquired, “What other things did you do because you had a crush on me?”

“Well, the random kisses for one. And I didn’t make you a special lunch every Friday because I was a saint. And the fact that every time you hugged me I literally wouldn’t let go until you pried me off of your body. And I always offered to return your library books for you. I took every
opportunity to get a piggyback ride.”

Stunned, Jeongguk could only ask, “...I thought you did those things because we were friends?”

“Ah, yes, the common ‘bro kiss’ occasionally accompanied by the ‘brojob’ and the-”

“Okay, okay, I get it! I just...damn, you were forward now that I think about it.”

Taehyung shot him another look, eyebrow arched. “And have I really changed? And before you answer that, allow me to inform you that your hands look fine as hell when you drive, almost as fine as when you’ve got a basketball between them, and I’d like you to choke me with them at your nearest convenience.”

His blush deepened. “Yeah, nope, still very forward.” A pause, and then, “Wait, you want me to choke you?”

Taehyung just winked and said, “There’s nothing sexier than asphyxiation, baby.”

Funnily enough, that didn’t quite answer his question.

They continued on like that for a few hours, stopping for lunch around one, and just reliving memories. School, family, holidays, birthdays, old friends...all of it came up at one point or another. Although, they skated around everything that happened after Taehyung’s sixteenth birthday. He tried to steer as clear as he could of Taehyung’s mom, too, even if it felt awkward at times.

“Remember that time I got stuck in that alder tree in my yard and my jeans ripped straight down the middle? I was like, what, eight? You laughed your ass off until you couldn’t breathe,” Taehyung reminisced as they were about two hours from Busan.

“I was just thinking about that the other day, actually. Well, I was thinking about the time I was getting ready to try out for my first season of basketball, and I practically broke down from nerves while I was practising on your driveway one day. I mean, other things were going on, too, but...”

Taehyung nodded, watching him curiously. “I remember that day. That was one of the worst panic attacks I’ve seen you have, I found it hard to believe it was all just from nerves.”

He shook his head. “That’s because it wasn’t. My parents had a fight that afternoon before I went over to your place. I don’t really remember the specifics, but I think it was about my dad’s affair. They told me to get out of the house so I took the bus over and-”

“Eomma and I picked you up at the stop,” Taehyung finished, a sad wistfulness in his eyes. “You looked off but you wouldn’t tell me what was wrong, so when we got home, I just watched you practise. I sat on the edge of the grass and let you do your thing.”

“Usually you played with me,” he recalled. “But you didn’t that day.”

“Because you were going so hard, I thought you’d barrel me over if I tried to defend you,” he admitted with a laugh. “It seemed like you had something on your mind, and you were trying to work through it by playing. You still do that. You head to the court or the gym every time you’re processing something.”

Jeongguk thought about it.

“Huh. I guess I do. It’s good to move around and think at the same time, it helps me actually work
through things. I didn’t last week, though, when we weren’t talking. I don’t know why. I think I’ve gotten used to you being around for games and stuff, so when you’re not, it doesn’t feel as therapeutic.”

“That’s...really sweet, actually.”

He shrugged. “It’s just true. I miss seeing you there.”

With a sigh, Taehyung confessed, “I miss being there. Believe me, if I could stand it, I would. But I’m just...pissed, I guess. Not at Hwang. Not really. She was just doing her job. But she gave me a chance to clear my name and I didn’t take it because I was so ashamed. I didn’t want to tell her my problems because I knew that no matter what I said, she’d look at me differently. The whole team would. And I get it. My reputation’s in the dirt. Instead of the campus flirt, I’m a slut and a drug addict. Whatever. Like I haven’t heard every name in the book. I just didn’t want to answer questions, y’know? I didn’t want the attention. And I sure as hell didn’t want the team to have to endure my scandal. Not when they’re so close to competition.”

Without really thinking about it, Jeongguk reached over and grabbed Taehyung’s hand, lacing their fingers together over the console.

Taehyung glanced at their intertwined fingers but waited for him to speak.

“I was talking to Lisa last week-”

“Oh, great.”

“Can I finish?”

“...Yeah, sorry.”

“Anyways, after I came out to her, she asked me about you-”

“Wait, you came out to her?”

Taehyung’s shocked eyes were on him now.

“Yes, I came out to her. And she was super chill about it. Very nice and supportive. So, can I finish my story?”

“I mean, yeah, I’m just...” he squeezed his hand. “...proud of you.”

Jeongguk smiled, Taehyung’s pride washing over him. “Thanks. I’m trying to get used to it. As I was saying, she asked about you and so we started talking about the dance team’s situation, and apparently things aren’t going great over there. Jimin’s struggling a little with the captaincy, and they don’t really have a routine for the winter competition, and practices have been a mess. They miss you, is what I’m getting at.”

“A whole lot of good that does anyone,” Taehyung snorted.

He didn’t say anything else on the matter, so Jeongguk left the topic there.

During a brief lapse in judgement, he let Taehyung drive for an hour before realising he actually didn’t want to get a ticket on this trip so they switched out again very soon.

It’s not that Taehyung was a bad driver, per say.
He just...liked speed. A lot.

“It’s not my fault your fancy car can get up to 120 in point two seconds,” Taehyung whined the minute he was back in the passenger seat. “C’mon, any normal human being would be a little generous with the gas.”

“Baby.”

“...Fine, fine, maybe 120 on a max seventy expressway is a bit excessive. But it was fun while it lasted.”

“You’re going to get us killed someday.”

“But I’m gonna do it in style. Seriously, Jeongguk, you’re ignoring life’s golden rules.”

“And those are?”

“Have fun! Be gay! Do crime!”

Taehyung said it with so much cheerful enthusiasm.

Fear for their future consumed him.

“Yep, we’re dying at twenty-four, aren’t we?”

Taehyung cocked his head. “You just gave me an idea.”

“Wow, that’s not concerning in the slightest.”

“Have you ever gotten road head before?”

“I-” Jeongguk shot him an incredulous look. “No, Taehyung. And we’re not doing that...Have you?”

A far too self-satisfied grin crossed his face. “Maybe. Once or twice. C’mon, Jeonggukkie, it’ll be fun!”

Jeongguk fixed his gaze on the road. “Taehyung, you’re not blowing me while I drive.”

A hand landed on his thigh.

“No, Taehyung.”

Seductive fingers crept along the inner leg of his jeans, wandering up and down the seam.

“Please, hyung?” A breathiness had entered Taehyung’s velvet voice, and he didn’t have to look to know he was giving him his most sultry pout. “We might not be able to play for days. I haven’t gotten to touch you in so long.”

He attempted to strengthen his resolve. “No.”

“You’ve been driving for hours,” Taehyung persisted, mocking sympathy sugar-sweet. “I just want to help you relax and enjoy your last hour behind the wheel. It’s the least I can do after you offered to drive me in your fancy car.”

Interestingly enough, his resolve began to crumble.
“I- it’s not safe.”

The fingers on his thigh wandered to the front of his jeans.

“Taehyung-” he warned, just before Taehyung grinded his palm down. “Shit,” he hissed, clenching the steering wheel.

The pressure on his crotch didn’t lighten up as Taehyung began palming him through his jeans. He could feel himself getting harder from the attention.

“I want to make you feel good. You sure you don’t want me to? I mean…” A flick of his wrist, and his zipper was down. “I could just jerk you off.” Taehyung’s fingers toyed with the waistband of his boxers before dipping beneath.

“No,” Jeongguk repeated through gritted teeth, although his hips unconsciously raised up, seeking Taehyung’s touch.

“Are you sure?” A little maneuvering, and Taehyung managed to pry his boxers down just far enough to free his erection. Jeongguk felt himself blush, praying none of the other drivers could look in and see what was happening. “A little handjob never hurt anyone.” As he spoke, he wrapped his hand around the base, giving him slow, lazy strokes.

And that was all he needed.

“Fuck, no, if you’re going to do it then use your mouth.”

He heard the metallic click of a seatbelt and suddenly Taehyung was leaning over the console, legs drawn up on his seat to give him the best angle.

“If I get a ticket for this-”

“Then, damn, what a story,” Taehyung cut him off, a coy smile on his lips as he looked up at him from his lap. “Now shut up and drive.”

Ignoring the teasing breaths he felt blowing over his exposed head, Jeongguk forced himself to look at the road.

Taehyung seemed to be in no hurry, however, as he rubbed his thumb over the slit and littered his cock with wet, open-mouthed kisses. He licked a long stripe from base to tip before wrapping his flushed red lips around the head, suckling for a moment before pulling off again.

“You’re trying to torture me, aren’t you?”

“A little,” Taehyung admitted, pumping him. Jeongguk had to remind himself not to thrust into his hand. “I’m just remembering the last time I tried to give you a blowjob, and the way you made me get on my knees for nothing.”

He remembered that. A smile rose to his lips.

“That was fun.”

Teeth grazed along a vein, a sensation both hot and terrifying. He started to rethink his response.

“Mm, was it?” Taehyung tongue flicked out over the head, swirling around. “Tell me, what exactly was I being punished for?”
“I distinctly remember telling you to figure it out.”

Taehyung dipped down, taking him a quarter of the way in.

“Shit.” Jeongguk tightened his grip on the wheel. He wanted more. He wanted to feel Taehyung’s tight throat clench around his cock, his pretty lips all wet and swollen. “I- I told you, remember? When you kissed me that day. I said you’d gotten mouthy and that I was going to punish you for it. And then you went and mouthed off right before dropping to your knees, so I decided it was time for you to get a taste of what a real punishment would look like. Not that it even really counts with you. Humiliation is your favourite, I’ve noticed.”

Bobbing his head, Taehyung took him in further before coming off again. “You know me so well,” he purred. “Still, that was a dick move.”

“I’ll eat you out until you cry next time if you want,” Jeongguk bargained desperately (although not that desperately since he’s been wanting Taehyung to sit on his face for longer than he’d like to admit). “Please? I’m sorry.”

Taehyung pretended to consider it, pressing another kiss to his tip.

“Fine. But only because I pride myself on giving half-decent blowjobs and I’m not going to break my own standard just to teach you a lesson.”

“And that’s why you’re not a dom,” Jeongguk couldn’t help but snicker.

He shouldn’t have done that with his dick at Taehyung’s mercy.

A swift hand closed around him, a clear warning. “Oh? Is that so, golden boy? Because if you want to play this my way, I can edge you for the entire rest of the drive until you’re begging me to come. You’d look so cute with tears in those big, pretty eyes and your poor thick cock weeping precome for an hour. Hm? Does that sound nice, baby?”

Under any other circumstance, it...did sound kind of nice. But he’d be far more willing to experiment when he wasn’t trying to drive at the same time.

“Fine, fine, I get it. You can dom. And I’d let you give it a shot literally any other time, but right now, I’m navigating a five lane expressway with my dick out of my pants, and if you’d take care of it for me, I’d be really grateful.”

“You’d let me. Cute,” Taehyung scoffed, tucking his hair back before going down on him again.

Jeongguk let out a long exhale as Taehyung wrapped his lips around his cock, engulfing him in the warm wetness of his mouth. In an attempt to maintain some semblance of normality, he switched lanes without glancing down.

But as Taehyung began sucking him off in earnest, flattening his tongue and taking him in deeper inch by inch, Jeongguk reasoned that he could probably drive one-handed. The lanes were wide and they were going straight for at least another ten kilometers.

Before he could talk himself out of it, he fisted Taehyung’s dark, messy hair, bringing him down further on his cock.

“Shit,” he hissed as Taehyung gripped his thigh, swallowing around him. Giving his hair a slight tug, he pulled him up just to thrust into his mouth, keeping his foot steady on the gas. “Fuck, I forgot how good your mouth feels.”
Taehyung hummed, eagerly pressing his tongue against him. Jeongguk got the message and loosened his grip, allowing Taehyung to slide off of him until only the head rested on his tongue. He pressed another kiss to the tip of his cock before lapping over it, tonguing the slit and taking him back in. Enough of Taehyung’s spit coated him now to the point where he could deepthroat him, bobbing his head and taking his cock down to the hilt.

He’d said it before and he’d say it again: no one sucked cock like Taehyung. He treated it like a reward rather than a service, always the first to initiate; he practically begged for it. And then once he had his mouth around Jeongguk, he gave it his best every time. Messy and eager, sure, but he was refined, too. He knew how to use his tongue and teeth, manipulating the sensitive spots on Jeongguk’s cock to make it hard to focus on the road in front of him since he wanted nothing more than to just force Taehyung down and fuck his mouth until he came.

But Taehyung made him wait. Every time he unconsciously thrust back, Taehyung would slap his thigh and slide off of him, toying with him by mouthing along his cock until Jeongguk pleaded for him to get back to it.

A brief stretch of traffic had them stopped for a minute, and Jeongguk took the opportunity to finally glance down at him.

And holy shit.

Taehyung looked up the moment he looked down, wide brown eyes blinking at him through his lashes as the tip of his cock rested between his parted pink lips. A small smirk graced his face and, without breaking eye contact, Taehyung took him all the way down to the base, watching in satisfaction as Jeongguk threw his head back the moment his cock touched the back of his throat, panting for air even though he wasn’t the one with a mouth stuffed full.

Arousal coursed through him and he jerked his hips up, chasing more.

For once, Taehyung didn’t reprimand him and let him use his mouth as he pleased. Taehyung continued to suck him off as Jeongguk thrust into him, hand back in his hair to hold him in place.

Everything felt hot and electric all at once, the fear of someone in the next lane looking over and seeing what was happening just propelling him on further.

He could feel himself getting closer, but just because he wanted to make sure, he tapped Taehyung’s cheek once.

“You good to swallow?” His voice sounded rough and wrecked even to him.

Taehyung nodded, bobbing his head along his cock in the process.

Taking that as permission, Jeongguk gripped Taehyung’s hair tighter and began fucking his mouth, foot never leaving the brake. The seatbelt only gave him so much room to work, but he did his best, and Taehyung helped by swallowing, keeping his throat tight and wet for him to fuck into.

His orgasm hit him hard and fast, and he came into Taehyung’s mouth in spurts, thrusts slowing as he rode it out.

He sighed when his hips stilled. But even when Taehyung came off of his cock, Jeongguk noticed he hadn’t swallowed. The thought burned something in him. “Show me,” he ordered, voice still ragged.

Taehyung opened his mouth, proudly showcasing his release on his tongue.
“Fuck, you did such a good job, baby. Thank you. Swallow for me?”

He licked his lips once before doing as he asked, Adam’s apple bobbing to show he’d finished the task.

Jeongguk couldn’t help himself. He leaned over and grabbed the collar of Taehyung’s sweater, kissing him messily. Taehyung dragged his teeth along Jeongguk’s tongue before returning the kiss.

A car behind them honked.

He jumped in his seat, breaking apart.

Taehyung just laughed.

“Told you it would be fun,” he commented once Jeongguk started driving again. With nimble fingers, Taehyung reached over and tucked him back into his boxers and jeans, giving his dick a firm pat before buckling himself back into his seat.

“You...are something else, Kim Taehyung,” was all he could say in return, definitely a little breathless.

“I’m kind of disappointed that we didn’t get a public indecency charge. What’s the point of putting on a good show if no one’s going to see it?”

Jeongguk shook his head, a blush already permanently painted on his cheeks. However, he glanced over at Taehyung, and saw something noticeably absent in his jeans.

“Usually you get off pretty hard on sucking my dick.”

Taehyung shrugged. “Didn’t want to get a boner and then have to deal with it before we got there.”

“How...?”

“I’m a male stripper, Jeongguk. I’ve gotten pretty good at controlling myself. So as sexy as your voice gets when you’re fucking my mouth, no, I’m not going to all that trouble.”

Jeongguk considered the thought. “You know, that’s kind of like a superpower.”

“It’s most certainly not a superpower.”

“Kind of! Think about it. I don’t know anyone who can just suppress a hard-on.”

Taehyung had his hand in front of his mouth, stifling laughter. “You’re ridiculous. And adorable. And we’re stopping at the next gas station for water and mint gum because I’m not kissing my dad on the cheek with your dick on my breath. You guys used to be close, but not that close.”

Jeongguk could only imagine the talks Taehyung’s dad would have with him if he knew the turn their relationship had taken.

“Does he know? That you and I are...?”

And then he stopped.

He didn’t know what they were.
Taehyung glanced at him, biting his lip briefly. “That we’re what?”

“I-” He took a deep breath. “What do you want us to be?” he asked softly. “Because I feel like we should have something figured out before I invade your family time for no reason.”

“Do you really want to have this conversation right now?” Taehyung countered, attention now solely out the window. “You’re coming because I wanted you to, and you wanted to. It’s not that complicated.”

“Do you not want to have this conversation?”

“No...not right now. Please. I just want to get there, and settle in, and try to decompress a little from last week before we dive headfirst into anything, okay?”

Even though he knew they shouldn’t keep putting it off, he nodded. “Okay. Whatever you want.”

Taehyung sighed. “Thank you. And seriously, please pull off at the next gas station.”

Jeongguk chuckled in spite of himself. “You’ve got it, princess.”

However, once they arrived, Jeongguk realised it would be a lot harder to keep Taehyung to himself without putting a label on it than he’d imagined, as he fended off one particularly inquisitive cashier.

“Boyfriend?” the cashier, who couldn’t be more than eighteen and clearly hadn’t outgrown his punk phase, nodded at Taehyung, who was humming and swaying his hips as he examined his gum options a couple aisles down.

“Nope.”

Jeongguk held out his card for gas and the two bottles of water he’d grabbed. The cashier accepted it with ring-clad fingers and black nails.

“Good. He’s cute.”

“Trust me, I know. He’s also far more than you can handle.”

“Hyung, do I want peppermint, spearmint, or wintermint?” Taehyung called. Jeongguk knew it wasn’t intentional, but he couldn’t help but watch as he bent over, ass sticking out while he browsed packages. “Who the fuck even makes this many mints? What kind of mint leaves-”

“It’s sugar content. Peppermint’s the sweetest, spearmint’s the least sweet.”

“But they all say no sugar.”

“That’s the magic of chemicals, sweetheart.”

Taehyung didn’t even look back as he snapped, “I’m not your sweetheart. What the fuck is a Minty Sweet?”

“I think I could handle him,” the cashier commented under his breath, leaning forward to peer around the aisle. He had a tattoo of a rose blossoming behind his ear.

“No, you really fucking couldn’t,” Jeongguk growled.

The cashier just arched his eyebrows and asked, “Should I wait for him before running your card?”
“Obviously.”

“I think I’m gonna go with wintermint, it sounds like a nice in-between.”

Taehyung came bounding over, tossing his gum on the counter while he went to fish his wallet out of his pocket.

“Taehyung, it’s a pack of gum, let me handle it.”

“No, no, I’ve got it.”

“You’re the one who decided to blow me in the car, the least I can do is buy you gum.”

Blinking, Taehyung glanced up. And then he seemed to register something, gaze flicking between him and the cashier. He slung his arms over Jeongguk’s shoulders, purring, “Mm, okay, if you say so, hyung. Thanks.” But of course, Taehyung enjoyed watching him suffer more, so he added to the cashier, “Your tattoo is hot.”

The cashier smirked, touching the rose. “Thanks, pretty thing.”

Taehyung drew away from Jeongguk, leaning over the counter to get a closer look. “The detail is incredible. Can I touch?”

“Course.”

He reached out and caressed along the boy’s jaw, tucked a lock of dyed red hair behind his ear, before tracing over each petal. And Jeongguk had no choice but to watch, biting his cheek until it bled.

“I have a tattoo, too,” Taehyung informed him, all of a sudden very chatty. “Right-” He took the cashier’s hand, dragging it down his own chest to a spot right below his ribcage. “-here.”

“Oh? What’s it of?” The cashier brushed his thumb along Taehyung’s sweater.

Taehyung giggled, an airy, suggestive sound. “A good boy never shows and tells.”

Something within Jeongguk broke.

“Okay, that’s enough.” He grabbed the back of his sweater, tugging him over to stand beside him. “Are you done with my card, or were you too busy flirting?”

The cashier rolled his eyes, swiping it through his reader. “Sign on the screen, dude.”

He kept a hand knotted in the fabric of Taehyung’s sweater while he signed with his other, collecting his card and their items.

“Have a good day!” Taehyung said, cheerfully waving as Jeongguk practically dragged him out the door and back to the car.

“Really?” he asked the moment they were alone, Taehyung leaning against his car while he operated the pump. “Was that really necessary?”

“Was what necessary?”

“Taehyung.”
“Oh, are we getting angry now?” Taehyung dragged his lip between his teeth, turning it a plush, full red before letting it pop back into place. “Cute.”

Thoroughly annoyed, Jeongguk just turned his back on him and focused on filling up the tank.

“C’mon, Jeonggukkie, I was just playing.”

Taehyung hugged him around the waist, tucking his chin over his shoulder.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have flirted with him. But he was just so easy, y’know?”

Jeongguk remained stiff in his hold.

“Hyung,” Taehyung whined. “I’m really sorry. I won’t do it again. I just like your angry voice. Is that so wrong?”

“A little.”

“You like my kinks.”

“I didn’t realise that getting angry at you for flirting with other guys was a kink of yours.”

“Really more of the getting angry part than the flirting with other guys part, but yes. It’s just like what you said to me last night. Remember? You told me I’m sexy when I’m jealous. It’s like that. Your voice gets all deep and you grab me and get all possessive. I like it.”

Jeongguk shook his head, returning the gas nozzle to its home.

But Taehyung didn’t release him, nosing his neck like a needy kitten. “I’m really sorry! Tell me I’m forgiven.”

He never said he wasn’t a weak man.

With a sigh, he ruffled Taehyung’s hair. “You’re forgiven. I’m still mad about it, but I’m going to be mad at him instead of you.”

“That’s fine!” Taehyung replied happily, slipping into the passenger seat. “Twenty minutes to go, or so Google Maps tells me.”

He popped the lid off of Jeongguk’s water for him, and he took it gratefully.

“You sure you don’t want me to drive the rest of the way?”

“Absolutely certain, actually.”

“Just checking,” Taehyung said with a wink, popping two pieces of gum into his mouth.

Memories started hitting him like trains fifteen minutes later. They never actually entered Busan, where most of his memories sat and saturated, but there were plenty waiting for him in the outskirts.

“We used to play at that court there,” Jeongguk remembered, gesturing to a worn down basketball court on the edge of a suburban park. He could almost feel the summer sun on his skin, turning both him and Taehyung a sweet honey colour while they scrimmaged for his basketball.

“And we got ice cream there.” Taehyung pointed to a shop two blocks down from the park, its
faded pink awning exactly as it was five years ago. “I bet noona could still recognise you.”

“Not you?”

“Mm, probably not. I don’t know. We’ve both changed a lot.”

“Yeah. I guess we have.”

He drove for a few more minutes, but slowed as they neared the edge of town.

“You see it?” he asked Taehyung.

“Of course I see it,” he breathed. “Fuck, I miss that place.”

Jeongguk came almost to a full stop -there were no cars behind him anyway- and rolled along the street.

Glistening windows announced the studio in the center of the block, the tallest building around, flanked by a consignment store and well-known cafe.

“I danced here for over a decade,” Taehyung reflected.

“I remember. I spent more afternoons than I could count sitting on that curb waiting for you so you wouldn’t have to walk to the bus stop alone.”

Taehyung’s eyes were filled with warmth when he glanced at him. “Yeah, you did. You’d sit out there and play on your Game Boy, and then during the winter, you’d either snap a table at the cafe or come inside and watch. I always got nervous when you decided to watch, and I wouldn’t dance as well. The other kids would tease me about it, too. About how flustered little Taehyungie got around his hyung. The girls wouldn’t shut up about you, you know, and how adorable you were.”

Jeongguk blushed, smiling fondly at the memory. “I remember when you wanted to switch from jazz to contemporary, and how worried you were about asking your mom. I also remember how nervous you got when you wanted to ask about taking ballet.”

“Our dad had a riot with that one,” Taehyung reminded him. “That one day when it was snowing and Appa’s car got stuck in the driveway, so your dad had to come pick us up. He asked me what class I’d just gotten out of and I told him ballet, and he said to me, ‘Still? At fourteen, you’re still doing that? I told your dad that you’d outgrow all this gay crap and try a real sport, but I guess I was wrong. I can only imagine how he’s dealing with that.’ And I cried for two hours because I thought he was right, and my dad wanted me to do a ‘real sport’ but was too nice to tell me.”

His grip tightened on the steering wheel. “Well, he’s a prick, and I’m sorry he put you through all of that.”

“It’s okay. You always stood up for me.”

“Not really.”

“Yes, really,” Taehyung insisted. “You always told him to back off, and you called him out whenever he tried to insult me.”

“But I could have done more,” Jeongguk finally said, feeling his chest clench.

“Like what? You’re still his son, Jeongguk. And it’s hard to stand up to a parent like that, but you did for me almost daily. You did more than I ever could have asked for.”
Taehyung reached over and took his hand, squeezing.

“Thank you.”

Jeongguk squeezed back.

“Of course. Got any more memories you want to talk about before I keep going?”

Taehyung paused, absorbing the sight of his old studio, frost climbing up the windows and seeping into the sidewalk’s cracks.

“Yeah. We kissed. Right in that alley between the studio and the boutique. Remember that?”

The memory washed over him. It was cold that day, too. November, if he remembered correctly. Taehyung had a grey scarf tied up nearly to his nose and a little red pompom hat on his head. They were waiting around for his practice to start, they always had about half an hour between the end of school and Taehyung’s class, so they were trying to keep warm between the buildings. Taehyung had burrowed inside Jeongguk’s large winter coat, zipping them both up to ‘conserve body heat’ he kept insisting. He’d looked so cute, his mop of brown hair sticking out under his hat, the tips of his ears and nose red from cold, blinking up at him from his place huddled in his jacket. Jeongguk couldn’t help but lean down and steal a kiss as the passing cars blocked them from view.

Fifteen to sixteen had been the magic year for them. Everything seemed perfect, like a cheesy teen rom com had been orchestrated and put into place just for them.

Except for everything else going on when they parted ways. They became each other’s escape in that sense, they just didn’t know it at the time.

“Yeah,” he managed to respond, voice a little rough with emotion. “I remember. You were precious back then, you know. So cute.” He poked Taehyung’s nose, teasing, “I wonder what happened.”

Taehyung snorted, batting his hand away. “The drinking, and drugs, and stripping kinda temper out some of the cuteness.”

He felt a brief pang of loss for Taehyung’s innocence, but pushed it aside. “Nah, you’re still adorable. You’re just mean, now, too. It’s a very confusing combination; it usually takes me a minute to figure out if you’re insulting me or not.”

Taehyung rolled his eyes, but kept their fingers intertwined. “I’m good now, I think. I’m ready to be home.”

Jeongguk flashed him a smile before returning his attention to the road. “Then let’s get you home, princess.”

“I’m going to break your wrist if you keep calling me that.”

“It’s hard to finger you with a broken wrist.”

“The other one works just fine.”

Jeongguk laughed, and continued on down the street. “You’re so high-maintenance.”

“Oh trust me, I know. Hey, look, our initials are still on the stop sign!”

Taehyung pointed at the red sign they’d vandalised five years ago when they’d been out way past
curfew, KTH+JJK carved into the paint using a plastic knife.

“Shame we didn’t put a heart around it,” Jeongguk commented.

“Maybe we should come back one of these nights and finish the job,” Taehyung suggested.

“Although I’m not sure if it has the same charm when we pull up in your fucking 2019 Genesis G90.”

“We’ll take the late night bus instead. Try and capture some of that teen spirit.”

“I’m not missing it that much, to be honest. I was nineteen a year ago.”

“It’s the principle of the thing,” Jeongguk pressed. “C’mon, imagine if Leonardo diCaprio left the Moaning Lisa half-finished.”

Taehyung devolved into a fit of laughter, yanking his hand out of Jeongguk’s to press it to his mouth in mirth.

“What? What’s so funny?”

“...Babe...” Taehyung wheezed. “Aren’t you an arts student?”

“I’m a film student.”

Once Taehyung got himself together, he answered, “Okay, and Leonardo diCaprio starred in several famous Western films. He did not paint any sort of monstrosity going by the name of the Moaning Lisa. Nor did Leonardo da Vinci, who painted the famous Mona Lisa.”

Flushing at his mistake, Jeongguk mumbled, “Italian names are hard, okay?”

But Taehyung wasn’t focused on that part.

“Have you been thinking much about Lisa moaning lately?”

Sensing danger, Jeongguk hastily replied, “Not even once. Your moans are the only ones I think about, thank you very much.”

“Mm, that’s the correct answer. You passed the test, golden boy.”

“Thank god.”

As they drove, they continued to point out landmarks associated with specific memories, just reminiscing together. Eventually, the houses thinned and the landscape widened. Taehyung’s dad didn’t live out in the country or anything, but he definitely lived on the rural edge of town.

Everything looked familiar; from the roads, to the trees, to the signs lining the streets.

Jeongguk turned down a half-paved driveway that would forever be ingrained in his memory. Engraved, even. The small field that grew dotted with dandelions in the spring, the silver SUV that never quite made it into their tiny garage, the farmhouse’s faded brick foundation and big, open windows...all staples of his childhood.

Before he even truly parked, Taehyung bolted out of the car, yelling something along the lines of, “Tannie, Tannie! My baby!”

Perplexed, Jeongguk turned the car off and popped the trunk, retrieving their bags and the gift he’d
picked up for Taehyung’s dad.

Just as Taehyung went to open the door, it swung open itself, and out stepped another living memory of Jeongguk’s.

Kim Seongki, although in Jeongguk’s head he was pretty much just Taehyung’s dad (he’d only learned his real name when he was fourteen), stood a little more stooped than he remembered, broad shoulders sloped, but he still had the same sharp, cheerful gleam in his eyes that caught the last of the sun’s rays.

“Taehyung-ah!” his dad called, arms open for a hug.

But Taehyung breezed right past him through the door, saying, “Wait a second, old man. Tannie!”

Nerves raced through him, but Jeongguk forced himself to head for the door.

Taehyung’s dad continued to watch whatever was happening inside, but turned when Jeongguk reached the base of the steps.

Immediately, he set the bags down and bowed, low and respectful. Probably with more respect than he’d used bowing to his own father in years.

“Jeon Jeongguk,” he remarked, not sounding surprised in the slightest.

He waited to speak, gaze fixed on the pavement.

“I thought it might be you. I mean, who else would Taehyung-ah bring home?”

Still, he waited.

“I saw you on television the other night. Good game against Yonsei. You played well.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“You do have some nerve, coming around here.”

He barely nodded his head, still examining his shoes.

“But we can talk all about that later.” A hand clapped him on the shoulder. “Look up, boy. And welcome home.”

Jeongguk followed his direction, relief washing over him when he saw Taehyung’s dad looking at him with warmth. Curiosity, too. But not hatred. And that was good enough for him.

“Tannie!” he heard Taehyung squeal, and a sharp yap brought both of their attention to the door where Taehyung suddenly appeared, a wriggling ball of black and brown fluff in his arms. “Hyung, meet Tannie!”

Taehyung brought the puppy over to him, and Jeongguk engaged in a brief staring contest with what looked like a Pomeranian with very distinct eyebrows.

It licked his nose.

Laughing, Jeongguk reached out and stroked the puppy’s head. “Tannie?”

“Yeontan,” Taehyung clarified. “My precious baby boy. Appa, have you been feeding him? He
looks so skinny.”

His dad snorted. “That’s because he was four pounds overweight the last time you saw him. Yeontan and I have been working out in the mornings, you know. He’s losing all that baby fat, and on his way to becoming the Pomeranian heavyweight champion.”

“So he’s Jeonggukkie.”

“Hey, don’t be mean!” Jeongguk exclaimed in his defense. “Can you believe this?” he asked Yeontan, who just blinked in response.

“Hold, please.”

Taehyung passed Yeontan to him, and Jeongguk scrambled to form a comfortable cradle for what he could already tell was a very spoiled pup.

The second his arms were free, Taehyung wrapped them around his dad who gladly returned the hug.

“For a minute there, I thought you only made the drive for Yeontan.”

“Sorry,” Taehyung said sheepishly. “I missed you so much.” He retrieved Yeontan from Jeongguk’s arms, clearly missing him the most.

“I missed you, too, obviously. Let’s talk inside, though. I’ve already got dinner going.”

Jeongguk collected the bags as they spoke, but the minute Taehyung spotted him, he rushed to his aid, trying to tug bags off his arms. “Let me carry something.”

He waved him off, turning the bags out of his grip. “I’ve got it, prin-” Blushing, he coughed to cover it. “I’ve got them. I’ll meet you in the kitchen.”

He couldn’t even meet Taehyung’s dad’s gaze as he hurried into the house, nostalgia hitting him like a truck.

Everything looked the same.

The front door opened directly into a big main room, high windows filtering in light from outside. The living room sat a step down from the entryway, sunroom attached to it by a sliding glass door. To his right was the dining room with its long birch table, and behind it was the airy grey-tiled kitchen. To his left was a long hall which held the master bedroom, Taehyung’s bedroom, an office, a storage closet, and a bathroom.

Nothing had changed.

Except for one major thing.

Taehyung’s mom wasn’t there to greet him. Not a single sign of her short, choppy hair, or billowing blouses and wide-legged jeans, or her trademark mulberry lipstick and sea glass earrings. Not a faint mist of lavender and sage. Not even the telltale snatch of a song that always crept in from the sunroom where they kept the piano, at which Taehyung’s mom would sit at for hours and just play concerto after concerto, especially in the summer where she could bask in the sun and watch them play in the yard.

Classical music played on the radio now, Nocturnes being washed through grainy static like the
pleasant hum of bees on particularly windy spring days.

Jeongguk didn’t have to think too hard about why. It was to keep her around, paying homage to her spirit and preserving some part of her presence.

The void she left wasn’t an easy one to fill.

Shaking himself from his thoughts, he left the gifts on the dining room table and carried their bags into Taehyung’s room.

Now that...that was a different story.

It had changed since Jeongguk had last been inside, five years ago, but still that same essence of Taehyung lingered in everything. Fluttering grey drapes with lavender sheers underneath, a soft round white rug upon which stood his queen-sized bed, grey comforter a little askew. His white shelves were still stacked with films and books, but most of the figurines had been taken down. He’d also finally taken down the glowstars they stuck to the ceiling one night when they were eight. The biggest change was the grey...everything. The last time Jeongguk was in this room, the bedspread had been an atrocious coral and white floral pattern with curtains to match.

But the bleakness of the room almost made him miss that ugly coral thing. It didn’t quite feel like Taehyung anymore.

Or maybe he was just mourning the loss of teenaged Taehyung, who had clearly become someone different than the person he had known five years ago.

They both had.

And he supposed Taehyung’s room would reflect that.

“Are you taking inventory in here or something?” Taehyung’s voice remarked from behind him. Jeongguk shook his head and deposited the bags on the bed. “Just...you redecorated.”

“Well, I am twenty now. The bedroom of a sixteen year old wasn’t really going to cut it forever.”

“I guess that’s true.”

He turned back to him, surprised to see Taehyung watching him closely.

“It’s weird being here with you,” Taehyung admitted, but he took a step closer to him.

“Good weird or bad weird?”

Taehyung placed a hand on his shoulder and pressed a small kiss to his lips while he thought it over.

“Good weird,” he decided.

Jeongguk chuckled, resting a hand on his waist. “I’m glad. It’s...weird being back here, but also good weird, I think.”

“I’m glad,” Taehyung replied, kissing him again.

Footsteps padded down the hall, and triggered their well-ingrained response of springing apart.
“Everything alright in here, boys?” Taehyung’s dad asked, peeking his head around the corner.

“Fine, Appa.”

“I see you’ve taken the liberty of putting your bags in here,” his dad observed. “And what makes you think you’ll be sleeping in the same room, Jeongguk?”

Eyes going wide, he rushed to say, “I’d happily sleep on the sofa, sir, I just-”

Taehyung placed a hand on his chest.

“Stop teasing him,” he accused his dad.

Leaning against the doorframe, he inquired, “What makes you think I’m teasing? Boys his age don’t have good intentions, and as your parent, it’s my job to-”

“We’ve been sharing a bed since we were seven! He’s four months older than me.”

His dad laughed. “Relax, Taehyung-ah, I’m kidding. But as for you,” he fixed Jeongguk with a level stare. “I expect you to be nothing short of gentlemanly.”

“Yes, sir,” he answered with a gracious dip of his head.

Nodding in approval, he said, “Come on, then. I made japchae.”

A wide grin appeared on Taehyung’s face at the mention of his favourite food and he practically dragged Jeongguk to the table.

He found an opportunity to earn some points back when he noticed the dining table stood bare.

“Can I help set the table?”

He received another nod and took it as a green light, finding the dishes exactly where he remembered them. Taehyung appeared next to him, locating napkins and helping him carry bowls.

Of course, once everything was set and bowls were full, Taehyung’s dad sat directly across from them.

Now, Jeongguk had always thought of Seongki as a respectable, warm-hearted man. He was known for never taking life too seriously.

But at that exact moment, he began to see a new side of him, one that watched and evaluated his every move like a hawk.

They chatted for a while as they ate, mostly about classes and the activities Taehyung’s dad had taken to in an attempt to fill his life.

“How’s dance going?” he addressed Taehyung, moving some of the beef from his bowl into his son’s.

Taehyung accepted it gratefully, although Jeongguk could see his nervousness at the question in the way his hands clenched under the table.

“Um, good. I scored top of my class in Jazz and Pedagogy.”

“Remind me what a pedagogy is?”
A warm laugh came from Taehyung. “Jeonggukkie said the same thing. It’s dance instruction. Basically, you learn all of the academic fundamentals of dance and then our final was just teaching a class.”

“I’m not surprised you scored well, then. You love getting to tell other people what to do.”

Jeongguk had to suppress a chuckle, fearing the actions Taehyung would take if he sided with his dad.

“No, I just...like making sure that things are done correctly,” Taehyung defended himself, miffed.

His dad gave him an indulgent smile. “Right. I was telling Jeongguk that I watched the game on Friday.”

Taehyung stiffened.

“I was a little surprised when the dance team came out to perform during half time and you weren’t there.”

His dad looked nothing but curious as he said it, but Jeongguk felt the temperature in the room drop as Taehyung struggled to form a response.

Even though he didn’t want to lie, he couldn’t stand watching Taehyung fight a losing battle.

“He twisted his ankle the week before,” Jeongguk offered. “Coach Hwang had to bench him. He put up a good fight about it, too, but in the end, she just couldn’t let him dance for fear of upsetting the injury. And then it was the end of finals, and we were all exhausted, so he took the opportunity to get a quick nap in before going to work. Hwang was fine with it. She practically begged him to take the game off.”

Under the table, he felt Taehyung take his hand and squeeze it gratefully.

Their luck held; his dad bought it. “I’m sorry you had to miss the game, but it sounds like it was for the best. I just missed seeing you, that’s all. How’s the ankle doing now?”

“Oh, it’s fine,” Taehyung assured him. “It was just a little sprain. Our athletic trainer took care of it.”

“Good, good.”

Jeongguk could tell Taehyung had something else he wanted to say, and after a minute of silence, he finally spoke.

“How are you doing?”

“Me?” His dad settled back in his seat, hair glinting under the overhead light. “I’m fine. You know, just making it day to day. Finally sat down and taught myself spider Solitaire.”

Taehyung nodded, biting his lip. “How’s your back?”

“It’s fine, Taehyung-ah. I’ve got a brace on it.”

“And your legs?”

“Still a little shaky. I use the cane to get around if I have to, but I try to use it sparingly.”
“Any news on remission?”

His dad shook his head. “Not quite there yet. I have another screening scheduled for next Tuesday.”

Taehyung swallowed; Jeongguk knew he must be thinking about the cost, even if he didn’t want to be putting a price tag on his dad’s health.

“Did you get my last check?”

His dad sighed, setting his napkin on the table. “Yes, Taehyung-ah. I got it. Thank you.”

“And the hospital?”

“Not a word of complaint from them, so I assume they’re getting everything. Taehyung, seriously, are you sure you’re not overworking yourself? I know it can’t be easy to make these deadlines and keep up with your classes at the same time and-”

“Appa,” Taehyung interrupted, a small smile on his face. Too easily faked. “Don’t worry about it. I’m fine.”

He wasn’t fine. Nothing about his situation was fine. But Jeongguk watched him put a smile on and pretend like it was fine every day.

“You’ll tell me, right?”

“Of course.”

He knew it wasn’t easy to lie to your family. Yet Taehyung made it look so simple. Because he was lying for a good cause, Jeongguk realised.


“Um, no, sir. Much to my father’s displeasure, I’m a film student.”

Taehyung’s dad grinned at that. “I’m sure Jeon Jeongnam must be thrilled.”

“Not exactly,” he acknowledged. “In fact, he’s furious. But I wasn’t going to give up my passion just to make him happy, and we’ve been able to compromise on it so far.”

Compromise might have been a stretch, but it was the only word that came to mind.

“And your stepmother?”

Jeongguk’s eyebrows shot up in surprise.

“Have you met her?” he inquired.

Taehyung’s dad shook his head. “No, no, but your family’s affairs aren’t exactly private. She seems like a nice woman. Studied law at Cambridge?”

“Yes, sir. She’s wonderful. And my brother’s just as sweet.”

“That’s right, I forgot she had a son with your father.” Something close to sympathy, but somehow more reassuring shined in his eyes. A look that Jeongguk used to trust with his life. “It must’ve
been a difficult transition for you.”

Throat feeling a little tight, he nodded. “But things are good now.”

“And what does your father think of—” He gestured between Jeongguk and Taehyung “—this?”

They glanced at each other, both hastily clarifying. Jeongguk, saying, “Oh no, we’re not—” just as Taehyung said, “No, Appa, we’re not together.”

Astonishment crossed his dad’s face. “Oh. Huh. My bad. I suppose I jumped to conclusions.” And then skepticism replaced astonishment. “So, then, Jeongguk, do you often just kiss boys you don’t intend on dating?”

“Appa!” Taehyung exclaimed.

A blush rose to his cheeks. He must have seen them earlier. “No, sir.”

“So you do intend on dating my son?”

“Seriously, please stop hazing him,” Taehyung pleaded.

Jeongguk tried to meet his dad’s gaze as he answered, “Eventually, sir, but that’s a matter that should be discussed between the two of us.”

Taehyung’s napkin landed on the table as he sighed, “Oh my god, don’t encourage him.”

And yet, Taehyung’s father gave him another approving nod and he finished his tea in one long sip.

“You’re welcome to clear the table, Jeongguk.”

“Thank you.” Glad to have something to do, he rose to his feet immediately, gathering empty dishes and heading for the kitchen.

“Honestly, you’re ridiculous,” he heard Taehyung remark to his dad before following him. “I am so sorry,” Taehyung apologised the minute he stood beside him, rinsing dishes under the tap.

“I don’t mind,” Jeongguk assured him, drying the plates and bowls Taehyung washed and placing them in the rack.

“You don’t have to act all tough.”

“No, really, I don’t mind. I would probably do the same thing if I were in his position. It’s worth it.”

Taehyung glanced at him. “Why’s that?”

Jeongguk returned the look, stunned by the genuine confusion in his brown eyes. “Because I’ve been wanting your dad’s approval for years? I’ll do whatever it takes to earn it.”

Returning to the sink, Taehyung inquired, “Why do you want his approval so badly?”

“Well, you see, usually when you’re interested in committing to someone, you want to earn the parent’s approval before actively pursuing that someone.”

“Traditionalist,” Taehyung snorted, although Jeongguk could see the pink spreading across his
cheekbones. “I’d offer to do the same, but I’m sort of afraid your dad might kill me on sight.”

Frowning, he placed a hand on Taehyung’s back as he leaned forward to retrieve a pan. “I’d like to think he wouldn’t actually kill you. Might threaten to, but actual murder would look pretty bad on his record. There’s no way he’d get approved next term.”

“Maybe we should do it,” Taehyung suddenly suggested. “I mean, if you ever came out to him. You’re right—what’s the worst he could do? You’re an adult. I’m an adult. He’s an adult. He has to grow up at some point, right?”

“Trying to imagine you two sitting through a dinner together gives me a migraine,” Jeongguk informed him. “Let’s take this one step at a time, yeah?”

“Right. Obviously.” A beat of silence and then Taehyung tacked on, “I bet I could take him in a fight.”

Jeongguk just smiled and ruffled his hair. “You’re cute.”

“You don’t think I could do it?” Taehyung pressed, clearly offended. “I’m like ninety-percent muscle.”

“Really?” He tugged his back against his chest, tickling his stomach.

“Hey, stop!” he tried to force out between giggles.

Jeongguk leaned forward, whispering in his ear, “I’d slap your ass, too, to emphasise my point, but I have a feeling your dad won’t take too kindly to that. Still, case made.”


“That’s better.”

“Taehyung-ah!” his dad called from the dining room. “This Christmas cactus is beautiful, thank you.”

“That’s from Jeonggukkie, not me!” Taehyung called back. “I got you my love and affection, though, which is worth a lot more in my opinion.”

“Hm, some of the leaves are browning on the edges,” his dad suddenly decided. “It’ll need to be pruned.”

Even though he knew he was just messing with him, Jeongguk still offered, “I’d gladly take care of it for you, sir.”

He heard him chuckle and considered that a win.

“Don’t worry about it, Jeongguk. Thank you.”

Taehyung flashed him a thumbs-up. “’C’mon, let’s go find my baby.” He took Jeongguk’s elbow before giving him time to respond, leading him out of the kitchen and calling, “Tannie?”

They heard a faint bark coming from the sunroom.

Taehyung tugged him in after the sound, dropping his elbow in favour of picking up Yeontan the moment he darted out from under the piano.
“Hi, Tan-ah,” Taehyung cooed, stroking the top of his head. “You didn’t properly meet earlier, this is Jeongguk.”

A light laugh escaped him as he scratched behind Yeontan’s ears. “It’s nice to meet you.” Turning his attention to Taehyung, who wore perhaps the softest expression he’d ever seen on him, he asked, “When did he join the family?”

“Two years ago, when my dad was discharged from the hospital. He needed a companion to keep him from going insane, and I’d wanted a dog for years, so it worked out.”

“I remember you trying to blackmail him into getting you a dog literally every holiday.” He tickled under Yeontan’s chin, whispering to him, “If you need me to break you out, just give me a sign. Blink once for-”

“Hey, stop trying to convince him he’s being held captive!” Taehyung bounced Yeontan in his arms, pouting. “He’s very happy.” Jeongguk watched as his gaze travelled around the sunroom, taking in the potted plants, faded floral sofa, large windows displaying the night sky, and covered grand piano; and on the piano it stayed. “Would you mind holding him for a sec?” Taehyung asked distractedly, already placing Yeontan in his arms.

“Of course.” Jeongguk made sure Yeontan was comfortable, booping his nose with his own. Yeontan licked his cheek. “I think he likes me.”

But Taehyung wasn’t paying attention to him. He carefully swept the cover off of the piano, folding back the glossed case over the keys.

Almost as if in a trance, he sat at the bench and tested the keys, fingers hovering hesitantly over notes that he seemed to know, but felt too scared to touch.

Yet, Jeongguk watched in rapture as Taehyung closed his eyes and overcame his fear.

His fingers flew across the keys, and out poured a melody Jeongguk associated with muggy summer evenings, when they’d be out in the yard, conjuring up their own little worlds or just lying on the grass debating the intricacies of life as the sun set in shades of creamsicles that stuck to their fingers and strawberry ice cream that never quite left Taehyung’s upper lip until Jeongguk took the liberty of removing it with his thumb, and then later, his own lips.

This song would flow through the open screened windows as his mom sat at the piano for hours, the purest lullaby to every picture perfect summer they had together. And when she stopped playing, they knew it was only a short time until dinner.

He hadn’t heard it in five years.

Taehyung played that song now, a song Jeongguk had never learned the name of, but knew better than his own address. A song that felt more like home than his own house ever had.

He watched as Taehyung lost himself in it, fingers moving of their own accord as his eyes remained shut. Not every single note rang out perfectly; he’d never been a serious pianist. But he rarely faltered, either. His hands were steady, connecting to his mom in the only way he had left.

A tap came at his shoulder, startling him half to death.

Taehyung’s dad stood behind him, motioning for him to follow. Torn, Jeongguk glanced back at Taehyung but decided maybe he needed this time alone for it to be therapeutic. Gently, he set Yeontan down and followed him back out. Taehyung’s dad quietly shut the sunroom door behind
them and led him back to the dining room.

He took a seat at the table and Jeongguk hurried to follow suit.

And then he noticed for the first time the faint watery shine in his eyes.

He must’ve spotted Jeongguk’s realisation, because he offered him a smile, looking back in Taehyung’s direction.

“She would’ve been so proud of the man he’s become,” his dad said softly. “I know he doesn’t think so. He thinks she’d be disappointed in him just because he doesn’t say everything that’s on his mind the way she did. But he doesn’t realise that she was just as reserved, if not more so, because he was a child when he knew her. I knew her. Better than anyone, I’d like to think. And she was a complex mother, but an even more complex woman. And I don’t think our children ever really know us as people until they’re all grown up, you know? I think Taehyung and I are just starting to understand each other. I’m not stupid. I know he’s hiding things from me. But I want him to feel safe talking to me, so I’m going to wait until he’s ready to have that conversation.”

Jeongguk didn’t know how to respond, so he just nodded.

Levelling Jeongguk with a firm but not unkind stare, he asked, “I assume you know why you’re sitting in that chair right now? Why, even though I trust Taehyung, I’m struggling a bit to see you in my house?”

“Because I broke your son’s heart,” he answered evenly, although it tore at his own heart, claws that hadn’t relinquished him in years.

“Because you broke my son’s heart,” his dad confirmed, relaxing in his seat. “And maybe it was just a matter of timing. I only heard the news about your family months later, seeing as we were…” He glanced down at the table, taking a deep breath before continuing. “…otherwise occupied. But I remember the way things used to be between you. Unlike most parents, I was privileged enough to watch my son fall in love. And then I was cursed enough to watch him lose every spark of joy that used to light up his life. He lost his mother, he lost his best friend...and all I could do was watch.”

He could only nod. No words would translate what he felt.

“My point is this,” he pressed on. “I have to know. Are you serious about wanting to be with him? To be back in his life permanently?”

“More than anything,” Jeongguk responded instantly. “And there’s nothing I can say that excuses what happened between us five years ago. I’m so beyond lucky to have him back in my life, and I’ll do anything for him,” he vowed, carving every word into his chest.

It was his dad’s turn to nod, hands folded. “Do you love him?”

Jeongguk glanced back at the closed glass doors separating the living room from the sunroom, piano melody still slipping through. He couldn’t see Taehyung but he didn’t need to.

“Yes, I do.”

“Does he know that?”

He shook his head. “I’ve never told him. I wanted to wait.”

“Wait for what?” he asked, leaning in curiously.
“Wait until I was sure I loved the person he is today, and not just the memory of him. But I do. I’m sure now.”

“I’m impressed by your maturity,” he admitted. “You’ve grown up a lot. Both of you have. Sometimes, I think he’s grown up too fast, though.”

“You’re not the only one who thinks so,” Jeongguk agreed, thinking about everything he’d watched Taehyung endure in the past few months alone.

Taehyung’s dad appraised him. “I’m glad we had this talk. Whatever you plan on doing from here, as long as it doesn’t hurt him, I support. And I think you should tell him sooner rather than later. He gets worried, you know. Worried that he’s not good enough. It’ll eat at him.” Ever so subtly, he added, “The back porch is clear of snow. And I have a bottle of wine on the counter. Unopened.”

Amazed at his response, Jeongguk got to his feet and bowed. “Thank you so much, sir. I promise I won’t let you down.”

He chuckled. “I believe you. You’re a good kid, Jeongguk. You always have been.”

Giving him one more gracious bow, Jeongguk left the dining room, slipping quietly into the sunroom where Taehyung still sat at the piano with his back perfectly straight, poised with so much effortless elegance as his slender fingers glided across each note.

Overcome with fondness, Jeongguk kissed the top of his head.

“You sound beautiful,” he murmured.

Taehyung’s playing stilled and he glanced up at him. “Thanks...I haven’t played in years, but I still remember a little, I guess.”

He noticed the same mistiness lingered in his eyes. And suddenly he realised; silence was what tore them apart in the first place. So if he had to be the first person to break it, he would.

“I remembered while I was listening...that’s the song your mom always used to play.”

And thankfully, Taehyung gave him a watery smile, absentmindedly tapping a C. “Yeah, she did. Chopin’s Berceuse.” Taehyung slid out from behind the piano bench, lifting his black sweater for Jeongguk to see the lines of ink circling his ribcage. “I have the first twelve measures.”

Jeongguk brushed his thumb along the staff. “It makes sense now. A beautiful way to honour her.”

Gently, he lowered Taehyung’s sweater. “Do you want to grab your jacket and shoes and meet me on the porch?”

Taehyung didn’t ask questions. “Yeah,” he breathed. “I’d like that.” And Jeongguk felt a soft kiss pressed to his cheek before Taehyung swept past him, Yeontan following at his heels.

Steadying himself with a deep breath, Jeongguk returned to the kitchen, surprised to see Taehyung’s dad had disappeared from the dining table. A bottle of red wine and two glasses sat on the counter.

He filled both glasses and carried them delicately back to the sunroom and out onto the porch, where the overhanging awning kept the two cushioned chairs set out clear from the weather. Setting down the glasses on the small glass table, he took a seat. The lawn stretched out before him, a flat plain of tall grasses that whistled in the wind and looked like midnight-tipped paint brushes under the moon’s glow.
The door slid open, Taehyung’s hair briefly framed by a halo of light from inside. “I grabbed your coat, too,” he said quietly, passing it to him.

“Thanks. It’s not too bad out, though,” Jeongguk said as he slipped on his jacket.

“We’ve had worse winters,” Taehyung agreed, settling into the seat next to him. He took one look at his glass and remarked, “Really? You didn’t bring out the whole bottle?”

Laughing, he replied, “I figured we’d take it one glass at a time.”

“What were you guys talking about in there?” Taehyung inquired conversationally.

He decided to be honest.

“You. And us, I guess.”

“Us?”

Although it was dark, Jeongguk could still make out the arch of his regal eyebrows.

“Us,” he confirmed softly.

Taehyung took a sip of his wine. “I didn’t know there was an us,” he finally said.

“Do you want there to be an us?”

A heavy pause passed between them, through which only the wind dared to speak. And then,

“I don’t know, Jeongguk.” A frustrated sigh escaped him. “I’m just...I keep waiting for you to change your mind, y’know? And you can tell me it’s not going to happen all you want, but the truth is, you’ve done it a thousand times. Hell, you told me you were straight for years and that you just thought of me as a younger brother, and that most of the shit that happened between us didn’t matter to you the way it mattered to me. And then the minute you were out to me, you suddenly wanted me all the time. Then, a year and a half later, you cut me out for good. And I just...I don’t want history to repeat itself. I don’t want you to pretend like you’re falling in love...” Taehyung set his glass down and crossed his arms, hugging himself tight. “...I don’t want you to act like you want me, then change your mind and toss me aside again. You know what I want. I don’t have to tell you. But that doesn’t mean that I’m not the problem, too. There’s just so many problems. You’re closeted, and I’m going to struggle with that because I want to be able to be with you somewhere outside of our own private little spaces, you know? That’s just the kind of person I am. I’m touchy, and overbearing, and I need constant affection, while you’re closed off, distant, and constantly putting space between us. And I get why you do it. I do. But I can’t take that, Jeongguk. Not after what happened before. And it’s not just you. My lifestyle isn’t exactly conducive for a monogamous relationship, but I’d make it work as long as I thought that it was worth it. That we were worth it. So, maybe you should sit with it for a couple of days. See what you’re willing to sacrifice and what you’re not. Then we’ll actually have something to work with.”

They had enough to work with now. Taehyung knew that, and this was just another attempt to delay the conversation.

“Taehyung, I sat with it, by myself, for an entire week. I thought about it constantly. About the way things used to be between us compared to now and I realised, I like now better. I like that we understand each other more, that we’ve had the chance to grow up and reevaluate our lives and what we want from them. I thought about other things, too. I thought about what coming out to my family would look like. I’m not worried about uni. I’m worried about them. But I realised that I
want to be happy. I want to live without feeling like I’m lying to anyone. And you’ve always made me dream about it. You’ve never lived in the closet, and I used to envy you for it. I used to get jealous because your parents were so supportive and encouraging. It made me hate my own family. I wanted what you had. But now... I look back and I just admire you, honestly. Your strength, and how much it must’ve taken to constantly be out and proud. I mean, I saw it. The sacrifices you made. And I did nothing to help. I was weak then, but you’ve always been strong. And I want to be strong, too. And I think I could do it, if I had you by my side. If I knew that, no matter what happened, what they said or did, you’d still have my back. I want to be with you, Taehyung. And it’s not about making sacrifices. It’s about compromising. I want to meet you halfway. You don’t have to give everything up just to make me happy. You’ve done enough of that to last a lifetime.”

He risked a glance at Taehyung only to find him already looking at him, brow furrowed, dark eyes conflicted with the snatches of spilling lamp light and moonlight they were able to catch.

“So, tell me what you want, then,” Taehyung eventually said, voice barely audible.

“I want you,” he answered simply.

“When it’s convenient. When you want a quick hookup-”

“No, Taehyung. I want all of you. I want your late nights, and your early morning hot cocoa runs, and your naps during our morning lecture. I want your tantrums, and your sarcasm, and your fatalistic opinions. I want your philosophical talks at four in the morning and your adorable sleepy murmurs at six. I want the way your eyes light up when you talk about your favourite things, and the way your soul comes to life when you dance. I want the memories I’ve made with you for the past fourteen years, and the ones we’ll continue to make in the future. I want you, and everything that comes along with you.”

Taehyung stared at him, and Jeongguk watched as a single tear rested on his eyelashes and fell.

“I hate you,” Taehyung whispered, off of his chair and on his lap in an instant.

Jeongguk steadied him with his hands, able to feel the heat coming off his body, electricity connecting his fingertips to his waist, and his heart thrumming beneath it all.

Taehyung’s eyes were filled with uncertainty as he gazed at him. But after all of these years, Jeongguk finally felt sure.

He brushed the tear from his cheek, whispering, “I love you.”

Taehyung caught his hand, intertwining their fingers as he hesitated, and then, with conviction, whispered back, “I love you, too.”

And when they kissed, it felt as though they’d never kissed before. Not like they were teenagers again. But like nothing else would ever compare to this, the sensation of being with each other and fully belonging to each other unparalleled in its completion. A red thread match years in the making, having finally been sealed on a frigid December night with the sort of kiss they’d been unknowingly trying to replicate for years, only finding it now at the moment destiny had picked out for them so many seasons ago.

Taehyung felt like heaven and tasted like home, able to conjure countless memories with only a specific tilt of his head or movement of his tongue, gripping his hand and bicep like anchors keeping him afloat.

But Jeongguk needed him just as much, squeezing his hand tight and finding a place to finally
ground himself in the smooth dip of his waist, eternally grateful to him for always being his grounding point, the one person he could go to when he simply needed to breathe.

Even now, he still relied on Taehyung to breathe, resting his chin on his shoulder when they eventually broke apart, feeling the cold air slowly return to his lungs.

“I love you,” he reiterated when he collected himself. “And if you’d allow me to, I’d like to date the hell out of you, Kim Taehyung.”

Taehyung laughed against him, freeing his hand to loop his arms around his neck. “I love you, too. And although I’ve never dated anyone, nor have you filled out the proper paperwork, request granted.”

“I haven’t dated anyone either,” he reminded him. “But I’m pretty sure it’s just like being sexy with your best friend in public. And I’ll get on that paperwork first thing in the morning.”

The humour faded from Taehyung’s eyes a bit as he asked, “You’re sure you’re willing to work this out with me? I won’t promise that it’s going to be easy.”

“I have never once expected anything with you to be easy,” he teased, but grew more serious as he promised, “I’d do anything for you. And I don’t think this is going to be as difficult as you think it is.” And finally, he said what everyone else had been saying for years. He tucked back a loose strand of Taehyung’s hair, murmuring. “You get so lost in your own head, you know? The world isn’t out to get you. You’re safe, and I’m going to do everything within my power to help you see that.”

“It’s safe in my own head.”

“Is it?”

Taehyung hesitated, searching his gaze. “I- I’m not sure anymore.”

“You shouldn’t feel like you’re fighting just for a place in it, Taehyung. You’ve got to own it. Your thoughts, your dreams, the things you want...you’re not supposed to let them own you. You’re not supposed to be afraid of them.”

“There you go giving good advice that you’ve never once touched yourself,” Taehyung pointed out, fingers resting in their familiar place, tangled in the ends of his hair.

He had a point.

“Let’s work on it together then, okay? I told you- you make me want to be better.”

Taehyung pressed his lips to his cheek, then down along his jaw. “You’re such a sweet-talker.”

Jeongguk tilted his head, inhaling deeply as he felt Taehyung’s kisses lingering on his skin. “That’s not an answer, baby.”

“I’d do it with you,” Taehyung conceded, this time leaving open-mouth kisses down his neck that made it hard to think. “Work on things, I mean.” He sounded a little more breathless each time he came up to speak.

He hummed, supporting Taehyung’s back to make sure he didn’t slip as he worked his way up and down his throat, leaving what he knew would be a constellation of marks to rival his own.
Finally, when Taehyung seemed satisfied with his work, he kissed his way back up to his lips, interlocking them once more under the night sky. His lips were wet after the attention he paid his neck, full and soft against his own, still as sweet as ever.

After a while, Taehyung rocked back on his heels, squeezing Jeongguk’s thighs with his own to stay in place as he retrieved his wine glass.

“So, where do we go from here?” Taehyung asked, taking a shallow sip.

Jeongguk considered it, carefully taking his own untouched glass from the table. “Where do you want to go?”

“I need to know what you’re comfortable with. As far as telling people we’re together.”

Even though he had to pause and evaluate it for a moment, address the fear that curled in his stomach, he knew what he wanted. “I’d tell the whole world that I’m with you, Kim Taehyung. But I’m going to ask you to be patient with me. One step at a time. Your dad, our friends...and eventually my family, too. I need to talk with them first, though. Is that okay?”

Taehyung carded tenderly through Jeongguk’s hair with his free hand. “Whatever is going to make you the most comfortable with everything is okay with me. You know I won’t force you into anything.”

He shook his head. “I don’t think I could go through my day pretending like you weren’t mine.”

Lifting his glass, Taehyung clinked them against one another. “To being together, then.”

Jeongguk felt a smile blossom across his face. “I’ll drink to that.” And he did, bringing his glass to his lips and watching as Taehyung did the same, eyes never leaving his. “You can thank your dad for the wine, by the way.”

Taehyung rolled his eyes. “First he hazes you and then he orchestrates romantic confessions. I think he’s getting too bored out here.”

Maybe it’s time to talk to him,” he suggested, thinking back to their conversation. “He said something to me. He said he wants you to feel comfortable sharing things with him, but he’s not going to force you to.” Jeongguk decided to omit the part about him knowing things weren’t exactly as they appeared, figuring Taehyung needed to reach that conclusion himself. “It might be so much easier if you just cleared the air. It’ll be hard, but you know he loves you. He’ll listen. He’s patient.”

Mulling it over, Taehyung took another long drink of wine. “Maybe.”

“I’m serious, Taehyung. It might be time.”

“I have something good going now, though. Why ruin it?”

“You really think what you have going right now is good?” Jeongguk asked quietly.

Taehyung tapped his nails against his glass. “It’s about to be better. I’ll have more money.”

“At what cost? Your own self-worth?”

“If that’s what it takes, yes!” he snapped. Then Taehyung’s expression softened. “Sorry, sorry. I just...we’ve been over it a thousand times.”
“Please,” Jeongguk begged, gently prying the glass from his hands and setting both down. “Let me help you. You won’t owe me or my family anything. We’re in this together, Taehyung, and I can’t stand watching you suffer anymore. It’s tearing me apart because on one hand, you’re allowed to make your own choices and be who you want to be, but on the other hand, you keep making choices you know aren’t good for you and that aren’t going to make you happy, and it’s so hard to just sit by and watch that when I know there are other options. Please.” He took Taehyung’s hands, attempting to soothe the wary look in his eyes. “Please let me help.”

“Jeongguk, I...I can’t.”

“Why not? And before you say it’s your fault, it’s not. None of this is your fault. You shouldn’t have to carry the responsibility for it all. Please.”

“But it is!” Taehyung argued, distraught. “It’s my fault, and-”

“It’s not,” Jeongguk cut him off, cupping his jaw. “Look at me. Listen. You’ve suffered an irreparable loss and paid the highest prices possible for a tragedy you weren’t responsible for. Trust me, I know, as someone who’s spent countless nights trying to figure out what I could have done to change things, there was truly not one thing you could have done differently. I know what it’s like to feel responsible for a parent leaving, but in your case, there was really no way you could have done anything. Stop punishing yourself for it. And stop punishing yourself for your dad’s sickness. If he saw how much you beat yourself up over it, he’d be heartbroken. It’s not your fault, Taehyung. Are you listening? It’s not. Your. Fault.”

Slowly, Taehyung nodded. After a moment, he conceded. “I hear you...It wasn’t your fault, either, you know. Your mom leaving. That’s not on you. No kid should have to torment themselves with that.”

“I think you know better than anyone that you don’t get to choose which thoughts keep you up at night.”

Taehyung kissed his forehead, brushing over it with his thumb. “Yeah. I guess I do.”

“Please think about what I said.”

He sighed. “I will.”

Jeongguk smiled and pressed a soft kiss to his lips.

“I said, I’ll think about it,” Taehyung huffed. “C’mon, let’s finish this glass of wine and head to bed. I’m exhausted.”

“Sounds perfect to me.”

And it did. Nothing sounded better than sitting on the back porch of his childhood at midnight with Taehyung on his lap, exchanging stories and memories until their toes went numb from the cold and carried them inside, collapsing on a bed Jeongguk imagined still held his shape from so many nights spent in it, Taehyung sleeping closer to the wall like always, intertwining their bodies in patterns found and set long ago.

As they lay there in the darkness, chest to chest, swapping breath, he pulled Taehyung closer and whispered, “I love you.”

Taehyung’s light laugh tickled his nose. “I love you, too. Now get some sleep, golden boy. We’ve got a big week ahead of us.”
Jeongguk hummed, stealing one last kiss before Taehyung tucked his head under his chin, and lulled him to sleep with his even breathing and steady heart.

~*~*~

Taehyung lay there for hours, thinking over everything they’d talked about.

More often than anything else, three words kept ringing through his head.

_I love you._

He’d waited years to hear them out loud in Jeongguk’s voice, to respond to them using his own.

And even if Jeongguk didn’t realise it, he’d already sacrificed so much for Taehyung. Accepting his scars, his trials, and his faults. Creating a safe space for him to live his life without fear of judgement.

But he’d said something about compromise.

Jeongguk couldn’t be the only one giving things up so selflessly.

His mind was made.

Quietly, carefully, he slipped out of the sheets and Jeongguk’s grasp, and retrieved his phone.

“Where are you going?” Jeongguk mumbled sleepily.

“Just to the bathroom,” Taehyung whispered. “I’ll be right back. Go back to sleep.”

He hummed, rolling over.

Picking his way delicately through his room, Taehyung crept into the hall in full darkness and headed back for the porch.

Once outside, surrounded by the sounds of deep night, he called a number he’d only been in rare communication with.

“Taehyung-ssi?” a male voice answered in surprise, the beat of an EDM song and muffled chatter pouring through the line. “What can I do for you?”

“Hey, Park Minjun-ssi. I’m sorry to call you so late, but I figured you’d be up.”

“You figured right; it’s our most active hour, after all.”

“Right.” His breath form little frozen clouds in front of him, and he hugged himself tight with his free arm trying to preserve some of Jeongguk’s body heat in his hoodie. “I needed to talk to you about something.”

“I’ve got a few minutes. What’s up?”

He took a deep breath, steeling himself.

“I can’t take your job offer. I’m sorry.”

“Thought you were in sort of a desperate place?” Minjun inquired.
“I-” Taehyung cast his gaze around, focusing on the trees bordering the road. “I am. But this...I just can’t do it. You said something to me about how...you didn’t know anyone who would sacrifice a relationship for a job. I said I wasn’t in love with him. I lied. And now...I can’t do it. I’m truly sorry, and I hope you find someone to fill the position. I have a number of guys that I’d happily refer to you if you’d like.”

The stretch of silence scared him. But finally, Minjun spoke.

“It’s all good, Taehyung-ssi. I admire you, you know. You’re a strong kid. It’s good to fight for the things you know are right, and love’s always going to be one of those things. Text me a list of names, yeah, and I’ll check them out.”

“Gladly, sir. Thank you.”

“And...one last thing.”

Apprehensive, he paced the porch. “Yes?”

“I told you. I like you, Taehyung-ssi. You’ve got the sort of potential as a dancer that I just don’t come across too often. Passion. I’ll tell you what. I’ll pass your name through my professional circles and see what comes up. Send me a copy of your dance portfolio and resume.”

Stunned, he couldn’t help but ask, “Wait, really?”

“Yes, really. I think you could really be something, Taehyung-ssi. I want to watch you make it to the top.”

“Thank you, sir,” he said softly, in complete and utter awe.

“No problem. And your guy...he’s a lucky man to have someone as selfless as you.”

Taehyung glanced back at the door. “I think I got luckier. Truly, thank you so much for everything.”

“Of course. Have a good night, Taehyung-ssi.”

“Thanks. You too.”

He hung up and just spent a minute gazing out over the lawn, shock and hope threatening to consume him.

He might get a real job.

He might be able to pursue his dream, take care of himself, and love Jeongguk all at once.

He might finally get everything he wanted.

A giddiness fluttered in his chest as he let himself back inside, trying not to wake Jeongguk returning to bed.

But of course, that never worked, and he felt a firm arm wrap around him the minute he layed back down.

“Everything okay?” Jeongguk asked, drowsy.

Taehyung’s heart swelled and he caressed his cheek.
“Perfect.”

And he meant it, letting Jeongguk’s soft hum and the comfort of his own bed lull him into the most restful sleep he’d gotten in years.

Chapter End Notes

aaaaaaa COMEBACK. wow. damn. the raw energy 7 has. i literally drove to the ocean today just so i could listen to the album on a scenic route. anyways, you might have noticed that there are only two chapters left after this one. you can expect the following in the next: taekook being peak boyfriend culture, vminseok finally talking, and perhaps the showdown we’ve all been waiting for. also, this fic jumped from like 400 kudos to 500 in literal days and i don’t understand but i’m so beyond grateful, thank you so much!

yell at me on twitter! and stream on!
“No! Tannie, come back here!” Taehyung tore after his little rascal, ignoring Jeongguk’s amused snort behind him. Yeontan’s fluffy tail bobbed in the breeze as he darted off through the tall grasses. “Yeontan!” Taehyung called, wind snatching his breath away. His pup just glanced back at him and continued to run. “Tannie!”

Taehyung understood the appeal of disobedience; he really did.

But this was absolutely not the same thing.

He could hear Jeongguk jogging behind him, felt a hand briefly land on his shoulder.

“Use your voice,” Taehyung urged him, keeping pace. All those early morning runs were finally paying off.

Jeongguk shot him a confused side-glance. “What?”

Yeontan wove through the grass, just being a little shit for the hell of it.

He was lucky Taehyung loved him.

“Your dom voice! You’re the alpha male! Make him see that, get him back here!” Jeongguk laughed at his urgency, to which Taehyung just rolled his eyes and called out another fruitless “Kim Yeontan! You get back here right now!”

His loyal pup ignored him wholeheartedly, forcing him to run even faster in the hopes of catching up.

“Jeongguk, make him listen!” Taehyung whined, growing breathless. “Yeontan!”

“Wait, wait, you said something about me being the... what was it again?”

Taehyung fixed him with the dirtiest side-glare he’d ever given. Jeongguk didn’t even sound tired, smug smirk firmly in place.

“Fuck you.” Turning his attention from him, he shouted, “Yeontan! Tannie, please! I’ll give you anything! Belly rubs, cuddles, new toys!”
Yeontan was apparently interested in none of the above, although he did cock his head as if to hear and consider Taehyung’s offer.

His legs started to burn, shooting up his calves and through his thighs.

“C’mon, Tae, just say it one more time and I’ll give it a shot,” Jeongguk wheedled, supporting him with a hand on his back. “He probably won’t listen to me anyway.”

With a desperate sigh, he reaffirmed, “I said ‘you’re the alpha male.’ Now stop stroking your own dick and call my baby!”

“Where on the hierarchy exactly?”

“I’m going to hit you.”

Jeongguk remained silent, but increased his speed a little, daring Taehyung to try and keep up.

“For fuck’s sake!” he burst out, regret consuming him immediately as his lungs screamed for air. “Above me! Yeontan, me, then you, okay? You’re at the top!”

“You’re damn right, I am.” Satisfied, Jeongguk cupped his mouth, commanding clearly, “Yeontan! Back! Now!”

And the fucking traitor listened.

Taehyung stopped in his tracks, heels skidding in the dirt as Yeontan flicked his ears and circled back their way, yapping happily.

“Disownment,” he informed Yeontan the moment he stood in front of him, jumping up on his leg in excitement. “That’s what you’ve earned yourself.”

Yeontan barked, tail wagging as Jeongguk squatted down to pet him, smirk still stuck on his stupid handsome face.

“You’re really lucky I love you,” he stated as he tickled Yeontan under the chin.

“Yeah, he is,” Jeongguk agreed.

Taehyung glanced up. “I wasn’t talking about him.”

Jeongguk’s smirk broke into a happy grin and he tackled Taehyung into the grass, cooing, “Aw, baby, I love you, too!”

“Okay, off, off!” Taehyung ordered, swatting him to no avail. Seeing all the ruckus, Yeontan pounced on Jeongguk, yapping loudly to try and either save Taehyung or just join in on the fun.

A pout tugged at Jeongguk’s lips. “Say it again”

Taehyung rolled his eyes, shoving with all his might.

“You weigh more than a tonne of bricks,” he complained.

“Say it again.”

“Say what again?”
Jeongguk’s pout deepened, and his weak heart couldn’t handle it.

“Oh my god, okay, I love you. Now get your toned ass off me so I can breathe.”

A smile quickly replaced his pout, and Jeongguk sprang to his feet, tugging Taehyung up along with him. Yeontan circled his heels.

He tried to ignore the way being hauled from the ground to a standing position with zero visible effort on Jeongguk’s part made him feel hot all over in the middle of winter.

“I wish my dad would decide we need groceries or something.” He didn’t care how whiny he sounded as they trekked back through the grass. They had decided to take a morning walk with Yeontan, and of course his little baby (read: fucker) had somehow managed to bolt through the door before they got his harness and leash completely on, so what was supposed to be a nice leisurely stroll turned into the olympic mile.

“Why would you want that?” Jeongguk inquired. “Are we out of anything in particular? I’ll run to the store for you.”

Taehyung sighed. “No, baby. I want him to leave so we can fuck and be as loud as we want.”

“You really have a one-track mind, don’t you?”

“No! We did the soft stuff last night,” he reminded him. “And we haven’t slept together in over a week. We were going almost every day for two months before that. My body hasn’t adjusted.”

“Oh, you poor thing,” Jeongguk snorted.

“Actually, I was thinking…”

“I love it when you think.”

Taehyung threw him another filthy glare. “Dick. Anyway, I was thinking that...maybe once we’re back in our own space on campus...I don’t know, I kind of want to have...romantic sex? Not that the kinky shit isn’t great, I want that like ninety-nine percent of the time. But, for one time, I kind of want to try something sentimental. Candles, and rose petals, and soft music...you know, the whole deal. Someday.”

He bent down to pick up Yeontan, terrified of him running off again, and when he straightened back up with the wriggling fluff ball, Jeongguk wrapped an arm around his shoulder.

“You’re so cute,” Jeongguk hummed.

Indignant, he snapped, “Don’t make fun of me. Forget it.”

“And so goddamn prickly. I want to do that, too, Tae. Let me make it special for you.”

Taehyung glanced at him, smoothing down Yeontan’s fur. “It’s not just for me. I can take care of it. And we can do dinner first or something.”

Jeongguk arched an eyebrow. “Nothing is ever just for you. But I want it to be this time. Let me take care of it, and let me take you out to dinner.”

“No.”

A long sigh came from Jeongguk. “Here we go again. Yes, Taehyung.”
He frowned, burying his nose in Yeontan’s fur as a means of escaping a lecture. “No, Jeongguk. I don’t need taking care of.”

Grass brushed at their thighs as they walked, rippling with the breeze. “As your boyfriend, I want to take care of you. At least once. It would make me happy.”

*Boyfriend.*

Huh.

He liked the sound of that more than his noncommittal tendencies ever thought he would.

“Yes, boyfriend,” Jeongguk repeated with a laugh.

Oops, he hadn’t meant to marvel at the word out loud.

As shyness painted his cheeks pink, he leaned into Jeongguk’s touch a little more, warmth flooding him as he tightened his hold around his shoulders.

Reluctantly, he conceded. “Fine. But as your boyfriend, I’m begging you not to go over the top. With anything. Ever.”

“Where exactly is the top?”

Taehyung rolled his eyes. “I draw the line at anything over 100,000 won.”

“What.”

“What?”

Jeongguk was watching him with thin lips, as though trying not to laugh.

“Okay, yes, you’re a fucking Jeon, and you’ve got 100k’s in your back pocket, whatever. You know what, fine. Do what’s going to make you happy. I just want to get dicked down surrounded by rose petals. Anything else is up to you.”

“Wait, is that a green light or are you mad?” Jeongguk inquired, reaching over to stroke Yeontan’s head.

Taehyung narrowed his eyes, considering it. “That’s a green light, I guess.”

“Whatever is going to make me happy?” he reiterated just for clarity.

Suspicious now, Taehyung adjusted Yeontan in his arms to glare at Jeongguk properly. “I guess.”

A joyous noise came from the back of Jeongguk’s throats and he practically squished him in a hug, kissing the top of his head. “Thank you! I promise you’ll like it, Taehyungie.”

“You’re suffocating Tannie.”

Jeongguk drew back with a sheepish, “Sorry.”

But as he walked, Taehyung lingered back a little, admiring him in the early winter sun, his heart secretly racing.

Jeongguk was too good for him. He’d said it before, and he’d say it again. He always got on him
for being distant, but the truth is, Taehyung acted more distant than Jeongguk ever had.

He appreciated every little thing Jeongguk did for him, but he never knew how to show it. Instead, he just pushed him away with a sharp remark and thanked him silently in his head.

Maybe he should try speaking up.

“Hey, Jeongguk?” he asked softly.

Jeongguk turned, waiting for him to catch up. “Yeah?” He linked their arms together, making sure Yeontan still had support.

Taehyung swallowed. “You’re allowed to back out, you know. I’m not very nice, and I’m not good at showing appreciation, and love isn’t exactly my strong suit, and-”

“Baby, I’ve known you for fourteen years. You really think I’m gonna take stuff like that seriously? You’ll say the things you need to say when you’re ready. I’m lucky enough to have learned that a long time ago. So don’t worry so much, okay? I’m not going anywhere.”

“That’s not fair to you, though. At all.”

“No, what’s not fair to me is having to listen to you second-guess this. I want to do this with you, Taehyung. Please believe me.”

He glanced at him, doubt slowly ebbing. “Really?”

Jeongguk shook his head, smiling. “Yes, really, dumbass.”

It was now or never, he supposed.

“I should probably tell you something, then.”

Nervousness tinged Jeongguk’s voice as he asked, “What?”

“I talked to the GC owner last night. Told him I wasn’t gonna take the job.”

Jeongguk stopped in his tracks, staring at him. “What?”

Yeontan perked up curiously at his tone, but Taehyung smoothed over his ears, repeating, “I said I wasn’t going to take the job.”

Blinking, Jeongguk said, “But, I thought...you needed it.”

He shrugged and continued walking. The house began to come back into sight. “I’ll figure something else out.”

Hurrying to catch up, Jeongguk inquired, “Why?”

“Because.” Taehyung avoided looking anywhere but him. “I don’t want to be with anyone else when I’m with you.”

“Oh,” Jeongguk breathed. “But...the money. It’s a good job. You don’t have to give all that up just because of me. I can back off. Let you make what you need to make so-”

“It’s not for you,” he cut over his babbling. “It’s for me. And us, I guess. Besides, I’m tired of being treated like a toy. And I know that those men are just going to use me as a plaything, and I’m
sort of over it. But...the owner offered to send my name and resume out to professional agencies with a recommendation. So, who knows, maybe something good will come of that.”

“That’s amazing, Tae,” Jeongguk reassured him, wrapping an arm around his waist. “You deserve it.”

Did he?

With another shrug, he said, “I’m not getting my hopes up. I’m going to start looking for teaching jobs, though. Since I passed my Pedagogy class and doubled with course certification through the center’s sister agency, I’m now officially certified to teach contemporary, and it fits my hours. I should be able to teach from six to closing, then head to Sin after.”

“Or you could just take me up on my offer,” Jeongguk muttered.

“I said I’d think about it. That doesn’t mean I’m not going to work for it. Even if I do take you up on your offer, that just means you’ll pay off the bills, and then I’ll pay you in installments. I’m covering it either way.”

Jeongguk just bumped his shoulder, petting Yeontan. “Whatever makes you happy. But...um, thanks.”

“For what?”

“For declining the job. I was never going to outright tell you that you can’t do it, because I’m not in charge of your decisions, but it means a lot that you...I don’t know, value this enough, I guess. I just...sorry, it’s hard to put into words. But, it’d feel weird, y’know, if you were sleeping with other guys. Not that it’s just about sex...”

Taehyung could tell he was struggling to vocalise what he meant, so he tried to help him out. “But still, that’s sort of a sacred part of a relationship, and I didn’t want to intrude on that. There’s no one other than you I want to be sleeping with, Jeongguk. That’s why I declined the job. What we have is special to me. I want to keep it that way.”

Jeongguk flashed him a grateful smile, eyes sparkling in the sunlight. “Thanks. I do, too, if I’m being honest.”

“This-” He shifted Yeontan to nestle between the crook of his elbow and his shoulder so he could take Jeongguk’s hand. “-means the world to me. And I know I don’t say sappy shit a lot, but I’m going to for a minute so buckle up. I’ve been in love with you for most of my life, so I’m not going to prioritise a stupid job over what we have. You’re sort of my soulmate, and no pervy business offer is going to get in the way of that. Got it?”

His laugh, so light and airy, washed over Taehyung, filling him with warmth. “Got it. Love you.”

“Love you, too,” he mumbled with a barely concealed eye roll.

They made it back to the house with only a few detours, most of them just to reminisce about specific landmarks that some pertained to their childhood.

Finally, they stumbled through the front door, giggling about a joke Jeongguk had just made, and Taehyung freed Yeontan to run around as he pleased. High off their laughter and the early morning sunshine, he looped his arms around Jeongguk’s neck, bringing him in for a sweet kiss.

“Ahem.”
Jeongguk pushed away from him instantly, doe eyes wide with fear as his dad stared them down from the living room, loudly clearing his throat.

Taehyung just grinned. “Good morning, Appa! How are you?”

His dad raised his eyebrows, trying and failing to suppress the smile tugging at his lips. “Clearly not as good as you two. How was Yeontan’s walk?”

“You mean Yeontan’s two mile sprint,” he muttered. “Took off before we even got his harness on, right out the door. Had to chase him forever. Good thing hyung’s loud and fast, otherwise I’d still be out there running after him.”

“I can be quiet and slow, too,” Jeongguk tacked on hastily, as if trying to prove something to his dad.

Taehyung resisted another sarcastic eye roll. “Yes, Jeongguk, you’re very dynamic. Congrats.”

“Don’t be mean, Taehyung-ah,” his dad chided.

“Sorry.”

He really needed to work on his manners.

“I swear, you haven’t tried to master a simple ‘please and thank you’ since you were ten.”

He smiled as wide and bright as he could, cupping his chin. “Why would I when I’m this cute?”

Jeongguk snorted a laugh beside him, to which he received a swift elbow.

“Ouch!” Jeongguk exclaimed. “Don’t think I won’t get you back, you little brat.”

Taehyung whirled on him, taunting, “Try me, big boy,” before darting off toward the living room. Loud footsteps pounded on hardwood floors as Jeongguk raced after him. They sprinted circles around the room, Jeongguk struggling to keep himself from cursing as Taehyung wove in and out of furniture, dodging the couch, armchairs, lamps, and end tables.

Something about being here, at the house of his childhood with Jeongguk made him feel young again. More joy, more hope, more optimism. More faith that the world wasn’t as cruel as all the adults swore it would become. He could laugh as loud as he wanted, he could run, he could dance his way around Jeongguk’s carefully honed defense, he could stumble, and giggle as he collapsed on the couch, Jeongguk firmly pinning him down with a playful triumph in his eyes and cute curve of his pouty lips.

“Gotcha,” Jeongguk announced, keeping his wrists against the armrest, nearly identical to the position they’d found themselves in at the basketball court four months ago. Except this time, no hate simmered between them. He could laugh as loud as he wanted, he could run, he could dance his way around Jeongguk’s carefully honed defense, he could stumble, and giggle as he collapsed on the couch, Jeongguk firmly pinning him down with a playful triumph in his eyes and cute curve of his pouty lips.

“Gotcha,” Jeongguk announced, keeping his wrists against the armrest, nearly identical to the position they’d found themselves in at the basketball court four months ago. Except this time, no hate simmered between them. Only love rose and fell with their breathing, and of course, the irresistible spark of competitiveness that never quite left, alight in the challenge of, “Gonna surrender?”

Taehyung arched an eyebrow, imperceptibly drawing his knee up. “Oh, you wish.”

And before Jeongguk could process what was happening, Taehyung shoved his foot against his chest, sending him sprawling on the other end of the couch as he made his escape.

“Taehyung!” Jeongguk yelled, sprinting to follow him down the hall.
Anticipation rushed through him, and that persistent childlike fear of being caught. Rationally, he knew Jeongguk wouldn’t do anything to him. But the thrill remained nonetheless.

He practically flew into his bedroom, hurrying to shut the door behind him, but Jeongguk was faster. He shoved his foot in the door and pushed Taehyung away from it, overpowering him with brute strength.

So, at least that much had changed since they were kids. Taehyung used to worry about a strong gust of wind blowing Jeongguk over.

Laughing, Taehyung circled around the other side of the bed, using it as a barrier between them.

“Taehyung, you better come here right now,” Jeongguk insisted, although the shine of competition lingered bright in his full dark irises.

“Or what?”

He tried really hard not to make this sexual, but just as kids grew up, so too did their games.

“Or what?” Jeongguk repeated, slowly inching around the bed. “Hm, I don’t know, Taehyung-ah.” Oh, shit. “What do you think is fitting?”

Suddenly, he felt cornered, backed into a punishment he had no way of escaping.

Or maybe he did.

“I don’t know, hyung.” He drew the words out, buying himself time. “I’ve always wanted to try housework with my hands tied. You think that could be fun?”

Jeongguk actually paused to consider it, only a foot away from him, and Taehyung took his chance. In one swift movement, he rolled across and off the bed, running for the door.

Not waiting for Jeongguk to shout after him, he took off, located his dad in the kitchen, and promptly hid behind him.

“Save me!” he squeaked as much as a baritone could, clinging to his dad’s broad shoulders.

But just as Jeongguk came jogging down the hall, his dad shook him off with a good-natured smile. “You got yourself into this mess, Taehyung-ah. You get yourself out of it.”

“Appa!” he whined, trying to hide behind his back again.

A devious twinkle entered his dad’s sun-lined eyes. “You’re twenty years old, Taehyung. Learn to play nice.”

Jeongguk’s smug grin seemed downright unfair. “Yeah, Taehyung. Learn to play nice.”

“Oh, don’t you gang up on me!” Seeing that no end to this game lay in sight, at least not one that worked in his favour, he sighed. Slow steps brought him out of safety and he bowed deeply. “Fine, fine, I surrender, Oh-Great-Jeon-Jeongguk.”

A soft elbow (far softer than he had been) jabbed him in the ribs.

“Hey!” he exclaimed, indignantly straightening up.

Jeongguk just ruffled his hair, making obnoxious brown fringe fall in his eyes. “Now we’re even.”
Yeah, he was absolutely head over fucking heels for this guy.

“Meanie,” he grumbled, rubbing his side. Jeongguk laughed, shaking his head, and pulled him into a tight hug. Careful fingers worked over the barely-there ache on his ribs, and Taehyung couldn’t help but blush at the tenderness of the gesture.

As his dad observed them, he appeared to remember something. “Oh, yeah, I got you guys something at the store.”

“Oh?” Taehyung pulled away from Jeongguk, curious. Or he was, until a shopping bag hit him in the chest. He just barely caught it, and when he saw what was inside, he dropped the bag on the floor and went to walk away. The blush coating his cheeks deepened, but Jeongguk stopped him from walking out by grabbing his wrist.

“What?” Jeongguk asked, bending down while keeping a hold on him to retrieve the bag. When he saw its contents, he small, “Oh,” escaped his mouth. When Taehyung glanced at him, he was blushing just as visibly.

“Use them, please,” his dad advised, looking every bit as cheerful as he always did. “Always better to be safe than sorry.” With that, he turned back to the sink, rinsing coffee mugs as though he hadn’t just done the most embarrassing parent thing in the world.

“I’m moving out,” Taehyung announced, snatching up the bag of condoms and marching towards his bedroom.

“You lost the ability to use that one three years ago,” his dad reminded him.

“Damnit.”

“It would be really suspicious for me to follow him, right?” he heard Jeongguk check.

“Yeah, don’t you dare,” his dad confirmed.

Taehyung had to smile to himself at that, dropping the bag off in his room before returning to the kitchen. Returning to who had undoubtedly become his two favourite people.

…

It was on their third night there that they decided to go create a little mischief. His dad’s back pain had started acting up right around lunch time, so Taehyung made a batch of beef short rib soup, wanting something to warm his bones and that he could eat at his own pace. As he cooked, he got his dad set up on the couch, nice and comfy with pillows, blankets, and his brace, the television playing whatever weird sitcom he was into these days. His dad said he was making a fuss. He said he was making up for months of not coming home. Jeongguk kept them both company, helping him out in the kitchen and changing the channel on their old television whenever his dad got bored with what he was watching.

Finally, however, it seemed his dad got tired of Taehyung’s fretful hovering and demanded they leave the house for a good few hours.

And although he felt reluctant to go anywhere when he knew his dad was in pain, he practically shoved them out the door. In compromise, Taehyung made Yeontan promise to take care of him.
“So, where to?” Jeongguk asked as they sat in his car.

Taehyung crossed his arms. “I go to all the trouble of making soup. I make the best blanket fort this house has ever seen. I rub essential oils into his shoulders. And he kicks me out!”

Jeongguk massaged his nape in sympathy. “I’m sorry, baby. On the bright side, we get a few hours alone.”

“To what, fuck in the car?” he snorted.

With a shrug, Jeongguk replied, “Among other things. You said something about finishing the deed on that stop sign. Might as well check that off the list. And we can go eat wherever you want, since we didn’t get any of that soup. It smelled delicious, though.”

Slightly mollified, he muttered a quick “Thanks.”

“I didn’t know you could cook,” Jeongguk added, still easing the tension between his shoulder blades.

Painful memories threatened to shut him down, but he fought through it. He wanted to be open with Jeongguk. He wanted Jeongguk to have every piece of him, even his pain. “I kinda had to learn fast. Eomma couldn’t do it anymore. Some nights she spent in the hospital. But the ones she was here for, she was too frail to move around the house. Appa sort of went into shock. Didn’t talk, really, either. I was cooking every meal for a year, probably.”

Realisation dawned on Jeongguk’s face. “That’s why you always rushed home before dinner, and wouldn’t let me come over anymore.”

He flinched, memories turning bitter. “Yeah. That’s why.” But he let the bitterness wash over him, processed it, and made it flow back out. He hadn’t lost anything. It just took longer than he wanted it to. “And then, um...when she...when she passed, um, it was just us. And you know, he always cooked for us. But he couldn’t do it anymore. Could barely move from his chair. So I did it. I made sure he was fed, and that he took care of himself, and that he made it to work on time. Some days he wouldn’t get out of bed. I had to drag him up, convince him to dress, help him shave...and then he got sick.”

“You didn’t get any time to recover,” Jeongguk said softly.

Slowly, Taehyung shook his head. “No.”

“You had to be strong because no one else would.”

A pause. He nodded. “Yeah.”

“Baby,” Jeongguk sighed, pulling him close to kiss his hair. “God, I can’t imagine.”

“Yes, you can,” he disagreed, getting himself together so as not to be an emotional wreck during their vacation. “You went through your own slew of never being good enough bullshit. But you never talk about it. I talk about it all the time.”

“If by ‘all the time’ you mean twice, then yeah, Tae, you talk about it all the fucking time.”

He turned to look at Jeongguk properly, not expecting the venom in his voice.

“What’s got your panties in a twist?”
“I-” Jeongguk’s brow furrowed, cute little frown forming on his face. “I don’t know.”

“Wanna tell me about your trauma over milkshakes?”

Jeongguk hesitated. “Do I have to?”

“Well, I’m not going to like, tie you to a chair and sit on you until you fess up, but if you wanted to talk, I’d be there for you.”

“Later?” Jeongguk asked, the hope in that single word alone too much to argue with.

“Ugh, fine. You’re no fun. Let’s go get a fucking milkshake and do some vandalism.”

“Fuck yes to being the delinquent teens we were always meant to be!” Jeongguk whooped, throwing an arm over his seat as he checked behind him, backing out of the driveway.

Snickering, Taehyung reminded him, “Babe, we’re in our twenties.”

“Don’t logic me now, that’s bullshit.”

“You’re bullshit,” he shot back.

“You’re bullshit,” Jeongguk challenged.

With a tsk, he chastised, “Wrong answer, Jeon. You love my ass.”

He could see Jeongguk balancing his need to win with his need to compliment him at every opportunity. Taehyung was honestly a little astounded when the latter won out. “Ah, fuck, you’re right. Guess I lose.”

“Take it back,” he immediately decided. “I don’t like it when you just give in.”

“Too bad. I’m never gonna win against Kim Taehyung’s ass.”

They bickered like that for the rest of the drive, arguing all the way up until Jeongguk pulled into a parking space in front of the ice cream parlour of their memories, the one they’d reminisced about earlier in the week.

“You sure you don’t want to talk about your trauma?” Taehyung wheedled once they had a large strawberry banana shake between them. Unfortunately, the shop owner they’d known all their lives had retired, and the new girl behind the counter just didn’t make shakes the same way. Still, a milkshake was a milkshake, and he was determined to get some answers out of its fruity depths. It didn’t feel good, being the only one with his pain out in the open.

Jeongguk tried to glare at him, but failed miserably, the bendy pink straw between his lips ruining the effect for Taehyung entirely.

Realising a serious approach might be better, he modified, “You know, it might be nice. Talking to someone. And I would happily be that someone seeing as I talk a mile a minute.”

“Or not at all,” Jeongguk added, obviously referencing the numerous times he’d gone silent on him.

That shut him up real fast.

With a sigh, Jeongguk popped the straw from his mouth and leaned back in his classic diner chair.
“Alright, fine. But I’m only going to go through it because I like having everything out on the table between us. Fair?”

He nodded quickly, leaning in to show he had his attention.

After shaking his head humorously at Taehyung’s mock rapture, Jeongguk launched into it. “I knew they were splitting for months. I figured they were going to split for years. You and I...well, we always sort of talked about it. Joked, really. The few times you came over, I remember your astonishment that those two even lived under the same roof, let alone had a kid together. But they did, somehow. It’s weird, because I have good memories of them from when I was little, you know? Like, I can picture the way he used to smile. It looked like mine, big and dorky-”

“I love your smile,” Taehyung interrupted, taking a long sip of their milkshake to show him that he could continue.

Jeongguk’s expression noticeably softened, a smaller version of his bright bunny smile appearing now. “Thanks. I love your smile, too.”

“Anyway?” he encouraged him to move on, ignoring the way his cheeks were heating up under the sincere, non-horny compliment.

“Anyway, they were happy. We all were for a few years. And then, I’m not really sure what happened. I guess Abeoji got elected to public office, and that changed things. When he was a prosecutor, yeah he worked long hours, but he always came home, and when he secured a case, we’d have big celebrations to ease his stress. But when he took office, it started piling up, I guess, and he’d rarely come home. My mother started coming home less, too. They both started affairs—him with my stepmother and her with slot machines and smoky card tables.”

“Wait, your mom took up gambling?” Taehyung broke in, shocked.

Jeongguk snorted. “She took up anything she thought would make my father notice her again. She thought that if she drained his bank accounts, he’d finally start paying attention to her. Like that would ever work. He just made a new account, funneled money into it instead, and waited for the old one to run dry. They were good at that. Avoiding each other. If she knew he was coming home, she’d make up an excuse like she needed to go shopping or she left something at a friend’s. Which didn’t really make any sense because she so desperately wanted his attention, but she was too stubborn to just demand it. They stopped paying attention to each other, let alone me.”

Taehyung nodded, sympathy for Jeongguk welling up within him. He’d gone to their house, their massive, silent house, enough times without seeing his parents even once to realise how their petty games must’ve impacted his childhood.

“Eventually, I think right around when I turned fifteen, he stopped even trying to pretend that he wasn’t having an affair.” Something darkly humorous lit up in Jeongguk’s eyes. “She asked him, you know. In the middle of dinner. Didn’t even put her wine glass down. Asked if he was cheating on her after we didn’t see him for five days. And you know what he said?”

He dreaded hearing the answer, but had to ask. “What?”

Jeongguk smiled bitterly, stirring their milkshake with an anxious finger. “He said ‘Obviously.’ And then he had the nerve to laugh at her. And you know what happened then?”

He didn’t want to know anymore.

Slowly, he shook his head.
“She got up, she did the dishes, and she went to bed.”

His heart broke for Jeongguk, who had to witness every wretched moment of his parents’ relationship going up in flames. “Oh, baby, I’m so sorry.” He didn’t know what else he could say. But he reached his hand out, and after a moment of hesitation, Jeongguk took it, intertwining their fingers on the little round table.

With a shrug, he concluded his story, saying, “The divorce papers were drawn up the next day. That’s not what took so long. No, what took so fucking long were the arguments over things.” Taehyung watched as Jeongguk’s bitterness deepened into downright anger. “She wanted the good china, the Indonesian art, the Goryeo pottery, the reupholstered lounge chairs—” Jeongguk rolled his eyes, disgusted. “I could go on. The point is they argued every day over stupid, meaningless things. But…” He trailed off, clearly not wanting to sound as if he were petulant.

Suddenly, Taehyung understood.

“But she never once argued for you,” he finished for him. “And she never once came back.”

Jeongguk swallowed, but kept his gaze fixed on the table, a sure sign that Taehyung was right.

“You’re allowed to be upset about it, Jeonggukkie,” he tried to reason. “I’d be pissed. Honestly, I’d be a nightmare if I had been in your position. You think my attitude’s bad now? Imagine some serious neglect and emotional abuse sprinkled on top of that. I can’t explain to you how unbelievably impressed I am by the person you are today. You’re the sweetest guy I know, you know that? So sweet. Too sweet for this world, but the world needs people like you. Otherwise there wouldn’t be any goodness left. And you’ve kept so much fucking goodness in your heart all this time even if anyone else would’ve abandoned it for safer cynicism long ago. So yeah, you’re allowed to be upset. I think you’ve earned that much.”

Giving his hand a shallow squeeze, Jeongguk smiled gratefully. “Thanks. I’m not...I don’t really think of myself as ‘sweet’ or ‘good’ but whenever you talk like that, it’s impossible to argue with. And I’ve done my fair share of being upset. I don’t really want to be upset anymore. I miss her, obviously. But sometimes that’s just how it goes. People are a part of your life for so long and then they’re just gone. And suddenly you have this emptiness, like a missing puzzle piece, just sort of quietly hurting until it’s either filled or forgotten…” Lifting his gaze, he spoke directly to Taehyung, and he felt every word, his own missing piece finally restored after years. “I’m done being upset. I’d like to think I’m ready to move on. I’m not holding it against my mother. I’ve already forgiven my stepmom. I probably won’t ever forgive my father. And that might just be how things were meant to turn out.”

Letting things go. Difficult. Painful. But not impossible. And perhaps...necessary.

Taehyung knew he had some of his own things that needed letting go. He held a grudge better than anyone, a fact he’d become painfully aware of these past few months. And there were little places he could start. Easier places. He’d let go of the resentment he’d amassed towards Jeongguk. He’d let go of his bitterness towards his dad’s emotional shut down when the last thing Taehyung needed was to be alone. If he could do that, then he could do it with other things too, right? He could forgive Jimin for not being there when he needed him, finally acknowledging the fact that he hadn’t really been there for Jimin, either. He could forgive Hoseok for only choosing him as a friend to be closer with Jimin at first, since they’d become their own pair of best friends along the way. He could forgive Hwang for not standing up for him when he’d been faced with demotion because he didn’t do anything to help himself besides give her attitude, too ashamed of his situation to speak out. She didn’t know. And that wasn’t her fault. Maybe he could work towards forgiving himself, too, for the burden of his mom’s death he’d decided was his to bear.
It would take time.

But he was willing to give it his best shot.

“There you go again,” Jeongguk commented, a deep fondness for him residing in his inky irises, one he’d only just allowed himself to really acknowledge. “You’re thinking about something. Something big. Should I be preparing myself for the impending ‘Hey, Jeongguk?’ that never fails to give me anxiety?”

Realising the words had been on the tip of his tongue, he admitted, “Maybe.”

Jeongguk took a moment; he dusted off his pants, took another sip of their milkshake, combed his fingers through his hair, until finally, “Okay, I’m ready.”

Trying not to laugh at how ridiculous his boyfriend—oh, fuck, his boyfriend, that’s gonna take some getting used to—was, he asked softly, “Hey, Jeongguk?”

“Yeah?”

“You think it’s possible? To forgive the people who you don’t really think deserve it?”

He was talking about himself. He wondered if Jeongguk could see it.

Jeongguk considered the question for a moment, scooting the milkshake Taehyung’s way so he could take a sip.

“Why would you want to forgive them, then? If they don’t deserve it?”

“Because you know that it’s only going to hurt if you keep blaming them. Even if they’ve done something wrong.”

Frowning, Jeongguk asked, “Are you talking about Jimin?”

Although his words could apply in their case, giving him an easy out, Taehyung shook his head. “And I’m not going to tell you who I’m talking about because it might change your answer.”

Used to indulging him at this point, Jeongguk just gave it a little more thought. “I think you should forgive anyone you want to forgive. Even if you still think that they did something wrong. Forgiveness is a choice. There’s a difference between forgiving someone and letting them get away with hurting you. You can still forgive someone without erasing what they’ve done. Does that make sense?”

Did it? In the context of his situation, he honestly wasn’t sure. But he understood what Jeongguk was trying to say.

“I- Yeah, it does.”

“I don’t want you to worry so much, Taehyungie,” Jeongguk said quietly, as if he thought his words were selfish. “Do what feels right.”

“Are you going to take your own advice this time?”

He had to ask.

Jeongguk bit his cheek. “Maybe.”
Although there might have been more he wanted to say, the little silver bell above the door chimed, announcing the arrival of another customer and involuntarily grabbing their attention.

And who Taehyung saw crossing the threshold made him angry enough to spit.

The boy, now man, he supposed, stopped immediately when he spotted them, thin brows shooting up in surprise as a lazy smile appeared on his soft-featured face.

“Heave I gone back in time?” he drawled, taking a step towards their table. “Because if I’m not mistaken, that’s Jeon Jeongguk and Kim Taehyung acting like two lovestruck schoolgirls in their favourite little hookup spot.”

Taehyung forced himself to reign his anger in, although the insinuation that they’d ever hooked up at their neighbourhood ice cream parlour got under his skin.

Still, he would attempt to be civil.

“Jaeyong,” he acknowledged him, while the phantom ache of his nose cartilage shattering sent a dull throb through his skull. He risked a glance at Jeongguk, surprised to see him so relaxed, calm as he continued to hold Taehyung’s hand on the table.

He should take it back.

But the second he tried to move, Jeongguk curled his fingers around Taehyung’s tighter.

“Thought you two skipped town,” Jaeyong remarked. “Too good to hang around our shitty little district.” As he spoke, he continued to approach their table, grabbing their milkshake and taking a long drink after inspecting its contents. “Oh, look. Fruity and pink. Just about as fairylike as both of you. At least good old Jeongguk here used to try and pretend he wasn’t an embarrassment, but—” With a disappointed sigh, he tipped the glass over, spilling its contents onto Taehyung’s lap. “Little Taehyungie here couldn’t hide a single damn rainbow spilling out of his ass.”

Ironically enough, all he could think about was how fucking cold his dick was, milkshake thoroughly coating the front of his pants.

What Jaeyong didn’t know was that he wasn’t exactly the same shy little boy he’d bullied for years.

Instead, Taehyung glanced up at him unbothered, even as he felt Jeongguk’s grip on his hand tighten immeasurably.

“Luckily,” Taehyung said, scooping up a bit of the milkshake with his finger. “Pink’s always been my colour. Otherwise, I might be a little pissed by your incredibly fucking rude gesture.” Shrugging, he licked his finger clean. “What I think is more interesting is the fact that one, you’re still here. Two, you’re still an immature asshole. And three, you think we give a fuck about your opinion of us.” Smiling coyly, he added, “It’s cute, really, how much you desperately want a bit of attention. This is what a therapist would usually refer to as a cry for help. I would know, I’ve been to several. If you’d like, I can refer you to one. I know a guy who specialises in internalised homophobia and anger management.”

Eyes narrowed, Jaeyong snapped, “What the hell are you trying to suggest?”

Taehyung pointed a shocked finger at himself. “Me? Oh, honey, I’m not trying to suggest anything. But I think you have a spare brain cell or two. Feel free to use it.”
He knew why Jeongguk hadn’t spoken. He was too nice for this sort of thing. Too good to make an ex-friend of his, no matter how disgusting, feel like shit with petty word games. Unless that person happened to be him, in which case, he liked to think that made him special.

However, Taehyung wasn’t above anything of the sort.

“Oh, would you look at that?” Jaeyong laughed in an attempt to regain control. “Taehyungie’s finally learned how to use his words like a big boy.”

“Just say you always wanted to fuck me and go,” Taehyung sighed, tired of this already and more than happy to put him on the spot. And seriously, his dick was freezing.

Jaeyong’s slim face went red, choking with fury. “You fucking wish, Kim.”

A snort of derisive laughter escaped him. “I’ve given a lot of lucky guys the privilege of fucking me, and even my worst hookup makes you look like a troll. And don’t even get me started on what my best hookup makes you look like,” he cooed as he inclined his head towards Jeongguk. “I don’t think your precious fragile ego could handle it.”

Before he knew it, he was being yanked to his feet, strawberry banana milkshake spilling off his lap as Jaeyong held him by the collar. Nose to nose, glaring at him with unmasked rage.

He heard the sound of Jeongguk’s chair but he didn’t want him getting involved in this.

“What are you gonna do, big boy?” Taehyung mocked Jaeyong, enjoying how easy it was to rile him up. “Gonna break my nose again? Oh, that would show me, right? Put me right in my fucking place, if I gave two shits about you, that is. And the truth is, I haven’t thought about you once since I left this place. Heartbreaking, I know. But I bet you’ve thought about me. Boys like you…” He lifted an eyebrow, purring as he yanked Jaeyong’s hand off his shirt. “They always think about me.”

“Taehyung, sit down,” Jeongguk finally spoke up, getting to his feet.

Miffed, but unsurprised, he backed off and resumed his seat.

Jaeyong scoffed the second Jeongguk approached him. “What, you’re gonna stand up for him now? You couldn’t do it for two years, what makes you think you can do it now?”

Taehyung always marvelled at how nothing could shake Jeongguk’s calm expression, staring Jaeyong down almost as if he were below his interest.

“I think it would be best for you to leave now, unless you’d like to know what a broken nose actually feels like,” Jeongguk suggested, muscular arms crossed over his chest. He’d changed since high school, too. “And trust me, unlike the little one you popped Taehyung, I’ll make sure not a doctor in town could reconstruct the bloody mess you’d have left.”

That seemed to get through Jaeyong’s head a little clearer. He glanced up and down, sizing Jeongguk up, and coming to the same conclusion that he wasn’t the same person he’d known. Apparently, ruining their night wasn’t worth a trip to the hospital, as he took a slight step back.

“Whatever. It’s not like that’s the end of it. Your daddy’s gonna beat your ass when he finds out,” Jaeyong reminded Jeongguk cruelly, already heading towards the door. “Maybe somebody better tell him.” The bell chimed as the door slammed shut.

Jeongguk remained standing, glaring after Jaeyong long past his departure.
“He’s not gonna tell him,” Taehyung sighed, grabbing a wad of napkins to try and remedy the damage on his pants. “How would he? It’s not like they’re bffs.”

He tried to mop up all the liquid, nose wrinkling when the distinct smell of dairy clung to his jeans.

“Ugh, gross. Who the hell dumps a milkshake on someone?” he complained, trying to distract Jeongguk.

It worked. Sort of. He turned and immediately caught sight of the mess on Taehyung, anger only worsening.

“I should’ve broken his jaw,” Jeongguk growled, taking the napkins from him and wiping at the mess, using water to try and get the worst of it out.

“Careful, I think my dick got frostbite.”

Not even that brought a smile to Jeongguk’s face.

“I think you’re angrier than you need to be. It’s not a big deal. He’s done way worse. In fact, I daresay you won.”

Jeongguk shook his head, throwing the napkins away after giving it his best try. There wasn’t really much to be done; his jeans would need some thorough washing.

“I’m not like you,” he said quietly as Taehyung got on his knees, attempting to clean the spilled shake from the floor.

Confused, he glanced up. “What do you mean?”

“You’re just...brave. You never stop to think about consequences. You just sort of do things.”

“And it’s gotten me in trouble more times than I could count,” Taehyung reminded him. “I need to take a page out of your book.”

Jeongguk grabbed the dirty napkins, tossed them out, and pulled Taehyung to his feet. “No, you really don’t. I wish I was more like you.” They quickly apologised to the girl at the counter for the commotion, only to find she’d been in the back for their entire exchange. “Although...” Jeongguk said as he led the way out the door, a plastic knife shoved in his back pocket.

Taehyung glanced at him. “Although what?”

Shrugging out of his jacket, Jeongguk sighed, “Did you have to get in his face like that?”

The question secretly pleased him, but he’d never tell Jeongguk. He was curious how far he could push him. And what the consequences would be when he finally broke.

“Like what?”

Jeongguk reached over and tied his jacket around Taehyung’s waist to keep his dick from freezing off in the cold wind.

“You know exactly what I’m talking about.”

Resigned, Taehyung said, “It’s effective. Throws people off their game. I’m not looking to be suggestive but if it gets me what I want, then so be it. There are worse ways to get someone off your back.”
He gave a slight shake of his head but otherwise didn’t comment.

Evening had fallen over the street, only the orange glow of a couple lamps and the purple sky overhead available to light their way.

“So, what’s the plan now?” Taehyung attempted to break the silence.

“We finish our valiant bout of vandalism and then I was thinking we could go make out in the school parking lot.”

“Just feelin’ like breaking all kinds of rules tonight, aren’t we?”

Jeongguk wrapped an arm around his shoulder, holding him closer. “Something like that.”

Thankfully, the street was pretty deserted at this hour, only subject to a couple of cars passing through here and there.

“C’mon,” Taehyung urged, tugging Jeongguk down the street. “Let’s hurry up so I can take my pants off.”

“Bastard really got you good, huh?” Jeongguk managed to chuckle, although he tightened his jacket on Taehyung out of concern.

“I won’t be able to have kids after this,” he stated, dead serious.

“Yeah, all the girls you fuck are going to be so disappointed,” Jeongguk snorted.

“You could at least try to sound sympathetic.”

“It’s -6 degrees out, and I gave you my coat. That seems pretty damn sympathetic to me.” Still, Jeongguk was a softie, and soon brought his other arm up to envelope him fully. It made walking down the street kind of awkward, but definitely warmer.

Two blocks later and they were at their fated stop sign, not a car in sight.

Taehyung grinned at their initials, stepping aside to give Jeongguk full access. “Would you do the honours?”

But Jeongguk grabbed his hand, placing it on top of his own to hold the plastic knife. Together, they carved a misshapen little heart around their initials, finally able to say they completed the story, five years later.

“Cute,” Taehyung commented, receiving a kiss on the forehead in response.

“Very cute,” Jeongguk agreed.

As they were walking back, though, Taehyung noticed him shivering and quickly undid the jacket around his waist, throwing it over Jeongguk’s shoulders.

“No,” he protested immediately, tugging it off. “I’m fine.”

“Stop trying to save your damn pride and put on your coat. My jeans are dry by now. No permanent dick damage. At least not that I know of yet.”

Jeongguk still tried to give his coat back. “Taehyung-”
“If you try to give that back to me, I’m dropping it in the snow and leaving it there.”

Sometimes a little tough love was necessary, especially with a stubborn Jeon Jeongguk.

“Fine,” he eventually muttered, giving in. Once he slipped his arms back through the sleeves, he grumbled, “Happy now?”

Taehyung glanced over, appraising him. “Mhm, very.”

Jeongguk seemed to drop his attitude pretty quick, instead declaring, “Fuck, hurry up and get in the car, I wanna kiss the shit outta you.”

“Gotta drive us to our destination first, golden boy,” he reminded him, allowing Jeongguk to tug him all the way back to the car.

Luckily, their old high school wasn’t far, and the parking lot had been cleared out hours earlier. Still, Jeongguk parked in the lot behind the arts center where bored cops were the least likely to check for teenagers getting frisky after hours.

Taehyung kept experiencing major flashes of deja vu, having snuck kisses with Jeongguk in this parking lot a few times on late curfew nights. He’d had other experiences too, ones that didn’t involve Jeongguk. But he didn’t feel nearly as inclined to relive those.

Seatbelts clicked out of place and suddenly his hands were in Jeongguk’s hair, feverishly urging him across the console to connect their lips. He couldn’t explain the sudden need coursing through him, but all he knew was that his body craved Jeongguk and like hell he’d deny it anything.

“Always so eager,” Jeongguk hummed against him, catching Taehyung’s bottom lip between his teeth, sucking it slick before releasing. “You’ve gotta learn to slow it down, baby. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Mm, you say that,” he sighed, arching further over the console to get a better angle. He kissed Jeongguk with just as much fervour as before, tracing along the seam of his lips to lick into his mouth. “Might disappear on me,” he panted as he pulled back. “Gotta make the most of it.”

Jeongguk nuzzled his cheek, planting open-mouthed kisses along his jaw. “I’m never going to disappear on you again. I promise.”

After a minute of swapping a few more deep kisses, Taehyung finally pulled back to murmur, “I believe you.” And he did. No one kissed like that while lacking conviction.

“Good.” Jeongguk’s hands wandered down his sides, running slow, electric circles along his skin. Eventually, they got bored toying with his black floral button-up and slipped under the hem. The skin-to-skin contact felt incredible; even better as Jeongguk continued his exploration, climbing up his toned but stubbornly soft stomach to his chest, briefly brushing against each nipple only to dance back down to his navel.

“Jeongguk,” he whined, leaning into his touch. “C’mon,” he punctuated the word with a desperate press of his lips. “Touch me like you mean it.”

“Hm?” The vibrations of the noise thrummed against his mouth. “Where do you want me to touch you?”

“Everywhere.”
He wanted nothing more than to slide on top of him, matching their bodies up like puzzle pieces, but their current location didn’t allow for anything extremely sexy.

“Wanna take this show to the backseat?” Jeongguk inquired, echoing his thoughts exactly.

“You read my mind.”

They somehow managed to work both of their 5’10” bodies into the backseat without ever actually leaving the car, barely separating long enough to even get past the console.

Jeongguk reconnected their lips the second they were both situated, reclining back along the seat. Taehyung followed the guiding hand on his jaw to straddle Jeongguk’s thick thighs. Fuck, he loved the feeling of that much muscle underneath him. Used to being on laps constantly, he rolled his hips on instinct, swallowing the sharp gasp that escaped Jeongguk. A hand pressed against his back, bringing him down harder and bunching in the fabric of his shirt. The match of their lips and tongues was faster than usual, hot and desperate. For once, Jeongguk wasn’t fighting him to set the pace.

Eager fingers trailed from his back to the front of his shirt, a questioning thumb on his top button.

“Yes, fuck yes,” he encouraged, kissing along the column of Jeongguk’s neck while he set to work undoing each of the buttons meticulously. He’d always loved that about Jeongguk, his adorable perfectionist tendencies. They came in especially handy as he could kiss and strip him at the same time.

Jeongguk splayed a hand across his chest, parting his shirt so it fell to his wrists. Impatient, Taehyung threw it aside, a low whine slipping past his lips when Jeongguk began touching him everywhere, roaming over his stomach, his chest, his spine, down his sides. It felt like little rows of goosebumps arose in his wake, never able to hide how much Jeongguk affected him.

His breathing increased rapidly when Jeongguk littered insistent kisses in the dips of his collarbones and down his chest. He even managed to bring finesse to his haste, laving over a nipple with his tongue before gently taking it between his teeth.

An embarrassingly high keen came from Taehyung's throat, and he knotted his fingers in Jeongguk’s long dark hair for support. For a moment, the only sounds filling the car were the smooth murmur of the radio, the wet sound of Jeongguk’s mouth against him, and his own little moans.

Finally, Jeongguk took pity on him and kissed his way back up his throat, bringing their lips together once more.

But Taehyung wanted to hear him whine, too. Gripping on tight to Jeongguk’s hair, he rolled his hips again, harder and more demanding, creating a satisfying amount of friction between them. Jeongguk panted into his mouth, caressing along the backs of his thighs to cup his ass, encouraging every brush of their jeans together, both painfully hard.

Despite the location and theme of their vacation, however, Taehyung wasn’t especially interested in coming in his jeans like a teenager.

“Give me a good reason to get these fucking pants off,” he gasped, hands already roaming up Jeongguk’s crisp white t-shirt.

Jeongguk’s fingers were already at the front button of his jeans. “How about some douchebag spilled a milkshake on them and we need to check your dick for...what was it?”
“Frostbite,” Taehyung answered immediately, tracing along the chiselled planes of his abdomen.

“Right,” Jeongguk agreed with a kiss, popping the top button. “Frostbite.”

He tugged his jeans down just as Taehyung began pulling his t-shirt up. They laughed when they met halfway, pausing to take care of their own clothing.

Jeongguk arched an eyebrow the moment he saw him, remarking, “Do you ever not wear panties?”

Taehyung could already feel himself drooling just from one glance at his bare torso but forced himself to pull it together. “I spent a third of my bag space on lingerie. You better believe it’s being put to good use.”

“You better hope your dad doesn’t go through your shit,” Jeongguk countered with a laugh, grinning up so innocently at him with his pretty doe eyes.

However, he promptly ruined his innocent image when he grabbed a handful of Taehyung’s ass, squeezing and admiring the way the lavender lace stood out against his golden skin.

“Pretty sure I saw these on the floor of Seokjin’s dorm,” he continued to comment, tracing along the lace patterns.

Taehyung leaned into his touch, grinding back against his hand. “You probably did. He liked these ones.”

Jeongguk’s movements got bolder as he toyed with the little white bow on the front, briefly stroking along the outline of his hard-on with two fingers, smirking as Taehyung bucked his hips, chasing the sensation.

“I like pink on you better,” he decided. “But the black and red is by far the hottest.”

“Black and red?” Taehyung repeated, curious. He didn’t remember wearing black and red for Jeongguk.

“The other night when I got you from the club. Whatever you were wearing was probably the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen.”

Taehyung thought about it for a moment, then remembered. “Oh.” Leaning forward, Taehyung looped his arms around Jeongguk’s neck, whispering against his ear, “You liked all those collars and chains on me? That’s a little kinky, hyung, don’t you think?” Not waiting for a response, he sucked on the lobe of his ear before kissing along his jaw, slowly letting his hands slip back down Jeongguk’s chest.

“You’re a little kinky, baby,” was all Jeongguk could breathe in response, letting Taehyung capture his lips in a messy kiss.

He hummed his agreement against him, reveling in the feeling of Jeongguk’s jeans dragging along his lace-covered cock.

Jeongguk’s hand wandered, slowly dipping his panties as he moved to mark his throat up. Pleasure dripped into Taehyung’s veins, heavy and blissful, when he wrapped a hand around him. He opened his eyes slightly to drink in the sensations, freezing when he saw a pair of headlights coming their way, just able to make out the district decal on the side of the vehicle.

“Shit!” he hissed, sitting back on Jeongguk’s legs. “Car pulling up. Looks like some sort of cop
wannabe.”

Jeongguk glanced behind him and immediately noticed the headlights. “Fuck.” Scrambling, Jeongguk yanked his jeans up for him and Taehyung passed him his t-shirt while slipping on his own, working in tandem.

One of them would have to take the fall.

“Hide under the seats,” he said, slipping smoothly into the driver’s seat. “Let me do the talking.

The car parked right alongside Jeongguk’s, clearly some sort of police vehicle.

Taehyung calmly arranged his hair, although there would be no way for him to hide the blush on his cheeks or the hickeys dotted along his neck.

A knock came at the window moments later.

Putting on his prettiest smile, the one that never failed to dazzle his patrons, Taehyung unrolled it and leaned out, elbow planted to perch his chin on as he came face to face with a very disgruntled looking older man. This was obviously not his first time having this conversation. A pad of paper and a flashlight were clutched tightly between the man’s hands, alerting him to the possibility of real consequences.

He didn’t have money for any sort of law-breaking fee.

“Is there a problem, officer?” he inquired innocently.

The man arched his eyebrows, a permanent crease formed between the two from age.

Only then did Taehyung realise he’d forgotten to do up the buttons on his own shirt, left hanging off of his body.

“You better believe there’s a problem. You’re not supposed to park here after hours, boy. This is a school.”

He noted the lack of a wedding band on the man’s finger. And based off of his rumpled uniform, untucked in all the wrong places, and faint smell of cigarette smoke and coffee, there was no lucky lady or guy in this officer’s life.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” The officer rested his forearm on the window sill, fist brushing against Taehyung’s elbow. “I used to go to school here,” he explained, bringing his other hand up to cling to the sill. “I really didn’t know. Silly me.”

Yet, the officer bought none of it. “If you went to school here, you should know the policies.”

Taehyung mustered his best dumb blonde giggle, fingers walking slowly along the man’s forearm. “It’s been a few years.” Hinting he was overage. Didn’t matter if the officer was straight. Taehyung felt confident in his own charm, having brought plenty of conflicted straight men to their knees before. “I’m really sorry, sir.”

The man’s gaze flicked down to Taehyung’s fingers before coming back up, confused narrow eyes meeting his.

“Sorry doesn’t excuse trespassing,” the officer stated, almost as if he were internally reciting the police officer code of conduct.
Sensing pliance, Taehyung leaned into his space, breathing, “Is there a punishment for a first-time offense?”

Distantly, he wondered what Jeongguk thought of his little game. If it made him mad.

He hoped so.

Besides, even if this officer stuck to his morals, Taehyung had a pretty good chance of making him uncomfortable enough to leave it at a warning.

The officer stiffened at his words, squeezing the pad currently holding Taehyung prisoner.

“I don’t mind,” Taehyung informed him, eagerness shining in his eyes. “It’s my fault.”

Some control reentered the officer’s voice when he said, “Don’t think I don’t know what boys like you get up to around here. Bet your boyfriend just drove off, isn’t that right?”

Taehyung abandoned the man’s arm, instead tucking a lock of his own hair behind his ear.

Shame Jeongguk couldn’t see him. Taehyung wanted to watch his blood boil.

“Depends,” he purred. “Gonna punish me if I say yes? Because I can say no and spare your conscience, sir. Don’t wanna put pictures in your head.”

The man’s nostrils flared and he blinked, shocked. The way he pressed closer to the car didn’t escape Taehyung’s notice.

“That’s enough.” The officer’s voice was ragged, but curt. “A warning. I’ll leave it at a warning. Don’t hang around here again.”

Taehyung’s smile brightened. “Thank you so much, sir! Have a lovely evening!”

The officer had already started back to his vehicle, giving Taehyung a short nod before pulling out of the parking lot.

Turning to the backseat, he remarked, “I think that went well.”

To his surprise, Jeongguk sat directly upright, broad arms crossed across an even broader chest, the closest thing to absolute rage Taehyung had ever seen brewing a storm in his eyes.

“Jeonggukkie?”

“Don’t.”

The single word cut like ice.

“Get out of the driver’s seat and back into the passenger.”

Perplexed and still horny, but a little anxious to see where this was going, Taehyung exited and rounded the car, slipping into the passenger seat while Jeongguk occupied the spot he’d just vacated.

Not another word passed between them. Jeongguk drove in silence, taking him god knows where.

The air itself crackled with electricity, the force of Jeongguk’s anger gluing his lips shut for once.
He enjoyed toying with Jeongguk. And for the most part, Jeongguk went along with it. Just gritted his teeth and held his tongue. How, Taehyung had no idea, but it made him curious. How far could he push him? He’d been working at it all week, but it seemed like tonight, as he flirted with a police officer to secure their spotless escape, he had finally found Jeongguk’s line.

And oh, what a hard line it was.

The closer they got, the more Taehyung began to recognise their surroundings, even in the gathering twilight.

He knew exactly where they were going.

If one were to drive a little ways out of town, there was this road that led through a few lightly-wooded hills, out of sight from prying eyes.

They used to park here to make out.

Jeongguk drove them there now, parking off the road a bit on the crest of a hill behind a few trees.

“Out of the car.”

A shiver raced through him at the raw fury and dominance in his voice.

Taehyung rushed to obey, undoing his seatbelt and meeting Jeongguk by the hood. He’d left the lights on inside to illuminate whatever this was. His hardened eyes continued to burn as they met his own.

“What-”

“Bend over.”

“Babe, why-”

A hand tangled in his hair and another pressed down on his spine, bringing his cheek to the hood of Jeongguk’s Genesis in a position highly reminiscent of their first time.

Taehyung unconsciously braced himself on the metal, suddenly feeling rather vulnerable with the placement of Jeongguk’s hands, bent over his fucking car.

“I’m not in the mood for bullshit, but I need a colour.”

Still checking to make sure he was fine even when he seemed livid.

Once a soft dom, always a soft dom.

“Green,” Taehyung assured him.

“Do you know why we’re here?” Jeongguk inquired, deathly calm when Taehyung couldn’t look up and read his expression.

“Um, because you expressed a desire to fuck me on the hood last week?”

The hand in his hair suddenly yanked, hard, forcing a gasp from him.

“Wrong answer, Taehyung-ah. But don’t waste your breath. Let hyung tell you exactly why we’re here.”
"We’re here because you’re a slut.” The words rang through his mind, oddly satisfying. “I’ve given it a lot of thought. I’ve let it slide a thousand times for a thousand different reasons. First because I just chalked it up to your personality. Second because of your job. Third because I’m generally a pretty forgiving, laid-back guy. I could go on. But then I realised something. Do you want to hear what that something is, Taehyung-ah?”

Oh, did he.

“What?” he breathed, fogging up his sleek black paint-job. Thankfully, the running car kept him warm, otherwise he’d be freezing his ass off.

He felt as Jeongguk caged him in, making him bear the full weight of his body.

“I think you do it on purpose. Act like a slut just to see what I’ll do. Isn’t that right?”

He couldn’t protest even if he tried.


“You want me to do something about it,” Jeongguk reflected, pulling away. Taehyung almost whined at the loss of contact, not caring how pathetic he’d sound. “And I’m not particularly in the mood to give you anything you want. You see, I’m done Taehyung. I’m done watching you parade around like a whore.”

Fuck, the burn of the words felt so sweet.

“I won’t do it again,” he promised, arching his back ever so slightly.

Practised hands flew to his jeans, popping the button and undoing the zipper, yanking them down to leave just his lavender lace panties exposed to the harsh winter wind. A sharp smack landed on his ass, spilling another little gasp from his lips.

“That’s what you fucking said the last time,” Jeongguk growled.

Oh, he was mad.

“I mean it this time,” he simpered.

Another slap sent Taehyung an inch or two up the hood, an expletive resting on the tip of his tongue.

“No, you fucking don’t. But you will.”

Something about the vow sent his already racing blood ablaze.

Taehyung turned instantly, brown eyes going wide as they met Jeongguk’s simmering dark ones.

“Punish me. I deserve it”

“Oh, now you think so, do you?” Jeongguk mocked, drawing back to smooth over the skin he’d painted pink. The third spank was the hardest yet, and Taehyung gasped loudly, relishing the pain. “Count for me, Taehyung-ah.”

“Three.” He managed to keep his voice from shaking, praying Jeongguk wouldn’t make him start
“Look at you, learning to listen already.” Another smack, this time on his left cheek.

“Fuck. Four.”

Jeongguk twined his other hand in Taehyung’s brunette curls, yanking his head back as he struck him again.

“Five,” Taehyung panted.

“Fucking louder,” Jeongguk spat. “Don’t tell me that’s your best.” He’d never seen this side of him. Hints, yes, but nothing of this calibre. “I want them to hear you all the way down the hill.”

His words sent hot thrills racing through Taehyung. He could feel a spot forming through the fabric of his panties where his cock lay wet and heavy, already peeking out.

“Five!” he repeated, volume rising.

Jeongguk made no comment of praise, so different from his usual doting, soft dom self. Instead, Taehyung felt rough teeth sink into his back, right above the curve of his ass, as if Jeongguk were branding him with some sort of personal tramp stamp. He punctuated the bite with another merciless spank.

“Six!” He was almost feverish now, intoxicated by the way Jeongguk knew just how to play him, and the overwhelming desire to be manhandled and wrecked was utterly consuming him.

The seventh came next, with Taehyung nearly screaming out the number as Jeongguk bit him again, tears welling in his eyes at the intensity of the hit. It was like Jeongguk was unloading years of frustration and anger, and his ass was the only thing available to take the beating.

“You’re going to take three more, and you’re going to take them without complaining. You think you can manage that much?”

“Of course I can fucking manage it,” Taehyung hissed, shoving his ass back against Jeongguk’s waiting palm.

Jeongguk clicked his tongue, and the sign of disappointment had Taehyung’s arms shaking, but he made no move to retract his snarky response. He wanted Jeongguk to take him apart in every way and absolutely ruin him. All he had to do was push him past his breaking point.

And suddenly he felt pressure around his throat, not enough, not yet, but still there.

A warning.

A promise.

“Colour,” Jeongguk ordered, anger transforming into something even more dangerous.

“Fucking neon green,” Taehyung whispered, a whimper of bliss getting caught in his windpipe as Jeongguk tightened his grip around his throat.

God, he’d wanted to try this for so long. And finally, he understood the hype.

The sensation itself made him dizzy, panting out spank number eight with the little air he had. Jeongguk didn’t try and strangle him or anything. No, this was a skillful application of pressure on
the right areas of his throat, just enough to have his head going fuzzy with ecstasy.

Almost as if Jeongguk had done his research after the first time Taehyung brought it up in the car.

Yet, the aspect of choking that left him reeling was the exchange of power, something that cascaded over him as he tried to throttle a shattered, “N-nine,” from his throat.

Taehyung literally placed his life in Jeongguk’s hands, trusting him to take care of him and make sure he didn’t get hurt, the risk of the pleasure making it so much more worth it.

Jeongguk let up enough for him to draw in a short breath.

“Last one,” he warned. “I want to hear you scream.”

He nodded frantically, pushing back against Jeongguk’s hand once again. He wanted it. He liked the burn, liked to imagine the red marks Jeongguk had left all over his body. Marking him. Claiming him. Reminding him of who he belonged to.

Jeongguk’s hand resumed its position around his throat as he landed a final harsh slap on Taehyung’s ass, increasing the pressure as he wailed out a broken “Ten! Fuck, Jeongguk!”

He withdrew his hand, sliding it across his shoulders to rest on his spine, pinning him down against his car.

“No more fucking whoring around, Taehyung. No more flirting. No more playing.” Taehyung could hear Jeongguk’s vicious sneer. “No more acting like a cheap slut just to get my attention. I’m over it. Do you understand?”

“Y-Yes,” he tried to nod, tears leaving tiny wet spots on the hood.

“I don’t believe you. Say it back to me.”

“No more acting like a slut,” he mumbled. “Fuck, Jeongguk, please, want you to fuck me, wanna get white all over your pretty black car, want your cock, please?”

“‘No more acting like a slut’ you say while you beg me to fuck you.” Jeongguk pointed out the irony, making Taehyung’s cheeks burn with shame.

“S’not slutty when it’s with you,” he offered softly, pathetic even to himself.

Yet, Jeongguk hummed, seemingly satisfied with that. “That’s right, angel. And tell me why.”

Taehyung attempted to prop himself up on his elbows just to catch a glimpse of him, but Jeongguk kept his body firmly in place, watching him collapse back on the hood with disinterest.

“Because I’m yours. Hyung’s. Hyung’s slut.”

“No.”

He felt Jeongguk place a gentle kiss on the center of his back, out of place amongst all the punishment and anger.

“You’re my baby.” Another kiss. “My pretty baby.” The next kiss landed on his hip. “My angel.” Jeongguk kissed the top of his panties. “Got it?”

The terms of endearment washed over him, gentleness a surprising change.
Jeongguk didn’t want him to act like a slut and he didn’t want to treat him like a slut.

Jeongguk just wanted them to be okay.

“Yes,” he breathed, warmth kindling in his heart.

“Good job, baby. Tell me. What are you?”

“H-Hyung’s pretty baby. Hyung’s angel,” he stuttered out.

“Very good,” Jeongguk continued to praise him before tugging down his panties with his teeth. And before Taehyung knew it, he was being rewarded. Handsomely. He felt the unmistakable press of a tongue to his skin, tracing a slow line down to his rim.

“Oh, fuck, please, Jeongguk,” he whined.

But Jeongguk was hellbent on teasing, nipping at a cheek before licking along the inside of his thigh.“Hm? Please what?”

Taehyung felt as though he were burning up, a mixture of shame and desire sending a rush of pink to his face.

“Oh? Are you shy now?” Jeongguk mocked him. “You weren’t shy twenty minutes ago with that police officer.” He punctuated the point by biting him again. “You weren’t shy earlier today with fucking Jaeyong.” A third bite. “You weren’t shy at the goddamn gas station with that emo twink. Why do you only get shy with me, angel?”

“Because you’re the only one who can make me shy,” he mumbled after a heavy pause, wishing he had something to grip onto.

Jeongguk smoothed over his last bite with a lick. “That’s right. I’m the only one who can make you behave. My little brat. Now, tell me what you want.” As he spoke, he continued to swirl nonsensical patterns with his tongue.

There were a thousand things Taehyung wanted from him. His mouth, his tongue, his fingers, his cock; all of the above, actually.

But he couldn’t think coherently, still sort of in the clouds from being spanked and choked on the hood of Jeongguk’s car. “Just...want you to fuck me,” he panted, arching his back further, as if presenting more would help his case.

“Fuck you with what?” Jeongguk breathed against him. “With my fingers?” As he spoke, he pressed a spit-slicked finger to his rim. “Or my cock?” he asked, caging Taehyung in with his body, sucking another mark on his neck. “Or maybe my greedy angel wants something more.” He began trailing kisses back down the curve of Taehyung’s spine, ending right before his perineum, breath ghosting over the underside of his weeping cock. “Do you want me to fuck you with my tongue?”

The way he said it so directly sent shivers through him. Slowly, Taehyung nodded.

Jeongguk slipped his jacket off, murmuring, “Of course you do. Here, put this underneath you. I don’t want my little pillow prince to be uncomfortable.”

Taehyung shakily lifted himself off the hood to slide Jeongguk’s jacket beneath him, still finding it within his vast well of sass to remark, “You just don’t want me coming on your paint job.”
“You’ve already ruined a few sets of nice, clean sheets,” Jeongguk agreed, tacking on a saccharine coo of “Messy baby.”

“Fuck off,” he snapped. “You like it.”

A sharp smack landed on his ass.

“Don’t think you’re off the hook yet,” Jeongguk warned. “I’m still mad at you.”

Usually, he would tease back, but he had a feeling Jeongguk wasn’t joking, so he instead he whined, “I’m sorry. Hyung, please. Touch me. Do something.”

He heard the flick of a cap, as well as the rustle of Jeongguk sinking to his knees behind him.

“When did you grab lube?” He thought he’d be getting fucked with just spit, so this came as a nice surprise.

“I grabbed a bottle and one of those condoms your dad picked up before we left.” Jeongguk kissed along his thigh after he finished speaking, sinking his teeth into Taehyung’s soft skin just as he drizzled an excessive amount of strawberry scented lube over his rim.

Taehyung meant it when he said Jeongguk liked it just as messy as him.

“I don’t know if I want you fucking me with condoms my dad bought. Kinda kills the boner.”

Jeongguk drew a lazy circle around his entrance with his tongue before pressing flat against him, bringing a hand up to stroke Taehyung. “Mhm. Your boner feels really fucking dead. Baby, your pretty pink cock is practically crying for me.”

His words sent another rush of embarrassment over him. He didn’t get worked up like this ever, unless Jeongguk was the one giving it to him. “Shut up. I’ve made guys cry from my cock.”

With a flick of his wrist, Jeongguk only instilled their roles further, commenting, “I’m sure you have, baby, but not me. Now be quiet so I can eat you out properly.”

Taehyung stifled another sarcastic comment, breath stolen anyway when Jeongguk began using his tongue more insistently, getting his rim nice and wet before pressing in, using lube and spit to open him up.

He clenched his hands in Jeongguk’s jacket since it was the only kind of support he had, a low whimper escaping him when Jeongguk forced his tongue in deeper. Another intrusion followed, helping to loosen him.


Suddenly, everything stretching him so wonderfully disappeared.

“What are you…” He glanced back and saw Jeongguk standing perfectly still, arms crossed, an almost disappointed expression on his face. “What?”

Maybe he shook his ass a little. Sue him. He was desperate.

Jeongguk sighed, examining his slick fingers. “How do we ask for things, Taehyung-ah?”

“Fuck no,” he said, pissed off by his righteous attitude. “No. Fuck you. I’ve done enough begging.
Get on with it.”

Jeongguk’s eyebrows shot up and then he shrugged. “Alright,” and opened the door to the driver’s seat.

“What are you doing?”

He had one foot in the door, staring back at him as if he were stupid. And oh, he still loved the way shame burned.

“We’re leaving, obviously. If you can’t learn a lesson as simple as asking, then I don’t think there’s really anything else to be done here.”

“Wait, no!” he cried. But he stayed on the hood- Jeongguk hadn’t given him permission to move.

“I’ll ask, I’ll beg, please, Jeongguk.”

Jeongguk tilted his head curiously. “Beg for what?”

Taehyung shut his eyes, unable to look at him as he mumbled, “For you to fuck me.”

A careful hand grasped his jaw, lifting his head off the hood. Taehyung’s lashes fluttered as he blinked his eyes open, met with Jeongguk’s, who seemed to be inspecting him. “Go on, then.”

Confused, he asked, “What?”

Jeongguk barely contained the devious smile curling at his lips.

“Beg.”

“Jeongguk, I-”

“Oh, are you protesting now? I don’t see what the issue is. You make me beg for your attention and affection every goddamn day while doling it out to pretty much anyone else, so I think it’s only fair that you beg for me once. Don’t you agree?”

Taehyung was only just now beginning to realise how deep Jeongguk’s frustration at his attitude ran. Very, very deep.

“Fine.”

“Fine?”

He hurried to correct himself. “Yes. I mean, yes, please. Please, Jeongguk, I’m sorry. Please don’t leave me like this.”

Jeongguk pursed his lips but stepped out of the car, shutting the door softly behind him. “Better. Now, what exactly was it you wanted before you forgot basic manners?”

“More,” he rushed to plead, arching his back. “Wanted more of you. Filling me up. Please?”

Jeongguk’s pretty veined fingers danced down his spine, over the curve of his ass, to press against his entrance.

“Here?” he inquired, voice hushed.

Taehyung nodded frantically.
“Want my mouth back on you?”

“Yes, please, please,” he chanted.

Jeongguk eased a finger into him, working it in and out with slow thrusts. “I don’t think you deserve my mouth anymore.”

“Please, Jeongguk, I’ll be good. Anything, just...just more, please.”

Jeongguk chuckled lightly, the sound sending shivers through him. A second finger joined the first.

“When have you ever been good, baby? All you do is try your hardest to make me angry. So curious as to just how far you can push me, isn’t that right?”

He hesitated, then gave another weak nod. “Yes.”

“I wouldn’t call that being good.”

Suddenly, the fingers inside of him increased their pace, scissoring him open. The combination of lube and spit made indecently wet noises the faster Jeongguk went. Taehyung could feel lines of it trickling down his thighs.

He felt dizzy from just how badly he wanted Jeongguk, mind clouded with arousal, cock painfully hard against the jacket beneath him.

“Please, please, Jeongguk, I’ll be so good, use me, please, I’ll make you feel good,” he begged incoherently, kept from fucking himself back onto Jeongguk’s fingers by a steady hand on his spine.

A satisfied hum came from Jeongguk. “That sounds a little better, angel. Use you, you say? What, you want to be my perfect little cocksleeve now that you can’t go around flirting with everything that breathes? Someone sure switched gears real fast. You’re not usually this easy, baby.”

The degradation brought pleasant tears to his eyes. Jeongguk had never done this before. He teased him in bed often, but this felt different. More intense. He supposed he deserved it. And fuck, did he want it.

“I can be easy for you,” he offered, trying to get Jeongguk to keep moving. “Please, fuck me. I need you.”

He knew Jeongguk liked that. Liked feeling wanted and needed.

A light nip on his shoulder confirmed he was right. Jeongguk dragged his lips over Taehyung’s skin, placing another toe-curling bite on his ass before working a third finger into him.

“Oh, fuck,” he moaned. “Harder, harder, please.”

For once, Jeongguk listened, setting a fast, unforgiving pace with his fingers while wrapping his free hand around his cock. In contrast to the way he was fucking him, Jeongguk jerked him off nice and slow with full, lazy strokes. Precome dribbled in pathetic little pearls from his slit, Jeongguk catching it with a flick of his thumb only to coat him with it. Coupled with the lube in his hand and their unorthodox location, everything felt wet and dirty. Getting off like a cheap whore on the hood of a car in the middle of nowhere. And he knew that’s exactly how Jeongguk wanted him to feel, punishment for the countless rounds of torment he’d put him through.
“Jeongguk, stop, please,” he tried to get out through a loud moan. “I’m gonna-”

“Come?” Jeongguk finished for him, almost too sweet. “Well, don’t let me stop you. But just so you know, I’m fucking you whether you come right now or not, so if you don’t want it to hurt, you’d better wait.”

He couldn’t wait. He was practically trembling from the intensity of his impending orgasm. But he also knew Jeongguk didn’t make threats lightly. He would overstimulate him to high hell and not feel a trace of guilt right now.

So, Taehyung tried to focus, willing his orgasm to ebb, stopping himself from fucking back onto Jeongguk’s fingers or into the tight circle of Jeongguk’s hand.

“That’s good, baby,” Jeongguk cooed, kissing the dip of his shoulder. Both hands slowly withdrew from him, a small whimper falling from Taehyung’s lips when he was left open and empty. But then he heard the sound of a button popping and a zipper being undone.

“Oh, please, please, I want your cock, Jeongguk, please.”

He’d never said please so much in his life. And he probably wouldn’t for anyone else.

The weight behind him returned, this time through hot, skin-to-skin contact. Taehyung could feel Jeongguk pressing against him, the way his cock leaked against the back of his thighs.

“Fuck me,” he panted, unable to say anything else.

Jeongguk ignored his plea and lifted his hand to Taehyung’s lips. “Give your mouth something to do and clean me up, yeah?”

Taehyung didn’t even wait to respond, hoping that if he did everything Jeongguk asked, he’d stop being an ass and just give it to him, already. He wrapped his lips around his slick, strawberry-scented index finger, taking it all the way in and sucking hard, swirling his tongue around before popping off to move on to the next.

From behind him, he heard the sound of a condom wrapper being torn and prayed that meant what he thought it did.

Thankfully, he was right. Jeongguk finally took pity on him and lined himself up, sinking into Taehyung slow and steady. He moaned as Jeongguk caged him in, sliding in deeper until he was fully seated inside him.

“How do you want it?” he took care to ask, placing another wet kiss on the column of Taehyung’s throat.

He was already so fucking close. He knew he wouldn’t last if they drew this out.

Jeongguk didn’t say anything in response. But he snapped his hips forward suddenly, jostling Taehyung. A hand flashed out onto his shoulder, gripping tight to keep him steady as Jeongguk fucked into him in earnest, taking his request to heart.

There was nothing elegant or finessed about it. Just rough, deep thrusts that tested Taehyung’s self-restraint and had Jeongguk panting for air behind him. He knew the right angle by now, had memorised exactly where and how hard to hit to make Taehyung unravel beneath him, moaning as loudly as he wanted to for once. Jeongguk’s jacket had to be stained beneath him, sticky trails of precome smeared into black fabric as Jeongguk fucked him mercilessly.

Everything was wet and messy. Tears spilled over his lash line. Spit and lube smeared over his lips from sucking Jeongguk’s fingers. Bite marks littered his body, sliding up and down on the hood of Jeongguk’s car since he had nothing to grab onto. More spit and lube flowed past his entrance, sloppily fucked out of him by Jeongguk’s unforgiving strokes.

He was going to come soon. There was nothing he could do about it. In his best efforts, he tried to clench around Jeongguk, making everything tighter and hotter so he would come faster. He wished they didn’t have to use the stupid condom. He wanted to feel every inch of him, filling him up and taking him apart. He imagined how good Jeongguk would feel, tried to visualise his flushed pink tip, the slight, almost regal curve of his cock, and how nice his flared head would catch on his rim when he didn’t have the latex around it to ease the slide. How warm he would feel, just as he did right now, a hot and heavy weight spreading pleasure through every inch of his body. How deliciously filthy and full he would feel if Jeongguk came inside of him, fucking his come into him deep, claiming him from the inside. How wet it would be as he released sticky ropes of come into him, dribbling out down his thighs and over his balls, white against honey. Filthy and used and claimed.

And suddenly the thoughts were too much, pushing him over the invisible brink of ecstasy. He was coming. Hard. Clenching around Jeongguk as spurts of white shot from his cock, ruining the jacket beneath him for good.

Jeongguk didn’t even pause. In fact, he reached down and returned the grip on his cock as he fucked him, milking him for everything he was worth. With every flick of his wrist, Taehyung’s pleasure built until it hurt, oversensitivity making him tremble and cry.

“Fuck, Jeongguk, please,” he begged, no longer sure if he was begging for him to stop or if he was begging for more.

Jeongguk just snapped his hips into him faster, body hovering the breadth of an inch over Taehyung’s own, covering his back in hot, desperate kisses. It hurt so good, the feeling of his mouth distracting Taehyung from the abuse to his prostate and spent cock.

And then Jeongguk was tensing, grabbing his hips for support as he let out a low groan, continuing to pound into him as he came, filling up the condom. Taehyung whimpered at the sensation, fingertips curled against the black metal hood. Finally, his thrusts slowed, and he stood still, breathless.

“Are you okay?” Jeongguk asked after a minute, tenderly brushing the hair out of his eyes.

Taehyung blinked up at him and nodded, breathing heavily.

Jeongguk gave him another minute just to stop feeling so damn dizzy, simply tugging his underwear and jeans back up for him.
They stood in silence for a moment, recovering.

“Sorry,” he said quietly. “I shouldn’t have gone so hard on you.”

Taehyung shook his head and stretched, lifting himself back up into a standing position. “No, that was...exactly what I asked for. And deserved, honestly.” With a wince, he extended his arms, noticing how sore they were from propping him up for so long. “I think you got your point across, though, fuck. Also, your coat is kinda…” He gestured vaguely at the mess on it. “Sorry.”

“A necessary casualty,” Jeongguk replied with a shrug, folding the jacket neatly so as to keep the stains on the inside.

He turned to grab his shirt from off the hood, surprised at the worry he saw in Jeongguk’s eyes when he looked back.

“I’m fine, babe,” he reassured him, punctuating it with an eye roll. “You really think that’s enough to put me out of commission?”

“You’re sure?” Jeongguk asked hesitantly, doing up his own jeans.

“Yes, I’m sure. I’m, um, actually kind of glad you talked to me.”

“Talked to you?”

Taehyung busied himself with his shirt buttons. “I mean, you told me what was bothering you. We fucked it out. I won’t do it again. No more flirting with other people to make you mad, and all that. I know it was a dick thing to do. And you were right to call me out on it. It won’t happen again. Okay?”

Jeongguk placed a light hand on his shoulder, kissing his cheek. “Yeah, um, okay,” he eventually agreed. “And I’m sorry I got so angry. I probably should’ve just...asked if we could talk but my emotions sort of got the better of me.”

“Not gonna lie, I kinda like your method better,” Taehyung teased. “Also, I’m impressed by how many of my kinks you managed to hit on in one quick fuck.”

“Did I?” Jeongguk mused. “The only one I was really conscious of was the choking thing. I, um... “

A light blush crept up his cheeks. “After you talked about it, I looked into it a little. I wanted to make sure I did it right and that I didn’t hurt you or anything. Was it okay?”

His level of dedication was touching.

“Seeing as I almost came just from you choking and spanking me, then yeah, I’d say it was a little beyond okay.”

Jeongguk smiled, tugging him forward by his shirt for a kiss. “That’s pretty hot.”

Taehyung returned his smile, looping his arms around Jeongguk’s neck. “You’re pretty hot, Jeon.”

“You’re not too bad yourself, Kim.”

They exchanged a few more kisses before they realised how fucking cold out it was, Taehyung made another comment about dick frostbite, and they hurried back into the warm interior of Jeongguk’s car.

“You think a strongly worded email would convince Jaeyong’s mom to buy me a new pair of
“jeans?” he asked while Jeongguk drove.

A snort of laughter escaped him. “I don’t think his mom really cares, to be honest, but I’d happily buy you a new pair of jeans.”

“It’s not the same if it doesn’t come out of his fucking allowance,” Taehyung grumbled.

“Babe?”

“What?”

“You’re twenty years old.”

“If I wanted to be bullied, I would’ve followed Jaeyong home.”

They threw enough snarky, loving responses back and forth to fill the rest of the drive home. Taehyung felt tired and sore, but mostly pleased with how the night had gone. He’d gotten to drink half a strawberry banana milkshake and received a pretty damn good dicking, so despite a few mishaps here and there, he’d give it a solid nine out of ten.

“We’re home,” Taehyung called out when they opened the front door, exchanging his shoes for house slippers. He padded over to the living room, trying his best not to limp, pleased to see his dad sitting up and eating a bowl of ice cream, gaze fixed on some sort of true crime show. “How are you feeling?”

His dad waved to him cheerily with his spoon. “Welcome back! I’m feeling much better than I was earlier. How about you two? What did you go do?”

Jeongguk joined him, waving hello to his dad.

“We got milkshakes,” Taehyung replied.

“At the place by your studio?”

“Yup.”

“For three hours?”

Jeongguk stepped in with a smile. “We hung around some of our old spots, too. Basketball court, studio, high school. You know, reliving all the memories.”

His dad seemed skeptical, but let it slide, not interested in knowing more than he needed to. “Glad you got to walk down memory lane for a while. There’s some soup left on the stove if you’re still hungry.”

“I’ll probably grab a bowl,” Jeongguk decided. “Do you want some, Taehyangie?”

A savoury bowl of soup sounded really nice right now.

“Yes, please.”

The first thing he did was change his pants. Then, they ate in the living room, keeping his dad company and getting caught up in the elaborate crime depicted on screen. Eventually, the hour grew late and tiredness crept up on him.

Taehyung yawned, burying his nose in the crook of Jeongguk’s shoulder as the recliner they shared
rocked back and forth, illuminated by a single lamp and the glow of the television.

“You gonna fall asleep out here?” Jeongguk whispered, fondly stroking his hair.

All he had energy to do was nod, mumbling something incoherent.

A loud snore filled the room. Curious, Taehyung glanced up to find his dad passed out on the couch, pillow clutched tightly to his chest.

“Like father like son,” Jeongguk remarked. “Sleepy babies and cuddlers.”

“Shut up,” Taehyung groaned, lifting himself off the chair. “I’ll meet you in my room, yeah?”

Jeongguk got to his feet as well, nodding and heading off down the hall.

He tiptoed over to the couch and shook his dad gently. “Appa, wake up,” he whispered, repeating himself more insistently when the first try didn’t work.

His dad woke with a start, shoving his hands away. “Let me sleep,” he whined.

Suppressing a chuckle, Taehyung said, “C’mon, you know it’ll be bad on your back if you sleep out here. Let’s get you in bed.”

“Show’s not over,” he tried, gesturing vaguely to the television.

“There’s a tv in your room. I’ll put it on the same channel.”

“Walking sounds hard.”

Suddenly, Taehyung began to wonder if he got his oppositional side from his dad rather than from his mom like he’d always thought.

“I’ll carry you if I have to.”

His dad glared at him but waved off his efforts, slowly standing up. Taehyung took his hand, applying pressure to his back as he led him to his own room. After he tucked him in, he turned on the television and made sure to change it to the same channel as earlier.

“Let me know if you need anything, okay?” he asked, lingering in the doorway.

“Taehyung, I’ve been living here by myself for years. I think I’ll manage.”

That wasn’t exactly reassuring.

His dad appeared to notice the lack of relief in his expression, and added, “I’ll come to you straight away if anything happens, my big, brave boy.”

Pleased with that, he said, “You better. Goodnight, Appa.”

“’Night, Taehyung-ah. Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

He softly shut the door behind him, slipping into his own.

Jeongguk sat on the bed already changed, scrolling through his phone. But he looked up and clicked it shut when he came in.
“Take it he wasn’t all that interested in bed?”

Taehyung smiled, tugging his shirt over his head. “Not really, but we got there eventually.” He located Jeongguk’s hoodie and pulled that on, yanking his pants off to swim in the soft fabric. When he was fully changed, he hopped onto the bed, barrelling Jeongguk over.

“Hi, there,” Jeongguk wheezed, not bothering to struggle as Taehyung went limp.

“Hi.”

They gazed into each other’s eyes for a moment, simply a soft, silent second that passed between them. He liked the way Jeongguk instinctively wrapped his arms around him, holding on tight even as he complained of suffocation.

“If you don’t get off of me, I’m gonna cuddle the shit out of you,” Jeongguk threatened.

“Oh, god forbid,” Taehyung mock-gasped, throwing a dramatic hand to his forehead.

Jeongguk shrugged beneath him. “Alright, but you asked for it.” In an impressive display of body strength, he rolled them over onto their sides, limbs draped over Taehyung to keep him locked in place.

“The light, Jeongguk, the light.” He swatted at his chest until Jeongguk sighed and reached over, turning the lamp off.

“Happy?”

“Mm.” Taehyung nuzzled Jeongguk’s cheek, placing a soft kiss there. “Very happy. G’night, Jeonggukkie.”

“Night,” Jeongguk replied happily, kissing his hair and holding on tight until morning.

…

The days flew by. A blur of laughter, memories, card games at the dining room table, home-cooked meals, late night television, make out sessions before bed, and Yeontan snuggling occupied every hour.

Taehyung would have been the happiest guy on earth. If it weren’t for two heavy stressors weighing relentlessly on his mind.

“Are you going to do it now or…?” Jeongguk asked on their second to last day in Busan, carefully folding their laundry on his bedroom floor.

Taehyung sighed, plopping down beside him. “I’m a coward. In both situations, really. I just...why rock the boat?”

“Talking to your dad and your best friend isn’t really rocking the boat, babe.”

He watched Jeongguk closely, getting lost in the way his tongue poked his cheek in concentration, the creases he smoothed out almost compulsively, lining every inch of their clothing up to perfection. And yes, maybe he was stalling a little.

“Why the hell have I been doing your laundry for the past three months if you’re this obsessive
about it?” he burst out.

Jeongguk glanced up, Taehyung’s white sweater in his hands. “Because it was funny to listen to
you whine, and then it gave me an excuse to see you? I didn’t really care how meticulous it looked
when I knew you’d been thinking about me.”

Taehyung sat back on his hands, stunned. He really was the world’s sweetest boy. “Huh.”

“Oh,” Jeongguk repeated with a snort, but didn’t comment any further.

Maybe Taehyung should try harder to be sweet, too.

“I, um...the first time after we hooked up, I...wasn’t exactly coming back for just the sex.”

“Smooth, Taehyung.”

Taehyung dropped his head on Jeongguk’s shoulder in frustration, cheeks burning. “I’m not as
good with words as you are. What I’m trying to say is I was doing pretty much anything to see you,
too. That’s the only fucking reason I even went along with the laundry thing. And although the
tutoring sessions were ultimately beneficial, I didn’t really care whether they worked or not. And...I
wish I didn’t get kicked off the dance team because watching you play was sort of the highlight of
attending games for me. Um...since freshman year. And if you repeat that to anyone, I’ll be very,
very upset.”

Jeongguk reached up to ruffle his hair, chuckling beneath him. “Your threats are getting weaker by
the day, angel. But I appreciate it. I miss watching you dance.”

“Be glad I censored myself because I was originally going to say I’ll laugh in your face and call
you delusional, and then I remembered that I don’t have to be mean to you because I love you very
much and it’s a natural defense mechanism that I’m trying to work on.”

“And I wholeheartedly appreciate your efforts. Nice is a good look on you.”

“Isn’t everything a good look on me?” Taehyung asked with a pout, nuzzling Jeongguk’s neck.

“Everything but khakis. Khakis aren’t a good look on anyone.”

Taehyung raised his head. “That smells like a challenge.”

Jeongguk flicked his forehead and shoved his phone in his hands. “Stop stalling and text Jimin and
Hoseok.”

“I wasn’t stalling,” he muttered, reluctantly unlocking his phone. He opened their group chat and
stared blankly at the screen. Their old texts glared back at him, accusing blue bubbles that caused
his two most valued friendships to fall apart.

Seeing the harsh words they’d thrown back and forth sent a rush of determination through him. He
had to fix this.

dirty dancers gc
okay look. i’m a major dick. we know it. we’ve seen it. we’ve acknowledged it. i’m acknowledging it. you’re both being petty, too, but i understand and i’ll own up to the shit i did. i shut you out for months. i wasn’t honest with either of you. it’s not that i didn’t trust you but i was scared. about a lot of things. and i’m sorry for trying to handle everything alone. i know it doesn’t work. i’ve had some time to learn that the hard way. and i’m not going to go into a full blown grovelling here since i’m in busan rn but when i get back, i’d be really really really happy if you could find the time to meet up with me so we can talk? any time after tomorrow? please? i understand if you’re over it and never want to see me again. that’s your guys’ choice. just know i love you, and i’m sorry

Jeongguk proofread his text and gave him the all clear, so he figured he’d done all that he could right now, and if they ignored him, he would personally track both of them down and recite the whole paragraph start to finish. The measure of true friendship.

“And what about the second thing?”

Of course Jeongguk had to break his little bubble of happiness.

Taehyung instinctively glanced up at the door, although he knew full well his dad was on the living room couch.

“Do you think it will help at all?”

Jeongguk rubbed his back with gentle hands. “After watching you have literal mental breakdowns, depressive episodes, and self-deprecating thoughts about it for months, yes, I think it will help. Besides, I’d feel better if we had his permission to change the payment plan for the hospital. He’d notice whether you came clean to him or not.”

Damn Jeon Jeongguk and his smart brain.
“I guess you’re right,” he eventually conceded. “I’ll talk to him. And I love you, and I’ve been really grateful for your support so far, but—”

“This is something that needs to just be the two of you,” Jeongguk finished for him, already knowing exactly what he was going to say.

“Exactly.”

“It’s cool.” Jeongguk rose to his feet with a cheerful smile on his face, taking care not to disturb the piles of freshly folded laundry. “I’ll go to the grocery store. Find snacks and stuff for the drive back, and see if I can figure out what was in those banana cocktails at Sin, because they were fucking delicious.”

“Please don’t bastardise Seunggi’s cocktail art.”

“I’m not bastardising!” Jeongguk protested. “I’m recreating.”

“You recreate whatever you need to to keep yourself occupied for the next hour or so,” he snorted, accepting the hand Jeongguk extended for him.

As if to push him to get on with it, Jeongguk shrugged on his jacket and grabbed his keys. “Anything in particular you want?”

Taehyung hesitated. “...Cake?”

Jeongguk kissed his cheek. “You’ve got it.” Taehyung followed him out of his bedroom and to the front door. “See you in a little while.”

“Have fun.”

The moment the door shut, his dad called from the living room, “Taehyung-ah?”

Heading towards him, he replied, “Yes?”

“Oh.” His dad sat up on the couch, blanket falling from his lap. “Thought you’d left or something.”

“Nah, just Jeonggukkie. He’s going to grab a few things from the store.” Nerves on high alert, he offered, in perhaps a pitch higher than his own, “Can I get you anything? Leftovers? Tea?”

Scratching the back of his head, his dad nodded and turned down the television volume. “Tea would be great. Just green, please.”

“Coming right up.”

Hopefully he didn’t notice the tremble in his voice as he entered the kitchen, putting on the electric kettle. He couldn’t do this. No way. He should just back out. A little confusion was certainly better than this, right? If he kept his mouth shut, neither of them lost anything.

Except trust, he realised, the voice in his head sounding frustratingly similar to Jeongguk’s. If he didn’t come clean, he’d carry the weight of this around forever, always wondering if his dad’s love for him was really that fickle.

It couldn’t be. Right? He loved him. He wouldn’t look at him any different.

The kettle announced its boil with a whistle, startling him out of his self-beration. He retrieved two cups, dropping tea bags in both and filling them to the brim with boiling water. Not exactly classy,
“You wanna come to the dining table?” Taehyung called out shakily, setting their steaming cups
down. “I, um, was wondering if we could talk for a second.”

“Coming!”

Within moments, they were both settled at the table. A pleasant smile graced his dad’s face, just
like it always did, while Taehyung was an internal nervous wreck.

“It’s been really nice having you home,” his dad said when he realised Taehyung couldn’t bring
himself to speak. “Both of you, actually. Jeongguk’s still a sweetheart. You two are good for each
other, I think.”

“I like to think so, too,” he agreed. “I’ve had a really good time. I always love coming home and
seeing you, you know that.”

He took a hasty sip of his tea, scalding his tongue but swallowing down the pain. The room fell
silent for a few beats, the only sound being a quiet pitter-patter of claws on hardwood floor as
Yeontan vacated the sunroom and came to plop down by his feet.

“Hi, baby,” Taehyung murmured, absentmindedly reaching down to stroke his fur.

His dad sighed. “Look, Taehyung, I want you to feel comfortable talking to me. I know you have
some stuff going on that you don’t want to talk about, but I’m here for you. I’m never going to
criticise you, okay? I love you so much, and the last thing I want you to think is that you can’t
discuss your problems with me. I’m old now. Spouting wisdom is all I’m good for.”

“You’re not old!” he protested, although his words sent a wash of warmth over him. “You...you’re
really not going to be upset? You promise?”

“Promise,” his dad confirmed.

Taehyung lifted Yeontan onto his lap, needing the emotional support.

“I’m not a waiter. I’ve never waited on a single table in my life.”

“Okay.”

“I dance at a gay stripclub twenty minutes from my dorm.”

“Okay.”

“I’m so sorry, I didn’t tell you sooner, I just thought- wait, okay?”

His dad gave him a strained smile, extending his hand for Taehyung to hold. “I already knew,
Taehyung-ah.”

It took a moment to process and then...

He blanched.

“You knew? For how long? Who told you? Wait, no, I don’t want an answer to that. Just...just the
first two questions.”

His dad arched a thick eyebrow that greatly resembled his own. “You don’t want to know who told
Taehyung shook his head. “No. When it got out on my university campus, I didn’t want to know then, either.”

“Why not?”

“Because I have enough anger and negativity in my life? Why get mad at someone if I don’t have to. If they come clean, all the power to them. But honestly, I’m just not that interested. It’s over and done with. No use dwelling on it.”

Maybe it was weird. Maybe it didn’t make a whole lot of sense to anyone else. But Taehyung knew that if he knew who had spread those pictures of him, he’d harbour a grudge until the day he died. And he’d done enough grudge-holding to last a lifetime.

“If it helps, no one in particular told me,” his dad informed him. “But your university was tagged in a few photos that...depicted your job.”

Humiliation welled up inside of him. “I’m so sorry you had to see that.”

His dad grimaced. “I’ll admit, I could’ve gone without those images in my head, but here we are. I’ll live with it. I’d rather know than let you shelter me into misinformation. Taehyung-ah, if this is really what you’re pushing yourself to just to take care of me, then—”

“It’s not just that, and you know it,” he argued, trying to get over his embarrassment. “I have to make a living for myself, I have to make sure you’re supported, and there’s still the hospital payments. I make good money for what I do. But...”

It was now or never.

“But, what?”

Taehyung hugged Yeontan closer to his chest. “I’m probably going to get a new job for the new semester. Hopefully. I’ve been doing the club gig for three years and I think it’s time for a change.”

Surprise flickered across his dad’s face at the words three years, but it quickly disappeared as he brought his cup to his lips, blowing on his tea. “Like what?”

“Well, a guy I know offered to put me in touch with a few professional companies. And I doubled up during Pedagogy so I can teach jazz and contemporary. I don’t have a class past four with my new schedule, which opens up a lot of things for me.”

“I’d prefer you get a new job,” his dad admitted. “As soon as possible. I don’t like the thought of you being exposed to all of that. And I think teaching a dance class is more up your alley.”

Taehyung stifled his snort, taking a large gulp of tea.

He had no idea.

“I’m not going to make as much,” he warned him. “But, um...to take the pressure of deadlines off...Jeonggukkie offered to help me out.”

His dad sat back, eyes narrowed. “Help you out how?”

“...Financially,” he mumbled. “It wouldn’t be charity!” he rushed to add before his dad could shoot the idea down. “He’d pay the hospital and I’d just pay him back when I had the money. I’d still be
taking care of you, that won’t change. It’s just the bills.”

To his surprise, his dad didn’t immediately reject the idea. “Since my health is slowly improving, I was thinking of trying to find a job where I could work from home, too. That way not everything would come out of your pocket.”

“No, you should rest.”

“I’ve been resting for the past three years. It’s time for me to step up again.”

“But-”

“Taehyung. Please. It’ll make me feel better. And if it becomes too much, I’ll just stop, okay?”

Taehyung traced the rim of his cup with a finger. “...Fine.”

“And your plan...that’s something Jeongguk’s family is on board with?”

Chewing his lip, he admitted, “Not yet. But soon, hopefully. I won’t quit until I talk with his dad. If his dad will let me talk with him. Jeongguk still has to come out.”

His dad released a long breath. “That’s a big step. Especially for him, in that household. I wish him the best of luck. He deserves to be accepted. And if he ever needs somewhere to go, you remind him that he’s welcome here, okay?”

“Of course. I just want him to be happy, you know? I told him I’d keep us a secret if he wanted me to, but he didn’t. He wants to come out. He trusts his stepmom and his brother. And he’s tired of lying. So I feel better knowing I didn’t push him into it. I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself if I did.”

“I don’t think he’d want you to have to hide it. I don’t think he could hide it if he wanted to or not.”

His dad flashed him a fond smile. “He kinda likes you, and it’s a little obvious to the rest of us.”

Taehyung couldn’t help but return his smile. “Funnily enough, that sounded a little like sarcasm to me.”

“Huh, I can’t imagine why.” A spot of mischief glimmered in his dad’s eyes.

More things he was starting to realise he’d gotten from him. It made him wonder what he’d gotten from his mom.

His phone vibrated in his pocket four times, startling both him and Yeontan. After a nod from his dad, he pulled out his phone and read the messages on his lockscreen.

dirty dancers gc

Jimin.

you always apologise too much

taehyungie. i’m so sorry. for
everything. i love you and i miss you :(

**Jemin.**

let’s meet up as soon as you’re back
okay? please?

**Hoseok**

oh my god no it was us that messed up
not you. we should’ve paid more attention
and been there when you needed us. i’m really sorry taehyungie. just let us know
the second you’re back in town so we can swarm you in cuddles and just talk

**Hoseok**

love you taehyungie. always

“Everything okay?” his dad asked, concern written on his face.
Taehyung glanced up, blinking the mistiness from his eyes.
“Yeah. It’s just Jimin and Hoseok.”
“You look like you’re about to cry.”
A small smile tugged at his lips. “Happy tears, Appa. Don’t worry about it.”
He’d done enough sharing for one day.
His dad appraised him, but let the topic be. “If you’re sure...What’s your guys’ plan for tomorrow?”
Taehyung set his phone down, allowing him to change the flow of conversation even if happiness threatened to spill over inside him. “Not sure. We haven’t really talked about it, but we’re pretty open. If you were feeling up to it, I thought maybe we could take you for breakfast in town, or I can make something here, and then we’d pack, I’d kidnap Yeontan, and I guess we’d head out from there.”
“I heard that kidnapping Yeontan thing, you know. You’re not smuggling him into your dorm.”

“You’re no fun,” Taehyung grumbled. “What if I moved out of the dorms, hm? Then what?”

His dad shot him a skeptical look. “The minute you can afford to move out of the dorms is the minute I know Jeongguk is slipping money into your back pocket.”

“Hey! I could earn enough!” he objected.

“Earn enough what?” Jeongguk’s voice swept in from the hall where he was removing his shoes.

“Oh, hey, welcome back,” Taehyung greeted him.

“Thanks. Place was swarmed,” Jeongguk remarked, joining them at the table and placing a kiss on his head. “But I managed to find one that looked decently acceptable.”

He set a box down before him. Eager, Taehyung flipped the lid to reveal a fluffy vanilla cake with buttercream frosting.

“I’m going to gain ten pounds and I’m going to love every minute of it,” he decided. “Thank you, Jeonggukkie.”

Jeongguk just chuckled and moved into the kitchen to deposit their snacks for tomorrow’s drive.

“Did you really just go out to buy him a cake?” his dad asked in disbelief. “You can’t just indulge him like that, Jeongguk, he’ll walk all over you.”

“Oh, trust me, I know,” Jeongguk agreed as he put things away.

Glancing between them in utter betrayal, he noted, “Oddly enough I feel as though I’m being ganged up on once more.”

“Huh,” both his dad and Jeongguk replied simultaneously.

Gasping in mock offense, Taehyung lifted Yeontan up, kissing his forehead. “Guess it’s just you and me against the world.”

His dad laughed and asked, “Well, is there anything I should know about Jeongguk since I’ve been told my son is a stripper?”

“Yeah, he makes all his money from dealing cocaine.”

“Taehyung!” Jeongguk exclaimed, doe eyes wide with shock.

“Well, I know that one’s a lie. Look at him. He’d never make it out on the streets, he looks twelve.”

Taehyung grinned, finally on the winning side of things.

“I-” Jeongguk’s gaze flicked between them, unused to being the center of the banter. “This. This is mean.”

With a laugh, Taehyung let Yeontan wriggle off his lap and got to his feet, picking up the cake. “Come help me eat this, kid.”

“I’m older than you!” Jeongguk reminded him, wounded.
Fetching plates and utensils, he remarked, “But you have the cutest baby face.”

“As long as I’m cute,” Jeongguk muttered, following him out to the porch.

The sun continued to shine, easing the chill of winter and holding the promise of spring.

... 

Their goodbyes were short and sweet.

Kidding.

They packed, got breakfast, Taehyung really did attempt a Yeontan kidnapping, Jeongguk stuttered his way through several excessive thanks for his dad’s support and hospitality, Taehyung ran back inside to make sure his dad wasn’t dying without him three times before he let Jeongguk pull out of the driveway, then he called his dad every hour of their drive, they got into another fight at the next convenience store over most valid mini donut flavour, he lectured Jeongguk about constantly skipping every song on his playlist halfway through, but...

Finally.

They made it back to campus.

Sunset blanketed the sky, flooding the palette of blue with rivulets of indigo, rose, and tangerine by the time Jeongguk parked outside of his dorm.

“Wow,” Taehyung said, unbuckling his seatbelt.

“Wow,” Jeongguk agreed, exhausted.

“I- are we...we didn’t just like...transport ourselves into an alternate universe, right? Like, that happened?”

Jeongguk blinked a couple times, pinched his arm, then pinched Taehyung.

“Hey, ouch!”

“Yeah, that happened,” he decided. “I had a really good time with you, and your dad, and Yeontan.”

Taehyung found it oddly touching that Jeongguk bothered to include Yeontan.

“I had a really good time with you, too. Thanks for coming with me.”

“Well, how else would I get the coveted father-approval?”

“That’s only one father down,” he reminded him. “Guess it’s my turn next.”

Jeongguk dropped his forehead on the steering wheel, groaning. “Can we just...pretend he doesn’t exist?”

Although he disagreed strongly with that approach, Taehyung opened his mouth to consider the offer before Jeongguk cut him off.
“I’m kidding. It needs to happen. I’ll...fuck, what day of the week is it?’”

“Friday.”

Jeongguk looked up, appalled. “Oh my god, we start classes in two days.”

“Yup.”

“Winter session’s gonna be a bitch. Remind me why we didn’t just wait until spring?”

“Because we’re overachieving idiots. And we have to take a winter session if we want to participate in winter sports. Basketball is an autumn and winter sport. Dance is a year-long sport. And I already signed up for my classes before I got kicked off the team.”

“Fuck.”

“Yeah. Fuck.”

Jeongguk yawned, stretching. “Well, now what?”

Taehyung glanced out the window, watching the trickle of people through his residence hall doors. “Now I meet Jimin and Hoseok somewhere, then go to work at eleven.”

“You’re going to work tonight?” Jeongguk stared at him, astonished.

“Um...yeah? I still have to make money. Don’t worry, I’ll shoot you a text when I’m done so you don’t panic and send a SWAT team after me or something.”

“Ah yes, all those SWAT teams I have in my pocket. Right.”

Taehyung chuckled, but found himself still unwilling to get out of the car.

“So…”

Jeongguk hesitantly reached out, taking Taehyung’s hand in his own. “Guess I’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

Taehyung kept his gaze on their intertwined fingers. “Guess so.”

With a strange feeling in his chest, he drew his hand back and turned to grab his bag from the backseat, only to find himself blocked as a hand pressed firmly to his back while lips pressed even more insistently to his mouth.

A small sigh escaped him as he settled into the kiss, exchanging goodbyes far more powerful than words.

He felt the desperation Jeongguk kissed him with deep in his heart.

It felt as though they were parting for good.

He couldn’t explain it. He knew it wasn’t true, and that they were both just exceptionally dramatic, but the feeling lingered nonetheless.

The last week really seemed like a dream that they had only just woken up from, grounding more and more in reality as Jeongguk’s fingers wandered up his spine to his hair, knotting in the strands to hold him in place, kissing him like he would disappear the moment he stepped out of the car.
When they broke apart, they simply leaned against each other for a moment, eyes shut, breathing heavy.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Jeongguk murmured with more conviction this time.

“Not if I see you first.”

He laughed at that, lifting some of the tension from the air. Jeongguk leaned back in his seat to give Taehyung space so he could twist around and retrieve his bag.

“Love you. I hope everything goes well with Hoseok and Jimin.”

Taehyung already had a foot out the door. “It will. I have a good feeling about it. Love you, too.”

And then the door was shut, and he was walking up the steps to his residence hall in a bit of a daze.

People said hi to him.

He said hi back.

What a strange existence.

Once upstairs, he unlocked his dorm room and promptly collapsed on his bed, taking a moment just to absorb the past week.

His dad knew he was a stripper and he didn’t want to disown him.

He got a boyfriend and that boyfriend was Jeon Jeongguk.

Really, just one thing left to do.

dirty dancers gc

Me

hey i’m back in town if you guys
want to hang out?

Me

no pressure if you want to wait

Hoseok

no taehyungie get your ass over to
my place right now. and bring a
pizza. jiminie’s already here and i really think he might cry if you don’t show up in the next ten minutes

Me

oh jeez way to give me a time limit. i’m coming rn. don’t let him cry ffs

Surprisingly, he felt more excited than tired. He’d rather see Jimin and Hoseok than take a short nap to refresh his energy before work.

Figuring he’d probably just head straight to Sin after, he packed a change of clothes and headed back down to the parking lot.

The drive over to Hoseok’s apartment only took a few minutes, seeing as he still had to live somewhat close to campus. Even so, it felt worlds away. Seclusion and privacy while still being exposed to the real world. He envied him a little for it, wishing he had his own apartment.

He parked along the street and hurried into his building, taking the stairs up to the second floor.

It had been months since the last time he came here, everyone always opting to hang out at his dorm since it was closer to everything.

Once he stood in front of apartment number six, he hesitated.

Things were going to be okay.

They were going to make it okay.

He missed them like hell.

Jimin might cry.

That was more than enough motivation to have him raising his fist to the door, knocking three times.

The last knock was unnecessary as Hoseok flung the door open on the second, immediately smothering him in a tight hug.

“Taehyungie!” he exclaimed, squeezing him half to death.

“Ah- okay- hi-” he wheezed out, attempting to return his hug. “Can’t- breathe-”

“Sorry!” Hoseok released him, just in time for them to hear the screech of,

“Kim Taehyung, you get your ass in here this second you absolute piece of shit! I love you!”
Unsure of whether he was being threatened or welcomed back, he hesitantly entered the apartment, only for him to come face to face with a livid, red-eyed Park Jimin.

“Uh, hi,” Taehyung tried.

Jimin planted his hands on his hips, managing to stare him down from a whole two inches below him.


Confused, Taehyung said, “Look, I’m sorry about what happened, but-”

“You didn’t bring a fucking pizza,” Jimin finished, glaring at him.

“I- what?”

“We asked for one thing,” Jimin declared dramatically, shaking his shoulders.

Taehyung breathed a sigh of relief, letting Jimin abuse him as he pleased. “Oh my god, fuck you, dude. I ordered it, calm down, it’s on it’s way.”

Jimin’s expression immediately softened into deceptively squishy cheeks and a bright crescent smile. “Oh, well that’s all good then. Thanks, Taehyungie!”

“I hate you. You almost gave me a heart attack.”

Giggling, Jimin wrapped him up in a tight hug. “Sorry. Um…” He pulled back, wariness trickling into his gaze. “I really am. You know. Sorry. About everything. I’m the worst. I…that was such a stupid thing for me to say. Our friendship is the most important thing to me, and I shouldn’t have acted like it meant any less to you. I know you have a lot going on, and I should’ve tried to be more understanding and supportive. I really do love you. So much. And I’m so angry with myself for the way I treated you. Um, so if you’ll have me back…I’d really like to be your soulmate again.”

“Fuck off, you’re gonna make me cry,” Taehyung sniffed. “You never stopped being my soulmate, Jiminnie. I should’ve remembered that I have the best friends in the world instead of just shutting you guys out when things got hard. I’m an idiot. I’m so sorry. And I love you, too.”

Jimin hugged him even tighter, kissing his cheek. “Missed you, Taetae.”

“Me too. Oh, also.” He drew away from Jimin, and instead threw himself on Hoseok. “I’m so sorry, hyung. I shouldn’t have said all those things to you, especially over text. That was so shitty of me. I-”

“Shh, don’t even worry about it,” Hoseok hushed him. “I know you didn’t mean it, and I’m in the same boat as Jimin. I should’ve tried to be there for you more. And I’ll make sure it doesn’t happen again. I don’t want to lose my Taehyungie. Ever.”

Taehyung simply hugged Hoseok for another moment. “Love you, hyung.”

“Love you, too. So,” he released him with a clap on the back. “What’s been going on?”

Taehyung shrugged. “Not much. You know, being kicked off the team, barely passing my classes, and taking my clothes off for other people’s enjoyment. Oh, I might be getting a new job. And Jeongguk and I are dating so I guess that happened. And I told my dad I’m a stripper.”
A beat of silence passed between them.

And then Hoseok and Jimin erupted.


Hoseok punched him lightly. “Dude, what the fuck? Thought you hated Jeon’s guts?”

Taehyung stared at both of them. “Damn, it really has been awhile huh.”

“Well, like, we knew you were fucking because of Yoongi but he made it sound like a frenemies-with-benefits sort of deal,” Hoseok explained. “Like, releasing all the tension you guys had in a healthier way than killing each other.”

“Uh, yeah that’s sort of what it started out as. And then that went on for a while and we realised we kinda like each other. And then a few more weeks passed and we realised we still kinda love each other, so...He came to Busan with me for the week, and it was really nice. He and my dad still get along and...I don’t know, it felt therapeutic. Finally confronting all the bad shit that happened between us and agreeing to move on to something better.”

“That’s so fucking cute,” Jimin whispered. “So we can stop hating him, right?”

Taehyung laughed. “Yes, Jiminie, you can stop hating him. I mean, if you still want to, that’s up to you, but try not to.”

“Oh, thank god,” Hoseok sighed. “I can finally talk to him about what happened sophomore year without feeling like I’m betraying you.”

He knew bits and pieces of the full story, but Hoseok had yet to tell either of them the whole thing.

“What did happen to you guys that year?”

Hoseok shifted uncomfortably, the subject having gone unaddressed for so long. “Well, you know we played together for a year. I was on the team a year longer than him, and I played point guard when he joined up. The whole thing is stupid honestly. We were pretty good friends, since I didn’t know about your drama with him back then. I liked him. He was sweet and showed a lot of promise, already more talented than all the guys his age. But he was fighting to play my position from the start. And I was sort of crushing on Namjoon at the time, so it just sort of pushed me over the edge when I realised they were messing around. Jeongguk got everything, and it pissed me off. I was pushed to wings while he played point guard every game. Namjoon stopped hanging out with me to go screw him, or whatever they did. So yeah, I quit the team. I didn’t want to be angry with him because I knew it wasn’t intentional. He wasn’t doing it all just to take shit from me. He’s a better player, and it took me a long time to come to terms with that. So I figured the smartest thing was just to remove myself from the situation, which I’m glad I did, because it gave me more time to focus on my true passion, which is dance. I’m not mad at him. But I do want to talk sometime because he probably thinks I’m a pretty shitty guy at this point.”

That was somehow both worse and better than what he’d expected.

For some reassurance, Taehyung said, “He’s the world’s biggest softie, hyung, I guarantee he doesn’t think that. I really don’t think he even knows he did anything wrong. You should talk to him. He’ll probably go all teary-eyed and apologise profusely and offer you his spot on the team or something.”

“I swear to god, you’re not the same person,” Jimin reflected in awe. “You. Are calling Jeon
Jeongguk. ‘The world’s biggest softie.’ I’m going to need so many days to process this development.”

“Yeah, it took me a few days too, don’t worry. So, what’s been going on in your guys’ lives?”

“Mostly being in love and trying to fill your fucking spot on the team,” Jimin said, sounding exhausted. “I hate your job. I hate it. I hate it so much. Take it back.”

Taehyung rubbed his back in sympathy. “Sorry, Jiminie. You know I can’t do that.”

“Just talk to Hwang,” Jimin begged. “Please. It’s driving me insane. Our routine for the winter competition is shit, and we only have three weeks to perfect it. Please, Taehyung. Just tell her everything. She has to take you back. She wants you back, she’s just too stubborn to admit it.”

For a brief moment, he allowed a spark of hope to flicker in his chest.

*Could* he beg for his spot back?

“I’m not fucking begging for her pity,” he decided. “And I’m gonna go out on a limb and guess it’s not as bad as you’re making it sound.”

Jimin shook his head. “It’s worse. I’m so tired all the time. I barely have time for Hoseokie-hyung and Yoongi-hyung. I practically live in the studio.”

Yeah, *that’s sort of your job*, he thought before realising that didn’t sound very sympathetic.

“You’re not really selling me on it,” he pointed out, dropping down onto Hoseok’s couch.

Jimin followed suit, laying across his lap. “Taehyung,” he whined. “I want to focus on ballet. You know that. The ballet companies are starting to scout in three months. I need to be ready. And I can’t do that if I’m devoting all my time to the dance team.”

“Jiminie, you can’t ask him to just go back after everything he went through,” Hoseok reasoned, joining them on the couch.

“Please, Taetae, I promise, I’ll owe you the biggest fucking favour. You will want for nothing. I’ll be your personal slave, just please, please talk to Hwang.”

With Jimin staring up at him using his widest, shiniest pleading eyes, Taehyung could only sigh. “I- you know what? Fine. But only because I love you and I don’t want you to lose your shot at getting into a good ballet company.”

“I love you!” Jimin declared, reaching up to squish his cheeks.

Thankfully, the doorbell rang, announcing the arrival of their pizza, and everything else was pretty much forgotten after that.

Only to be picked up Monday morning as he stood outside of Coach Hwang’s office, Jimin by his side to vouch for him and Jeongguk opting to come with them for moral support.

“It’s probably best if you wait here,” Taehyung decided, squeezing Jeongguk’s hand apologetically. “Otherwise, she’ll think I’m trying to intimidate her with the cavalry or something.”
“No worries, I’ll be right here for when you finish, and we can go get drinks or something,” Jeongguk said with a smile, returning his squeeze.

“This is so fucking weird to watch,” Jimin muttered. Then he straightened up. “Anyways, let’s do this.” He knocked twice, bolder than Taehyung.

He’d sent her an email beforehand just to confirm a time to meet, but this was nerve-wracking nonetheless.

*The worse she can do is say no,* he reminded himself.

“Come in,” her stern voice carried through the door.

Jeongguk shot him one final thumbs-up before Jimin twisted the handle and practically shoved him inside.

Coach Hwang sat at her desk, pen in hand as she went over a document, brow furrowed. But when they stepped inside, she glanced up and set the pen aside, gesturing in front of her. “Have a seat.”

“Thanks,” Taehyung followed her instruction while Jimin settled into the chair beside him.

“So.” Hwang appraised them both, her rigid dark ponytail adding an extra layer of intimidation to her sharp features. “What can I do for you boys today?”

Taehyung glanced at Jimin, who gave him a reassuring nod as if to say *Go on.*

“I wanted to talk to you,” he finally said. “Actually talk to you. About what happened.”

Mild surprise flickered across her face. Intrigued, she settled back in her chair, hands folded. “Alright. Let’s talk, then.”

Taehyung scratched nervously at the desk beneath his fingertips. “I don’t honestly know where to start. I don’t want you to think I’m telling you a sob story just to guilt my way back on to the team.”

When he looked up, however, a trace of kindness emerged in Hwang’s hawk-like eyes. “I won’t ever think that about you, Taehyung-ssi. You’re too prideful to even consider something like that.”

He couldn’t tell if that was supposed to be a compliment or an insult.

Unsure, he just nodded.

“Um, so I guess...basically, my mom passed away when I was sixteen and my dad got diagnosed with leukemia two years later. We needed money to pay off both of their hospital bills, and he’s unemployed and on disability, so I needed to be able to take care of him. I took the job at Sin almost as soon as I turned eighteen because I needed to make a lot of money, and I needed to make it fast. I’ve been working there for three years. And although I know it in no way excuses my behaviour, it’s difficult to succeed in that setting without engaging in party drugs or alcohol because those shifts are brutal if you’re not on something. The guys treat you like crap and you walk out of it feeling worthless, but the amount of money is worth it. And yes, I’m aware that I was solicited for sexual favours in a context that could fall under a prostitution charge, but I looked into it and that’s under the club’s jurisdiction, not the individual’s. So if the university has a problem with that, they legally have to take it up with the establishment itself. Not with me. Basically, what I’m trying to say is that I recognise I made a few bad decisions, I’m sorry for the choices I made, and I wish more of it wasn’t out of my control.” He maintained firm eye contact with her as he
continued, “I miss dancing. More than anything. It’s always been an integral part of my life, and losing my place on the team felt like losing a part of myself. I want to see this team succeed. I want this team to absolutely sweep the floor at the winter competition. And I’d be honoured if you’d consider allowing me to appeal my case.”

“I fully endorse him, and should he be reinstated, I would like to surrender the captaincy back to him,” Jimin added.

Hwang tapped her pen against the edge of her desk, thinking everything he’d just told her over.

“Why couldn’t you just tell me this in November?” she inquired.

“Because I was in a really bad place in November,” he admitted. “Mentally, emotionally, financially. Nothing was going my way. But I’m doing better now. I’m stable, and I have a good support system. I’m going to quit my job and start looking for other, more reliable work.”

Hwang nodded.

“If you quit your job, then it’s no longer an issue.”

“I- what?” Taehyung asked, not sure he heard quite right.

“Well, obviously your reasoning would be reviewed, but the case was never brought to the Board since you resigned. The decision falls to me, and I say that if you quit your job, consider yourself back on the team.”

“Oh my god,” Taehyung whispered, shock setting in. “Really?”

She chuckled. “Really.”

Although he wanted to yank his phone out and send Jang a text right there, he knew he had to be rational and plan everything out.

“Well, I don’t want to be out of work until I know I have something else lined up…”

“Tae, just ask Jeongguk to have your back until you get a new job,” Jimin suggested quietly. “It’s not a hit to your pride. It’s giving yourself a moment to breathe. And then as soon as you get a new job, you can pay him back. You know he doesn’t care, and he just wants you to be happy and not swimming in stress and debt.”

The offer sounded tempting.

And yet,

He shook his head. “No. I’m not asking him to do that. When’s the next game?”

“Two Fridays from now,” Hwang informed him.

Taehyung glanced at her. “Can you bench me for it? I don’t have to dance. I just want to be there. And hopefully by that time I’ll have something else figured out.”

“I think that’s manageable,” Hwang agreed after a moment of hesitation. “But I expect you to show up for every practice, regardless of whether you’re dancing at the game or not. And Jimin holds your position until you quit that job.”

He dipped his head. “Yes, Coach.”
Outside he sounded fine, but inside he was absolutely ecstatic.

Hwang gave him another thoughtful once over before nodding again. “You’re dismissed, Taehyung-ssi. Practice starts again at six-thirty tonight.”

He rose to his feet, giving her a respectful bow. “Thank you, Coach.” Jimin bowed to her as well, then led him out the office door back into the hall.

Jeongguk stood there waiting for them, leaning against the wall on his phone. But he put it down the moment they emerged. “Well?”

Taehyung paused, then a wide grin broke out over his face.

“I’m back on the team.”

Jeongguk’s broad smile rivalled his own as he enveloped him in a tight hug. “I knew it! I’m so happy for you, baby. And I’m so excited to see you at our last two games.”

Taehyung revelled in the feeling of victory, and placed a soft kiss on Jeongguk’s lips with a murmured, “I’m excited to be there.”

“This is so weird,” Jimin whispered, although he wasn’t very quiet. “I don’t think you understand how weird this is.”

Pulling away from Jeongguk, he asked, “What?”

Jumin gestured wildly. “This! You guys! Everyone’s gonna flip their shit, you know.”

Jeongguk shrugged. “Let them.”

Taehyung’s heart fluttered just a little. “Anyways, who wants to go get cocoa and coffee?”

“Definitely me,” Jeongguk chimed in, slinging an arm around his shoulders.

Jumin was still staring at them in disbelief. “I’m almost glad I have an eleven am lecture so I don’t have to watch this.” But then he smiled, erasing the harshness of his words. “Kidding. You guys are cute. But I really do have to bounce.”

“Next time, okay?” Jeongguk asked, surprising them all with his sweetness. “I don’t want you and Hoseok-hyung to feel like strangers.”

“Absolutely,” Jimin confirmed with a nod. “Next time.”

Taehyung looped his arms around Jimin’s middle, squeezing tight. “Bye, Jiminie. Thanks for having my back in there.”

“I will always have your back, Taetae. My lecture’s just downstairs so I’ll catch you guys later.”

Jumin waved and headed out in front of them, Taehyung and Jeongguk staying back to plan the rest of their day.

“I’m so glad that went well,” Taehyung sighed.

“I knew it was going to. What’s the rest of your day look like?”

Taehyung tried to visualise his new schedule. “I have Modern Dance at one, and Jazz immediately
after at two-thirty.”

Jeongguk’s brow furrowed in confusion. “I thought you took Jazz last semester.”

“I took Jazz III last semester, babe. I’m in Jazz IV now. They have one and three during the autumn and spring sessions and two and four during the summer and winter sessions.”

“Huh.” Jeongguk shook his head. “Dance is a weird major. Your classes are all just...dancing.”

Taehyung chuckled. “And your classes aren’t all just filming?”

“Nope. I only have two classes this semester where I actually get to touch a camera.”

“Well, that’s bullshit.”

“I know. And we can talk all about it over hot cocoa. C’mon.”

Taehyung took Jeongguk’s outstretched hand, feeling a rush of excitement at the thought of walking around campus like that, fingers interlaced with his.

It was shaping up to be a good semester.

“That was way too short, Jeon!” Coach Yun shouted from the stands during Friday’s practice. “I want to see nothing but flawless three-pointers and you’re giving me shots you can’t even make from inside the key! What, you wanna lose this game? You wanna lose the whole damn championship?”

“No, Coach!” Jeongguk shouted back, already frustrated with his performance.

“Then get out there and stop playing like a pansy!”

“Yes, Coach!”

Trying to encourage some adrenaline back in his veins, he raced to half, beating the rest of his team there by nearly ten seconds. Sweat coated his forehead, neck and chest. All the guys had tossed their soaked shirts aside an hour into practice, the heating system in the gym working overtime for some godforsaken reason.

They had split themselves into seven on one side, six on the other. His team had Sungjae, Minho, Yoongi, Jeonghan, and Mingyu. Both teams were pretty evenly matched in terms of height- in fact, he and Yoongi were the shortest on his team by far. Still, they were holding their own. The score currently stood at 50:43 with Namjoon’s team in the lead. No surprise there. Having both Namjoon and Bogum on a team together was a dangerous move, and put their team at a disadvantage because they didn’t have a center. Mingyu had to step up and play center since he was their tallest player, and he wasn’t used to calling their plays.

This practice meant something.

They needed to win.

They had a game next week.

Semifinals.
His mind had been off his sport for too long, thoughts so used to swirling around with more significant things.

But right now, nothing was more significant.

“We need to break their defensive zone,” Mingyu muttered just loud enough for Jeongguk to hear. “They’ve been setting up 2-3 most of the game.”

“We’ve been trying to break it most of the game,” he pointed out. “They’re tight. We just need to have one person break through to get a good outside shot. Have Minho break left, you hang back with the ball, and we’ll attack the gaps in the defense,” Jeongguk suggested as they met at half.

Mingyu glanced at him. “That’s not a bad idea. Let’s give it a shot.” He turned to quickly and quietly relay the plan to the rest of the team. Then Coach Yun blew his whistle and they were off again. Jeongguk watched carefully as their players swarmed Namjoon’s defense, Minho heading left unnoticed. He got up close and personal with Seokjin, guarding him and diverting his attention to the right. He heard the ball hit fingertips, but kept his focus on the task at hand. And then…

The unmistakable swish of a net.

“50:46!” Coach Yun declared.

A rush of satisfaction coursed through him.

They were going to overtake Namjoon’s team.

They sprinted back to half. The ball flashed between Namjoon’s hands. And then he was off, racing back down the other end of the court. No time to plan, no time to think.

Going off pure instinct and adrenaline, Jeongguk tore after him, blood pounding in his ears. And suddenly, Taehyung’s first lesson popped into his head. Envisioning his steps, he surged past Namjoon and turned on his heel, snatching the ball back before he even had time to think.

Jeongguk took off back down the court, dribbling fast and accurate, keeping his steps light but decisive just like Taehyung taught them. He weaved through their hastily constructed defense and shot from the edge of the three-point line, feeling his heart stop just before the ball hit the rim of the basket and passed through.

“Yes!” he exclaimed quietly. “Did you see that, Coach?” he shouted far louder.

But of course, his coach wasn’t paying attention to him.

Jeongguk looked at the sidelines only to see him conversing intently with someone he couldn’t quite see since they were facing Yun, nodding and gesturing every now and again to the court. But he glanced Jeongguk’s way when he heard his name.

“Sorry, Jeon. That last hoop doesn’t count, I missed it. Everyone take a five-minute break to hydrate, then hit the court again. Shuffle teams.”

“Dick,” he muttered. Seokjin jogged his way, clapping him on the shoulder sympathetically.

“That shot looked really good, Jeongguk-ah.”

Even if it didn’t count, the compliment was still appreciated. “Thanks, hyung.”

They wandered over to the sidelines, only for Jeongguk to hear a very familiar voice.
Absolutely, sir. No, I was just talking with Coach Hwang and she’s really grateful to you for accommodating us during the autumn session, even if she won’t say it. I asked her to dedicate our win next month to you, but funnily enough, she said no.”

Jeongguk grinned, calling out, “Taehyungie!”

Taehyung side-stepped around his coach, somehow looking like a model in a paint-splattered t-shirt, loose white jacket, and light jeans. Definitely like a model compared to all of the half-naked basketball players around him.

“Hey,” Taehyung greeted him, slipping the black bag off his shoulder. “You left your bag in my dorm, and I figured you probably wanted to head straight to your dad’s after practice so I brought it over for you.”

He didn’t miss as Taehyung’s gaze roamed shamelessly over his body, smirking as he took his bag from him.

“Thanks, baby, you’re the best.”

“I know.” Then Taehyung flicked his eyes upward, sighing as he caught sight of Jeongguk’s hair. “Jeongguk, that’s a mess. Head down.”

Examining the floor, Jeongguk waited patiently while Taehyung’s nimble fingers set to work undoing his tangled bun, putting it up into something much more stable and smooth.

“There.” Taehyung released him, satisfied with his handiwork.

Jeongguk patted his hair, confirming that it would hold. “Sweet.”

“Alright, well, I’ll leave you to it. I have practice in half an hour, so I won’t see you until you get back. Text me as soon as you get there, okay?”

He’d never thought the day would come when Taehyung would fret over him, the look of concern in his eyes frighteningly adorable.

“Promise,” he reassured him.

“And text me if you need anything? I’ll come rescue you, you know that. I’ll break in if I have to.”

Jeongguk laughed. “I don’t think it’ll come to that, but if anything goes wrong, you’ll be the first person to know.”

“Good. Have fun, then.” Taehyung waved to his friends, then turned to head out the door.

But Jeongguk felt all their eyes on them, especially Bogum’s, Minho’s, and he knew he had to do something. Chanyeol’s words rang in his ears. You’ve gotta stake your claim.

“Wait, Taehyung!” Jeongguk called, jogging after him.

He paused, turning back. “Yeah?”

“Aren’t you forgetting something?”

Taehyung stared at him. “Um, I don’t think so? But knowing me, probably?”

Jeongguk tapped his own cheek twice, expectant. Realisation flooded Taehyung’s face, brown eyes
going wide.

“You could’ve just asked.” Taehyung said with a roll of his eyes, stepping forward to press a soft kiss to his cheek. “You big dork,” he teased as he stepped back.

“You big dork,” Jeongguk reminded him cheerfully. Then he pushed him towards the doors. “Love you!”

Taehyung shook his head, but he had a warm smile on his face. “Love you, too. Bye.”

With that, Taehyung headed out the doors, his confident, regal strut fully restored, and Jeongguk knew he was watching him go with the biggest grin on his face, but he couldn’t help it.

Everything felt the same as it did at the start of autumn, yet completely different.

And he wouldn’t change a single damn thing.

As soon as he turned back to his team, however, a raucous of claps and wolf whistles rang out.

Jeongguk knew he should play it cool. Act like being with Taehyung wasn’t the highlight of his life’s accomplishments.

But he never really thought of himself as cool.

“Yes, that’s my boyfriend. Yes, I’ve loved him for nearly fifteen years. No, you can’t ask questions,” he announced loudly, then turned to his equally-as-stunned coach. “That’s time, right, Coach?”

“That’s time,” his coach agreed, sounding winded, not even glancing at his watch. “Everybody back on the court.”

Jeongguk deposited his bag by the bench then jogged back to half, ignoring the looks of astonishment on his teammates’ faces. And he might’ve kept a smile on his own face for the rest of practice.

…

“So,” Namjoon said as soon as they emerged from the showers, flinching as Jeongguk shook out his wet hair. “You have some explaining to do.”

“You think?” Seokjin snorted, attempting to towel-dry his broad shoulders. When he couldn’t reach his shoulder blades, he sighed and passed the towel to Namjoon, letting him finish the job.

Jeongguk just shrugged, throwing his towel over his shoulder as he dug for a fresh t-shirt. Yugyeom had been the only person to receive the play-by-play breakdown of exactly how he and Taehyung got together, and he didn’t really feel like repeating it in the locker room. “Not really.” He knew the other guys were eavesdropping. They would never say they cared about the subject in the slightest, but he knew they were interested. “We made up. We made out. Pretty much the whole story.”

Seokjin laughed, clearly not believing a word out of his mouth. “Knowing Taehyung, that is so not the whole story.”

“Apparently, they went to Busan together, Jeongguk got Taehyung’s dad’s approval, and they
spent the week just doing cheesy romantic shit,” Yoongi supplied, shutting his locker.

Jeongguk glared at him. “Who told you that?”

Yoongi raised his eyebrows. “Take a guess.”

“Jimin and Hoseok,” they all said unanimously.

“Okay, you lucky bastards, you don’t know everything,” Yoongi huffed. “Maybe it was someone else.”

“Sure,” Seokjin scoffed. “All those other friends you have besides us and your two boyfriends are all lining up to gossip with you about Jeongguk and Taehyung’s love life.”

Their love life.

Weird.

But...nice.

Besides, it was always funny to watch Yoongi struggle for a response. “Whatever,” he finally conceded. “The point is, the story is way longer than Jeongguk’s making it out to be, and Jimin could probably give you a play-by-play if you wanted.”

“Taehyung’s a snake,” Jeongguk muttered. “I can’t believe he told them everything.” As if he hadn't done the same with Yugyeom. It was different, though. He knew Yugyeom wouldn't tell anyone else.

“The way Hoseok made it sound, Jimin practically tickled him to death for answers. Don’t worry, he didn’t betray you without a fight.”

That felt a little better. He smiled at the image of Taehyung’s bright giggling face as he fended off an aggressive, demanding Jimin, how he probably rolled around on the couch to escape him but ended up giving in. He’d never given their friendship much thought seeing as Jimin basically replaced him, and it made him bitter for a long time, but he had to admit, they had always been a cute pair.

“I forgive them,” he decided.

“If I’m not mistaken, that means none of us are single anymore,” Namjoon realised. “We should do a…” He performed a quick count on his fingers. “Hepta-date.”

They all stared blankly at him. “A what?”

“He means all seven of us should go out and do something,” Yoongi elaborated for him. “Namjoon, Seokjin, you, Taehyung, Hoseok, Jimin, and me.”

Jeongguk slipped his shirt on, considering it. “Yeah, that could be fun. We could all get drinks or something.”

“Think we’d get discounts at Taehyung’s club?” Seokin joked.

“Yeah, right,” Jeongguk snorted. “I spent six hours in there during his shift and I’m pretty sure the bartender charged me extra for every cocktail I got.”

“Damn,” Seokjin whistled sympathetically. “Well, I’m sure we can find a good spot. Propose it to
Tae, and Yoongi, you do the same for Jemin and Hoseok.”

“Sir, yes, sir,” Yoongi mock-saluted him.

Chuckling, Jeongguk slung his bag over his shoulder and waited for his friends to finish before heading out the doors.

“Well, I’ll catch you guys later,” he said, unlocking his car.

“See you, Jeongguk!” Seokjin sent him off with a cheerful wave.

“Wait, where are you going?” Namjoon inquired.

Jeongguk shifted awkwardly on his feet. They still didn’t know.

Maybe he needed to take a page out of Taehyung’s book.

Get used to a little honesty.

“I’m going to go come out to my homophobic piece of shit dad,” he confessed.

All of his friends stiffened.

He never talked about his family.

“I’ve never really heard you talk about him.” Namjoon treaded carefully, as if afraid he would scare him off.

“Yeah, I always just thought some witch dropped you off at our high school in the middle of the day and you lived at Taehyung’s until you were sixteen, and then in the boiler room until graduation,” Yoongi informed him.

“That’s more accurate than I’d like to admit,” Jeongguk muttered. “But...no, I have parents. Or parent. And stepparent. And half-brother.”

Seokjin blinked. “Damn, did we just not pay attention or something?”

He shook his head. “Nah, I just didn’t say anything. We don’t exactly get along. Um…” Anxiously toying with his fingers, he admitted, “If you’re into politics, you might have heard of him like once or twice. Jeon Jeongnam.”

A heavy silence as they all just stared at him.

“Oh fuck.”

Yoongi was the first to speak.

“That’s why you’re loaded,” Seokjin realised, clasping a hand over his mouth. “I mean, not that any of us noticed. You know. The car was subtle enough.”

“Right,” Jeongguk snorted.

“He is kind of a piece of shit,” Yoongi agreed. “I don’t keep up with politics that much, but didn’t he push a bunch of anti-LGBTQ policies? And helped pass a bill that screwed over people on disability in Busan?”
“Yep, that’s him.”

“And you’re going to go come out to him?” Namjoon inquired, concern in every word.

“Yep.”

Seokjin hesitantly rubbed his shoulder. “Jeongguk-ah, are you sure?”

“Yeah.” He made up his mind a long time ago. “I’m sick of pretending. And maybe it will make him open his damn eyes. The real problem is telling him I’m with Tae. They hate each other.”

“No surprises there, if he acted anything like he acts now when he was a kid,” Yoongi pointed out.

Jeongguk nodded. “Exactly. So, if I don’t make it back, you know where to send the police.”

He was only half-kidding.

“Call one of us if you need anything, okay?” Seokjin pushed, making sure he was really okay.

“I promise. I swear, it won’t be that bad. I’m not even planning on staying over because I know he’s gonna flip his shit. I’ll probably be back tonight. Don’t fuck in my bed,” he added for Yoongi’s benefit.

But Yoongi just gave him a daunting half-smile. “No promises.” His expression melted, however, into one of soft empathy. “Seriously though, good luck, Jeongguk-ah. Make him eat his words.”

“I’ll do my best.”

With that, he waved and got in his car while they walked out, probably going to get drinks considering it was a Friday night.

Oh, how he wished he was going with them.

Still, he needed to be strong.

A firm determination entered him as he pulled out of the Athletics parking lot and drove the few kilometers to the expressway, knowing the drive wouldn’t take nearly as long as he wished it would.

And it didn’t.

He passed through his family’s neighbourhood nearly fifteen minutes later, not nearly enough time for him to gather his thoughts.

What should he say?

He’d imagined it a thousand different ways.

Making a big speech about how much his father’s constant disgusting opinions made him feel worthless as a child because the older he got, the more he realised his father would never love him. Would never look at him again the way he sometimes did, with the brief flash of a smile and the telltale glimmer of pride. Jeongguk would never get to see that again if he did this. His dad would never accept him.

And he needed to come to terms with that particular heartache.
At least, if his father disowned him, he still had a second family to love and cherish more than he’d ever loved and cherished them.

He and his mom would be in the same boat. Thrown out and forgotten. Discarded like trash on a stroll down memory lane.

Jeongguk shook his head. No, fuck him. He had his own family. He had Taehyung, and Yugyeom, and Yoongi, and Namjoon, and Seokjin. And he had Junsoo.

Nothing would stop him from loving that kid.

At least he’d gotten to pick up his presents over the week.

He drove over the crest of the hill and then suddenly their house was in sight. Dark and imposing, just like every other over-priced place around, all lacking personality and warmth. His car got buzzed through the wooden gate, and, figuring he had enough problems to deal with, he tried to park as far off the grass as possible.

No Junsoo ran out to greet him, but Jeongguk had sort of figured that would be the case. The school day had only ended a couple hours ago, he was probably in his room studying.

Before he did anything else, he sent the text he’d promised earlier.

```markdown
Me
i’m here

❤️Baby❤️

thanks for letting me know

❤️Baby❤️
text me if you need anything.
it’s going to be okay. i’m so
proud of you, and i love you

Taehyung’s words filled him with confidence.

Me

thanks tae ❤️```
Heart glowing, he mustered his strength.

Although he didn’t think there would really be an opportunity for him to stay the night, he grabbed his bag nonetheless, and, after a split-second, he decided to grab Junsoo’s gifts, hoping he could make it up to the guest room before his brother spotted him. One of them was sort of difficult to wrap, so he’d just left it exposed.

Once he locked the car, he took the steps two-at-time, exchanging his shoes for house slippers and racing up to the second floor before anyone realised he was in the house. There, he left all his things and came back down.

“Sae-eomma?” he called out.

“In here, Jeongguk!” she replied cheerfully, voice coming from the sitting room.

He followed the sound and located her sitting in one of the cushioned bay windows, a trashy romance novel in one hand, a glass of rosé in the other.

“Ah, it’s so good to see you!” she exclaimed, laying her book across her pearl-layered chest. “How are you, darling?”

“Wonderful, Sae-eomma,” he said with a smile. “And you?”

“Oh, just excellent.” The odd thing was, he believed her. No hint of sarcasm in her candy-sweet voice. “I’ve had a fantastic day. Woke up at five, made Junsoo and your father breakfast by six, sent them both out the door, and spent the day in the garden. It’s time to start thinking about spring, you know.”

“Absolutely. I ordered you a new set of ceramic pots, they work for both indoor and outdoor in case you decide on getting that greenhouse built.”

She reached out, squeezing his shoulder. “Thank you, Jeongguk-ah. You’re the sweetest.”

He returned her smile. “It’s no problem. And if you need help moving anything, pots, potting soil, anything, you let me know, okay? I’ll be happy to come out here and help you out.”

“Don’t make promises like that, you know I’ll really put you to work!”

Laughing, he replied, “That’s the point. I won’t stay in my physical prime forever. Use my youth to meet all your manual labour needs.”

“I can help too!” an excited boy’s voice resounded from the staircase as Junsoo practically sprinted to Jeongguk’s side, hugging his waist.

“Obviously,” Jeongguk agreed, ruffling his hair. “Let’s build Sae-eomma a whole greenhouse castle.”

Junsoo nodded vigorously.

But his stepmother just shook her head, red-painted lips curved in a delicate smile. “You boys are ridiculous. Dinner is cooking right now, but it should be done in about twenty minutes. Your father should be home before then.”
“Oh, goody,” Jeongguk muttered under his breath.

His stepmother gave him a chastising look. “Please don’t be like that, Jeongguk-ah. Not tonight. He’s promised to make an effort after your last visit, and I think he’d appreciate it if you’d do the same.”

Skeptical, Jeongguk inquired, “And exactly what sort of promise was that?”

She examined her wine, swirling the faint pink liquid around as a way to mask her own insecurity. “A promise to act more like a father.” _To the son that wasn’t hers._

For some reason, the words filled him with dread.

“He shouldn’t make promises he can’t keep.” Jeongguk struggled to keep the snarl out of his voice.

“Jeongguk, just give him a chance,” she pleaded. “He loves you. And you’re making it sound as though you’re about to do something just to piss him off.”

She clapped a hand over her mouth at her language, red acrylic nails digging into her cheek.

Junsoo was blinking up at both of them, shock plain on his innocent features.

He needed to get his temper under control for Junsoo’s sake.

“I don’t do anything with the intention of upsetting him,” Jeongguk finally murmured, releasing the tension in the air. “And anything I say or do tonight has been a long time coming. I’m not trying to test him. I’m not trying to make him angry. Please bear that in mind.”

She stared at him. “Jeongguk, what are you _talking_ about?”

He shook his head. “Forget it. Nothing. I’m sorry. Can I help you in any way? Set the table? Clean up the kitchen?”

“That…” She took a deep breath, steadying herself. “That would be lovely. Thank you. Junsoo-yah, go help your brother.”

“Yes, Eomma.” Junsoo ducked his head and raced Jeongguk to the kitchen, beating him there. But as soon as they were alone, and Jeongguk was passing him plates from the tall cabinets, Junsoo looked up at him with scared eyes. “Hyung?”

He sounded so small.

“Yeah, bud?”

“Do you hate Abeoji?”

A piece of his heart broke. Their ongoing feud must be torturous to watch.

“No. I don’t hate him. We talked about this last time, remember? He and I just don’t always get along. But if he wants to work on it, I’m more than willing to try.”

Junsoo cocked his head, strands of messy dark hair falling in his eyes. He needed a haircut.

“Then why did Eomma yell at you?”

_Probably because I’m a loose cannon, and she’s terrified I’m going to fuck up her perfect family._
Obviously, he didn’t say that.

Instead, he leaned against the counter, hands shoved in the pockets of his leather jacket. Taehyung would be astounded he’d managed to wear something apart from a hoodie and a pair of sweatpants.

“It must be pretty exhausting for her,” Jeongguk reasoned. “Putting up with him and me. You’re her favourite, you know.”

Junsoo scrubbed his cheeks to hide his happy crescent smile. “No I’m not.”

“Yes, you are. Abeoji and I are troublemakers. But you’re perfect, Junsoo-yah.”

*A much more deserving golden boy than me.*

“I got you a few gifts,” he continued, turning to resume taking dishes down. “They’re up in my room if you want to go get them. One of them isn’t wrapped, though. You should be able to tell which one.”

Junsoo let out a very high-pitched squeak that Jeongguk thought might have been a thank you before hugging him again and dashing back up the stairs.

“Hyung!” Junsoo hollered not two minutes later. “Really? For me?”

“Yup!” he called back. “The package and the other thing!”

A new noise came from upstairs, a borderline scream, to be exact.

“Jeon Jeongguk, what on earth did you do?” a stern voice swept through the house like a cold wind.

Jeongguk glanced up, only to see his father standing in the doorway to the kitchen, glaring at him like he’d just murdered Junsoo or something.

“I got Junsoo a couple of presents.”

He refrained from adding a snarky comment.

But his dad just rolled his eyes. “So you mean I got Junsoo a couple of presents, since your bank account is filled with *my* money.”

Biting his tongue, Jeongguk muttered. “Sure. If that’s what you want to call it…” And then he took another calming breath, asking, “How was your day, Abeoji?”

The scathing look he received did nothing to make this easier.

“Don’t ask me that. That’s not your job.” And then he raised his voice, calling, “Minji!”

He heard a crash as his stepmother scrambled to her feet, book tumbling to the floor. “Yes, darling?” Rushed footsteps pounding against cool wood as she hurried into the kitchen. “What can I do for you?”

His father barely looked at her, only sparing her a brief once-over that ultimately resulted in disappointment. “Is dinner ready?”

The stovetop beeped just as he spoke.
“I-” She glanced at the stove. “Yes, as a matter of fact, it is. Jeongguk, why don’t you go gather Junsoo and finish setting the table?”

He did as she asked, and soon enough, they were all seated around the cherry dining table with steaming plates and bowls in front of them.

An overwhelming sense of deja-vu hit.

They did the same thing every time. Routine so deeply ingrained that breaking it now could break them apart.

“So, what presents did Jeongguk get you?” his father directed the question at Junsoo, trying, and failing, to keep the venom out of his words.

Junsoo shifted uncomfortably in his seat, tapping his chopsticks against his melamine bowl. But then he caught Jeongguk’s eye, and hopefully found some reassurance there as he seemed to get bolder. “Hyung got me new kneepads and sneakers for next season. And he got me a guitar.”

His father pinned Jeongguk with the iciest stare he’d ever mustered as he repeated, “A guitar, hm?”

Jeongguk tried to hold his own. “Junsoo talked about wanting to learn. Yoongi-hyung taught me in high school, and I’m not great, but I figured I could help him pick up the basics and he could explore as he wanted to from there.”

A vicious gleam entered his father’s eyes. “So, we have a film major and a budding guitarist. I wonder what will come next.”

You mean what disappointment will come next?

“Maybe a dancer.”

Jeongguk’s mouth worked before his brain. Furiously berating himself, he dropped his gaze, focusing on the food in front of him.

He couldn’t even concentrate enough to name a single dish, let alone register what he was tasting.

Yet, his father didn’t feel like letting it go.

“And what kind of dancer?” he spoke through gritted teeth.

“I’m not trying to bait you, so I’d appreciate it if you’d do the same,” Jeongguk said with a sigh. He didn’t want to fight. He needed them to not fight.

Once again, utensils clattered to his father’s plate. “Oh? Does it sound as though I’m trying to bait you?”

Don’t lose your temper. Don’t lose your temper.

“I’m just saying, it sounds like you’re expecting me to say something. And that wasn’t my intention.”

His father braced his large hands on the table, fixing Jeongguk with a familiar frigid stare as he snarled, “And what exactly does it sound like I’m trying to bait you into saying?”

“Jeongnam, maybe we shouldn’t-”
Jeongguk felt himself drop his own chopsticks, unable to hold back the torrent of words that poured from his lips.

“You want me to say that I’m talking about Taehyung, my dancing, gay best friend, except he’s not actually my best friend, he’s my boyfriend, because I’m fucking gay and you’ve known it my entire life and hated me for it and there’s not a thing I can do to change it even if all I’ve ever wanted to do was make you happy and proud of me once, so I’m sorry that I’ll never be the son you wanted, but you never really expected me to anyway, because all I’ve ever done is disappoint you!”

For a moment, the only sound in the room was Jeongguk’s rapid breathing, chest moving up and down in heaves as he tried to draw air into his empty, collapsing lungs.

He felt like crying.

Pain and bitterness clawing through his chest and up his throat, threatening to suffocate him.

The silence pressed in on all sides like a blizzard, a frozen wall between him and his family that he could never undo.

He shook his head, threw his napkin down, and got to his feet. “That isn’t how I wanted to do this. And... I’m sorry.”

His father hadn’t stopped staring at him, even as his expression tightened and he forced out a painful, “I think it’s best if you leave.”

Jeongguk had never felt more torn.

He wanted to stay and try to talk this out.

But he didn’t want to make things worse.

“That’s it?” he asked softly.

Anger flickered across his father’s face, and he rose to his feet as well, chair pushed back with a loud scrape. “What do you mean That’s it? I put a roof over your head, I provide a living for you, I feed you, clothe you, give you an education, your entire life, and you come into my house, yell and curse at me at my dinner table, and decide to throw all that away with this sudden, absurd, and disgusting declaration? Yes, Jeongguk. That’s it. I don’t want you around my family. I especially don’t want you around my son.”

The blizzard roared in his ears, cold and unforgiving. And the faint glimmer of hope in his chest died.

As if he’d almost convinced himself this night could have gone differently if only he’d tried harder. Been smarter. Been better.

As if he’d ever be good enough.

“Wait, why?” Junsoo suddenly spoke up, and the fear in his voice broke Jeongguk’s heart all over again. “Why does hyung have to go, Abeoji? I don’t understand.”

“He’s not your hyung,” his father spoke harshly. “He’s an embarrassment, and an ungrateful child who’s done nothing but take his entire life.”
“Jeongnam, that’s enough,” his stepmother finally broke her silence, firmly setting her wine glass down on the table. “You’re really willing to lose your son over something like this? How does his sexuality affect your life?”

Jeongguk could only turn to her, stunned.

He wasn’t the only one.

“Excuse me?” his father spat. “You’re the last person I expected to argue with me on this. You realise he’s just saying all this to pick another fight, don’t you? To embarrass me in front of my colleagues? In front of the nation? I won’t have it.”

“The whole nation doesn’t need to know who he prefers to love,” his stepmother countered. “Why does it matter?”

“Because it’s shameful!” his father insisted. “And people will notice. They’ll notice when he doesn’t get married. They’ll notice when he doesn’t have kids.”

“So what?” she pushed. “How does that affect their lives in any way? Why would they need to know? It’s not like he’s going into politics. He doesn’t have a reputation to worry about, and even if he did, it wouldn’t matter. I know you’re not ashamed of him. I know you love him, and you’re so proud of the things he’s accomplished, but you’ll never say it because you’re so afraid of him going soft and thinking he doesn’t have to work hard anymore. As if he’d ever do anything less than what he’s doing now. Alright, so he’s gay. So what? He’s still respected, and intelligent, and popular, and in the center of the country’s most successful university basketball team. What have you lost?”

For once, his father couldn’t muster a response.

But Jeongguk murmured a quiet, “Thank you, Sae-eomma.”

Inside, his heart was pounding. She’d just defended him. Even if his father’s reaction terrified her, and could put them both on the street, she’d defended him. And…

She said he cared.

His father had cared all along.

Jeongguk wasn’t sure if he believed her.

“It’s because you look like her.”

His father’s voice was hoarse, broken.

Defeated.

Confused, Jeongguk asked, “What?”

“You look like her. That’s why I hate having you around. Because everywhere I turn it’s just her and I can’t stand it. You’re everything she was. She was smart, and compassionate, and independent. Everyone loved her, admired her, wanted to be like her, and it never went to her head once. And…it’s selfish. The way I hoped your kids would look like her too. Not because I love her. I don’t. Not anymore. Not ever again.” His father glanced at his stepmother, and a trace of relief entered his eyes at seeing no bitterness at the statement. “But I loved the things she stood for. You stand for the same things. And I wanted you to pass that on because it’s all we have left of her.”
“Oh.”

He didn’t know what else to say.

Tense, his father bit his cheek. The same way Jeongguk did.

“You’re right, of course. I’ve known since you were a kid. How could I not when you’ve been in love with Kim Taehyung since the day you met him? How could I not know when I watched my son let a boy a year younger than him boss him into holding hands, baking cookies, and breaking all his expensive toys? When I watched my son build pillow forts and listen to bubbly girl groups with an orange-haired menace on his back? When I watched my son kiss another boy, despite my best efforts to not let you fall down a path I know would only lead to suffering, and realise that I would never be able to support and understand you the way I should? I felt like a failure as a father. Like I’d done something wrong. Otherwise, you wouldn’t have turned out that way, right? But then your mother left and suddenly everything stopped. No songs. No cookies. No Kim Taehyung. And I breathed a sigh of relief. I thought you outgrew it. That it was just a phase, and you would finally be normal. But then the years dragged by and...nothing. You didn’t introduce us to any girls. You never even mentioned a girl’s name who wasn’t your calculus partner. But the last time you were here...that confirmed it for me. Hearing his name in this house, where everything was new and untouched by memories of him, made me realise that nothing had changed. You had clearly found him again, and now you’re convinced you’re in love. And if you want honesty from me, this is what I think. I think he did this to you. I think he’s always been a terrible influence. And I think he will never love you the way you think you love him. He’s manipulative, and attention-seeking, and he’s taken advantage of you most of your life. But I’m done making decisions for you. Do what you want. I don’t care how stupid and selfish your choices are anymore.”

Everything he heard just confused him more. He didn’t understand. His father had sounded almost supportive for part of that. Wrong, but making an attempt. And then he suddenly switched gears, with so much hatred and venom directed at Taehyung that Jeongguk didn’t know what to think anymore. He just wanted to have a father who supported him and the boy he’d loved for most of his life. Was it too selfish to want both?

Jeongguk had to take a shaky breath, the pressure behind his eyelids nearly unbearable. He knew he was going to cry. He just wanted to escape the room before it happened.

“I don’t think I’m in love with him. I love him, and he loves me, and that’s the way it’s always been. I’m sorry to throw a wrench in your twisted narrative, but you don’t know him. You don’t know a single thing about him. He’s always been there for me when no one else was. Especially when you weren’t. He was the only person who made me feel safe and accepted for who I was as a kid, and he still does that today. He’s selfless, and genuine, and he’s suffered so much. You have no right to try and destroy the person he really is with skewed memories and petty assumptions. You don’t know a damn thing about him. And you sure as hell don’t know anything about me if you think I’d fall in love with someone who’s anything like you just described. I want to be your son and I want to love him. That’s my choice.”

“Jeongnam, please,” his stepmother contributed, just as hushed.

The silence between them felt heavier this time.

And then his father sighed.

Long. Trembling. As though he’d been holding it for years.

“Fine, Jeongguk. That’s what you want? You have one chance to show me that you mean this. And
he has one chance to convince me he’s not the same spoiled brat he used to be. And if I don’t like what I see, you’ll have another choice to make. Your future or this supposed love of yours.”

_Spoiled brat_. Ironic coming from the millionaire politician to the impoverished stripper but Jeongguk would take what he could get. Even if he risked losing everything.

“He was never a spoiled brat to begin with, but I promise he’ll take this seriously.”

His father eyed him skeptically. “Sure. Bring him over for dinner after your semifinals game. Hopefully, we’ll have something to celebrate.”

_Yeah, no pressure._

But he knew he’d reached his limit of lucky encounters for the day, and he wasn’t about to push it.

“Thank you, Abeoji.”

His father promptly ignored him for the rest of dinner.

Once again, he and his stepmother did their best to carry the conversation. However, they were really the only two participants. Junsoo had gone oddly silent, and his father maintained his mute behaviour at the head of the table, although Jeongguk caught him staring at him in distaste more than once.

Thankfully, they finished eating not long after. Jeongguk just wanted to do the dishes, go home, and cry on Taehyung’s lap while he played with his hair and murmured to him that everything would be okay.

But as his parents disappeared and he hurried to wash the dishes, he noticed he had someone else by his side.

“Hey,” he greeted Junsoo softly. “What’s up?”

“Can I help?”

He sounded timid.

“Sure, bud. Put them in the dishwasher after I rinse them off.”

They worked in silence for a few minutes before Junsoo said, “I’m confused.”

Jeongguk glanced at him. “About what?”

“About...everything you talked about at dinner. Why was Abeoji so mad?”

He realised the topic probably had yet to come up in Junsoo’s life. And being the person to introduce him to it meant he had to speak carefully. His words would last.

“Abeoji was mad because I like boys. And a lot of the older generation think that’s wrong, even if you can’t pick who you like.”

Junsoo frowned. “What do you mean you like boys?”

Jeongguk ran a plate under the water, scrubbing as he thought about the best way to phrase it. “I’m attracted to boys. I want to kiss and hold hands with boys, but since I’m a boy, not everyone agrees with it. I never thought that made a whole lot of sense. We don’t get to choose who we love, and it
doesn’t really affect anyone else’s life but your own. Still, our society isn’t totally open to that way of thinking yet, and sometimes people look down on people like me, and it can make life hard.”

Junsoo appeared to be thinking deeply about the topic, the crease between his brow deepening. “That’s dumb,” he finally concluded. “I think Eomma’s right. Who cares?”

“Exactly,” Jeongguk agreed.

“Are you staying here tonight?” Junsoo switched topics abruptly, the diverging track of a child’s mind more than welcome at this point.

He shook his head. “I don’t think so. I don’t think Abeoji really wants me around right now and I kind of want to get back to the dorms.”

“Will you come back soon to start teaching me the guitar?”

Smiling, Jeongguk mussed up his hair. “Of course. I’ll be back next Friday. And I’ll bring a friend with me.”

Junsoo returned his broad smile, swatting his hand away from his hair. “The friend you were talking about earlier? The one you said you loved?”

“That’s right.”

“What’s he like?”

Jeongguk shut the water off, considering the best way to describe the enigma that was Kim Taehyung to an eleven-year-old.

“He’s...well, he’s a professional dancer, so he’s really hardworking. And he’s had to be strong for most of his life, so he’s not exactly warm when you’re first getting to know him, but once he opens up, he’s the sweetest guy in the world. And he’s really funny. It’s hard to not smile when you’re around him. But he’s crazy smart. He thinks about the world differently from all of us, and he’s constantly blowing my mind with the stuff he says. And I’m really lucky to have had him as a best friend for years.”

Perhaps he went on a bit of a tangent, but it’s hard not to when trying to break down Taehyung into enough pieces to understand him. He was complex, and confusing, and it’s taken Jeongguk years to even understand that much about him.

But Junsoo just continued to smile as he closed and started the dishwasher. “Wow, you really like him. I can’t wait to meet him.”

“I can’t either.” The thought of his two favourite people in the world finally meeting filled him with an inexplicable warmth. Like the two halves of his life would finally come together and seal the empty, frayed tear between them.

He dried his hands.

“Well, I guess I’m going to go grab my bag and say goodbye to Abeoji and Sae-eomma.”

Junsoo nodded. “I’m gonna go look up guitar tutorials.”

A thought came to him.

“Here. Your homework for this week is to learn all of the string names, the C chord, F chord, and
G chord. Do you think you can manage that?”

Determination set on his face. “Definitely.”

“Sweet, then when I see you next week, we’ll work on tuning and learn a basic song.”

“I’m so excited,” Junsoo mumbled, and Jeongguk could see he was already itching to race upstairs and get started.

“Go on,” he said, patting his back with a laugh.

Without waiting, Junsoo squeezed him with a quick, “Bye, hyung! Love you!” then sprinted off, taking the stairs two-at-a-time.

After giving him a head start, Jeongguk slowly followed, retrieved his bag, then came downstairs.

His parents were waiting for him in the entryway.

“Good, I was going to suggest you head home tonight anyway,” his father greeted him, warm and welcoming as ever. He looked as though his stepmother had dragged him over to the door, barely even looking at him in favour of examining every centimeter of wood and tile in the room.

Jeongguk just bit his cheek, slinging his bag over his shoulder. “Great. Let me do that, then.”

“Jeongguk, wait.” His stepmother cast his father an anxious glance before stepping forward. She pressed a soft kiss to the top of his head before whispering, “I’m proud of you. And he’ll come around eventually.”

He sincerely doubted that, but refused to be the one who dashed her hopes.

“Thanks,” he murmured.

When he caught his father’s eye and was met with little more than a cold turn of his nose, he knew that would be it for tonight.

“Thanks for having me,” he muttered a little louder, brushing past them out the door. “I’ll see you next week. Taehyung likes japchae and expensive meats.”

The door clicked shut behind him.

Maybe a little louder than he’d intended.

He hurried to his car, threw his bag in the passenger seat, started the heat, and just stared out the windshield.

Things could’ve gone worse. He knew that.

So why did he still want to cry?

With shaking hands, he did the only thing he could think to do. Only one thought came through clear in his head.
He almost broke down right then and there when Taehyung responded immediately.

❤Baby❤
i’m still at the practice studio

❤Baby❤
is everything okay?

Me
i’m not sure yet. can i come see you?

❤Baby❤
you can always come see me
jeonggukkie

❤Baby❤
pac building. room 145. there’s nobody here but me don’t worry

Me
okay. omw

His breathing came in short intakes as he pulled out of the driveway, drove through their quiet, gleaming neighbourhood, and jumped back out onto the expressway.

Everything was fine.

He would see Taehyung soon.
He was overreacting.

His stepmother was proud of him. Taehyung was proud of him. His brother didn’t hate him.

His father was giving him a chance. And even if he gave it through gritted teeth and painful side-eyes, it was a chance nonetheless. One Jeongguk couldn’t afford to mess up.

It was only as he got into the midst of traffic that he realised it was raining, droplets reflecting jewelled tears of traffic lights on his windshield. Taehyung would find it beautiful, probably propose some philosophical thought to him about the relevance of a single raindrop and whether the colour it took on meant something. As of right now, Jeongguk regrettably found it annoying. He’d apologise later. To whom exactly, he wasn’t sure. With a twinge of guilt, he flicked his windshield wipers on and sighed.

The night already felt far too long.

Bright lights still glowed from the campus’ Performing Arts Center building by the time he parked outside. Dance majors were insane, and it wasn’t uncommon to see students rushing in and out of those double doors in the middle of the night.

As it was, the parking lot stood mostly deserted tonight. He couldn’t spot Taehyung’s shitty little sedan, which meant he must’ve walked over here. At least he could give his boyfriend a ride home. At least he was good for that much.

Jeongguk turned his engine off and stepped out into the night, tugging his jacket a little closer around himself as he headed towards the doors. They let out a lonely creak as he pushed them open, his heavy boots sending loud echoes with every step he took down the sleek tiled hall. He’d only ever been in this building for his Gender Performance class sophomore year and last week when he accompanied Taehyung to his meeting with Coach Hwang.

He kept his eyes on the right side of the hall, where the odd-numbered practice rooms stretched long and vacant.

141.

143.

Ah, there it was.

145.

Although, he probably would’ve been able to identify the correct room from the lofi beat slipping through the cracked door.

Momentarily distracted, Jeongguk peered inside.

The lighting was dim, more of an amber glow reflecting in every direction than anything else. Taehyung had his back to him, facing the large, impartial mirror. His hair was pushed back with a red bandana, and he wore a large black pullover that flew in the air every time he moved quickly, and a pair of black sweatpants Jeongguk would bet money had belonged to him at some point. Loose strands of hair escaped the bandana’s hold and stuck to his perspiring forehead, and Jeongguk watched as Taehyung let out a particularly unflattering groan of despair and restarted the track, hissing as he stumbled over a move right at the start.

And yet, Jeongguk had never found him more beautiful. Bare-faced, sweaty, underdressed, and
irritated, he still thought Taehyung was the most stunning person he’d ever met, and definitely the most stunning person he would ever meet. He found himself getting caught up in the way Taehyung moved, fluid sweeps of his arms and complex twists of his feet matching the slow, calming beat pouring through the overhead speakers. Even when Taehyung dropped down, popping his chest before swaying back up, he still moved with grace. His brow furrowed in concentration, tongue poking out faintly between his lips.

Finally, he figured if he didn’t say anything now, his behaviour would border on stalkerish.

“Hey,” he said softly from the doorway.

Taehyung glanced up, catching his eye in the mirror. “Oh.” And then he glanced at himself, and rushed to fix his hair, smooth his clothes, and wipe the sweat from his skin. “I- um. Sorry, I got caught up in it and lost track of time. I-” He turned to face him, and some of the initial embarrassment on his face seemed to melt. “Hey.” Taking a couple steps, Taehyung located a towel and his water bottle, and asked, “How long were you watching?”

He sounded almost nervous.

“For a few minutes. You’re incredible, you know? I couldn’t take my eyes off you. But…” His nose crinkled as his lips curved into a mischievous smile, “I couldn’t help but notice that you seemed frustrated.”

Taehyung dabbed at his forehead and neck, took a large draught of water, then glared at him. “I am frustrated. Lofi is literally the worst to dance to.”

“Then why exactly are you doing it?”

“My assignment in contemporary is to compose a routine to a lofi song and present it next Wednesday. And I’ve decided that I hate it,” he explained, leaning against the mirror with his eyes shut. “Which sucks because I love lofi. But I’m having to seriously reconsider our relationship.”

Jeongguk frowned. “Don’t say shit like that around me, it scares me. I’m fragile.”

“I know, my poor, fragile baby,” Taehyung cooed. “I’m not reconsidering anything about our relationship.” And then he slowly blinked his eyes open, watching Jeongguk from where he still rested against the mirror. “Speaking of, are you okay? I was worried when you texted.”

He shrugged. “I think so? I-” Where to start?

Thankfully, Taehyung always knew what he needed.

“I’m kind of sweaty and gross but if you want, we can sit and talk about it?”

Jeongguk just nodded and went to sit by him, smiling in spite of his heartache as he watched Taehyung shimmy down the mirror into a sitting position.

He tugged at Taehyung’s legs. “I wanna put my head on your squishy thighs.”

“Okay, first of all,” Taehyung said as he straightened his legs out for Jeongguk to lay down on. “Fuck you, I work hard to get muscular and strong but my body absolutely refuses to cooperate.” Jeongguk laughed, poking his soft stomach for emphasis. “And second of all,” Taehyung continued, swatting his hand away. “You’re really fucking cute, Jeon Jeongguk, you know that?”

“I’m fucking adorable, and I’m glad you’re finally picking up on it,” he agreed with a toothy grin.
Taehyung rolled his eyes. “I picked up on it when I was seven, actually, but nice try.”

“I miss being seven,” he confessed. “Everything seemed so much simpler back then.”

“That’s because things were simpler,” Taehyung pointed out. And then with a concerned frown, Taehyung carded a hand through Jeongguk’s hair, slender fingers curling around long strands. “Tell me what happened, hyung, I can see it on your mind.”

“It wasn’t even that bad,” Jeongguk whispered after a beat of silence. “I just...I had expected things to be so much worse, and obviously they weren’t great, but he already knew. He was angry at first. Accused me of wanting to humiliate him and our family in front of the whole country. As if most of his coworkers know I exist. So we argued, and it got loud and volatile, but then my stepmother interrupted and I think she calmed him down? I couldn’t tell. I was shaking, and on the verge of breaking down, but he seemed to ease up a little after that. Told me how he’d known since I was little. And…” Jeongguk felt a wall of frustration well up behind his eyes, torn between wanting to shout and wanting to cry. “He kept blaming you. That’s what made me really angry. He kept acting like you somehow did this to me. He called you manipulative and selfish, and I hated it. I hated every second of it, because you’re not like that, and I love you, and he knows I love you, and he refuses to just let that be. I don’t understand why he has to care so damn much.”

“So I take it we won’t be having any dramatic family reunions then?” Taehyung’s words may have sounded flippant and uncaring, but his hands told a different story, caressing Jeongguk’s hair gently to calm him down, the press of Taehyung’s thighs to his cheeks a constant reminder that he was solid; tangible and real. And all his. Each other’s. To trust, and to take care of.

“Oh no, we’ll be having one. Like I said, Sae-eomma vouched for me. I get one chance. Or I guess, we get one chance to prove we’re serious. That I’m serious, and I’m not just suddenly doing this to piss him off or whatever.”

Taehyung leaned down to kiss his forehead. “You tell me when and where, baby, and I’ll show up ready to kick his ass.”

He was cute when he tried to coddle him.

Jeongguk just rolled his eyes, saying, “Maybe no ass-kicking since we’re trying to be nice? And um, okay this is in no way meant to be taken as criticism because I love you exactly the way you are in everything you do, but...could you maybe...just for that one night...be less...?”

Taehyung shot him a sharp glance, hand stilling in his hair. “Less what, Jeongguk?” But when Jeongguk couldn’t muster a response, Taehyung still pushed it. “What, are you expecting me to show up in heels and fishnets, with my manicure freshly retouched and a Versace clutch in my hand? Maybe a thick choker while I’m at it, and glitter pasties on my nipples? I’m not going to fucking act like I do when I’m on the clock, Jeongguk. And I’m kind of offended you think I’d do that to you. As if I’d parade around like a fucking fairy,” Taehyung said, spitting out his father’s favourite insult towards him, “on the single night I get to finally prove to him that you’re right in loving whoever you want. So yes, Jeongguk, I’ll be less. I wouldn’t want to embarrass you.”

No, fuck, this was all wrong.

Jeongguk straightened up, pleading with his eyes for Taehyung to look at him.

“No, Taehyung, baby, that’s not what I meant.” All he received was a daring arched eyebrow. “Okay, fine, maybe that’s a little bit what I meant. But I know you wouldn’t do that and it was stupid of me to say it anyway. I’m just so terrified of screwing this up, and that has literally nothing
to do with you, it’s all on me, okay? I’m sorry.”

With a sigh, Taehyung relaxed and took his hand. “It’s fine, Jeongguk. I overreacted. It was just...sort of a triggered reflex for me, you know? This isn’t all on you. This is on us. I’ve got your back, whatever you need, you just tell me. I’m sorry I got mad.”

Jeongguk rested his chin on Taehyung’s shoulder. “I’m sorry I made you mad.”

Taehyung glanced down at him, a fond smile emerging on his lips. “Kiss me and then fill me in on the rest of this plan before work?”

Work. Right. Taehyung still had a six hour shift where he would go get high and grind on strangers all night.

“You’re going to be safe tonight, right?” Jeongguk burst out before he could stop himself.

“Of course. I’m trying really hard lately, you know that.”

“I just…” Jeongguk bit down on his lip. “I worry. Especially because...well, what if you got addicted?”

Taehyung blinked. “What?”

“I know you mostly do ecstasy, and hallucinogens and stimulants aren’t as addictive as other stuff, but I also know you’ve mentioned coke and I just...worry sometimes.”

He didn’t think they’d be having this conversation now. He’d planned to wait it out, see the effects after Taehyung quit his job to make sure he didn’t go through any withdrawals.

But of course, he had to say something.

“I’m not addicted, Jeongguk,” Taehyung said softly. “I don’t...I’m not dependent on anything. I can function fine, better, when I’m not high. Okay? Don’t worry about it.”

Jeongguk nodded. It was a stupid thing to bring up.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Taehyung kissed his forehead again before slinging a leg over his thighs, bringing himself on top of Jeongguk to straddle him. “I like when you worry about me. It means you care. It’s sweet.”

“I care a lot,” Jeongguk murmured, stroking Taehyung’s cheek with his thumb before cupping his jaw.

“I know.” Something gentle shined in Taehyung’s eyes, something only Jeongguk got to see. “I care, too. And I want everything to go perfectly with your family. When is it?”

“Next Friday. After the game.”

“No pressure,” Taehyung said with a light chuckle. “Sorry, baby.”

Jeongguk shrugged. “Just more reason to win, I guess. At least you’ll be there.”

“I’ll be on the bench,” he reminded him.
He squished Taehyung’s cheeks, enjoying the way his eyes narrowed in irritation. “You’ll be the best benchwarmer there ever was. And the cutest.”

“You’re a dick.”

Jeongguk raised his eyebrows, waiting. “But?”

Taehyung sighed. “But I love you.”

“Love you too.” He kissed his nose. And then smiled as Taehyung tilted his head, catching his lips in a real kiss, soft and sweet. The same slim fingers that had been carding through his hair curled in the fabric of his jacket, pulling him closer.

“Love the leather, Jeon,” Taehyung informed him, sliding his lips along his jaw.

“Well, since someone’s wearing all my clothes, I had to look for something else.”

Taehyung just smiled. “I haven’t the slightest idea what you’re talking about.”

Jeongguk pinched his hip, earning a small indignant squeak from Taehyung.

“You’re a brat.”

“You love it.”

As Jeongguk sought his lips again, tasting his sweat and cherry lip balm, he admitted to himself that he really did love it. Taehyung had once said something about him not being able to resist a challenge, and he realised that Taehyung himself was probably the biggest challenge he’d ever face. And he loved every minute he got to spend going head to head with the love of his life, able to match him word for word no matter what they did.

After all, they’d always both been extremely competitive.

But through each other, they’d learned how to win and lose graciously. More importantly, they’d learned that not all competitions were meant to be won.

Sometimes there was more joy in losing.

…

Anxiety flooded his senses, but thankfully it was the good kind. The kind that pumped his veins full of adrenaline, made him fast in his planning, and even faster on his feet. He needed that surge of nerves to push him towards the basket, keep a close eye on his teammates, and a close guard on his opponents.

Taking a breath to steady himself, Jeongguk slid his t-shirt off and exchanged it for his white jersey. Old bloodstains from last year’s semifinal match were barely visible just under the red collar, and the red 05 emblazoned on his back filled him with pride.

He could do this.

They could do this.

His teammates surrounded him, joking around, tossing water bottles back and forth, filling the air
with spray-on deodorant and casual locker room talk. Not their locker room since this game was at Hongik University, but locker room nonetheless.

“No, Seokjin, baby,” Namjoon was trying to appeal to his boyfriend, pressing a water bottle into his hands. “I told you, I’m sorry about the pancake thing.”

Seokjin just glared at him. “I spend my break between lectures making you your favourite pancake recipe, the one you swore were the best in the world, and you came home and didn’t even look at them! Just grabbed your bag, turned right around, and left!”

Jeongguk chuckled as he watched Namjoon tug a pouting Seokjin close, swearing over and over again that he didn’t even see him or the pancakes because he was in such a hurry to get to some meeting with his Literature professor, and eventually, Seokjin’s pout melted and he gave in.

They still had half an hour before Coach Yun’s pre-game talk, so they were all just milling about, high on each other’s energy.

“Feels crazy to be here again, huh?” Yugyeom said, slinging an arm over his shoulder.

“I’d be pissed if we weren’t here,” he replied with a laugh. “Although, this season has felt different. Less like I’m just living to play, y’know?”

Yugyeom waggled his eyebrows. “Oh we all know what you’re living to do now, Jeon.”

Jeongguk swatted him across the chest. “Oh, shut up. That’s not even close to what I was talking about, dude.”

“C’mon, you know I’m kidding.” Yugyeom ruffled his hair fondly, and Jeongguk had to smooth it down, grumbling the whole time. “You know you’ve gotta tie this up, right? Yun and the ref will be all over your ass if it’s down.”

Jeongguk glanced down at his phone. “Tae’s gonna come put it up for me because I’m apparently incapable of tying a respectable bun.”

“He’s not wrong,” Yugyeom snickered. “Everytime you put it up it looks like you got in a fight with a badger.”

“Rude! My buns look fantastic, thank you very much.”

“Mm, yes they do,” Jeongguk heard a voice which undoubtedly belonged to Taehyung purr before someone was suddenly groping his ass.

Jeongguk whirled around, a smirk on his lips as he backed Taehyung up into his locker. He looked fantastic in tight black pants with black shorts layered over, a matching long sleeve, and Jeongguk’s red jersey on top. Once again, seeing his number, especially on Taehyung, filled him with a sense of pride. “Didn’t see you come in.”

“Now that’s rude,” Taehyung remarked, resting a hand on his shoulder as he let Jeongguk cage him in. “Didn’t I tell you that you weren’t allowed to take your eyes off of me?”

“That was two months ago, baby.”

“Doesn’t make it any less true.” Taehyung’s fingers toyed with the ends of his hair.

“Okay, literally no one wants to watch you two fuck in the middle of the locker room,” Yoongi
interrupted from where he sat on a metal bench. “We’re trying to get ready for a game here.”

Jeongguk rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly, releasing Taehyung. “Sorry, hyung.”

“Speak for yourself, I was getting the popcorn,” Chanyeol commented. Even Bogum rolled his eyes, a smile on his face. Minho just turned his back to them, shuffling in his bag for something while Mingyu made a comment to Youngjae.

Whatever. He knew not everyone on his team would be thrilled about their relationship, but he just couldn’t find it within himself to care all that much.

Taehyung gripped his shoulders and turned him around to have better access to his hair, already slipping a black hair tie off his wrist. “Can you make yourself a little shorter for a second?”

“Like, on my knees short, or…?” He ignored the snicker Yugyeom gave at that.

“Here, wait, sit.” Taehyung pushed him gently over to a bench where Jeongguk did as he asked, understanding once Taehyung kneeled on the bench beside him. “That’s better. Tell me if I pull too hard.”

“Yes, sir.” As soon as Taehyung’s fingers touched his hair, Jeongguk let out a sharp, “Ouch!”

“Ah, sorry, sorry!” Taehyung apologised profusely, kissing the top of his head. “Did my rings catch you? Let me take them off.”

He tried to suppress the laughter bubbling in his throat. “No, Tae, I was kidding.”

“Oh.” And then Taehyung smacked him upside the head. Not enough to hurt, but enough to get his scolding across. “You’re so mean! I thought I actually hurt you! Dumbass, don’t scare me. More importantly, don’t make me apologise to you just for the hell of it. I’ve got a reputation to maintain.”

“But you’re cute when you’re saying sorry.”

“Shut up,” Taehyung muttered, going back to work on his hair. “I hate you.”

“And they’re back at it again.” Yugyeom had clearly taken it upon himself to narrate their interaction, to which Jeongguk could only flash him his middle finger.

They were definitely not back at it again.

“Say you love me.”

“No, you’re mean to me.”

“C’mon, Tae, say it.”

“Nuh uh.”

“Say it,” Jeongguk insisted.

“Meanie. Jeongguk’s a meanie.”

“Tae…” he whined.

“Ugh, fine.” Jeongguk felt as Taehyung twisted his hair up, then slid the tie into place, twisting it
twice before securing it. “I love you. And you’re all set.”

Jeongguk turned, catching him in a quick kiss. “Love you, too. Thanks for doing my hair, baby.”

“‘Course,” Taehyung said, voice going soft like it always did when he actually accepted someone’s gratitude. “I’ll see you on the court. Kick some ass, golden boy.”

“Just for you,” he teased, waving him out of the locker room.

Taehyung gave his sentiments to the rest of the team, then disappeared, leaving him with none of his anxiety and all of his adrenaline.

They were going to kill this game.

“That was so adorable, I think I may vomit,” Seokjin declared, plopping down beside him.

“Now you finally know how it feels,” he retorted.

Namjoon looped an arm around Seokjin’s waist. “Let them be, hyung, they’re young and in love.”

Thankfully, their coach chose that moment to step into the locker room, effectively capturing the attention of the entire team.

“Alright, SNU, listen up!”

All heads turned to the short stocky man in basketball shorts and a grey t-shirt, whistle gleaming from his neck.

“This is it! Semifinals! We win this, we’re on to the championship game! Let me hear who wants it!”

“We want it!” the entire team roared.

“Louder!”

“We want it!”

“Good.” Coach Yun looked satisfied, clipboard tucked under his arm. “You’ve got one match today against Hongik. I know, I know, they’ve been our rivals from the start. Our art program, our architecture program, and even basketball now. So, what are we gonna do? We’re gonna show them their place once and for all, that’s what we’re gonna do. You hear me?”

“Yes, Coach!” rang out in the Hongik locker room.

“Their team is solid, but not nearly as dynamic as ours. All their players are built the same, tall and lanky. The trick is getting our shorter, faster players past them. Yoongi, Jeongguk, and Seokjin, you all need to be at the top of your game today, understand?”

He did not like being singled out alongside Yoongi as one of their shortest players. Yoongi was tiny. His tiny hyung.

Nevertheless, he called out a “Yes, Coach!” with both of his hyungs.

“Today, I need you guys to focus on defence. It’s what we’ve been practising for the past two weeks, and if I don’t see results, you’re running laps outside.”
“Yes Coach!”

Well that sounded miserable. And the worst part was, Jeongguk knew he wasn’t joking. Then again, if they lost this game, he’d be upset about a lot more than freezing his ass off on the outside track. He would have a wrathful father to face, and that sounded far more unpleasant than a couple icy laps.

“With that said, and not to get sappy right before we hit the court, but I’m proud of each and every one of you. You’ve all grown so much this season, and I can’t wait to watch you take this all the way to the championship.”

Coach Yun’s watch beeped.

“Alright, that’s time. Let’s get out there and show them what we’re made of! I want to see flawless shots, every time. At least fifty each before warmups end! Remember to scope out the competition, but don’t pay too much attention to them. All that matters is how you play today. Leave everything else behind in here. You hear?”

“Yes, Coach!”

“Yes, Coach!”

“Then stop wasting time out here and go!”

The adrenaline was racing through him then, a grin on his face as he jogged after his teammates onto the court. Blood rushed in his ears, drowning out the deafening screams and hollers of the stands. Stadium lights shone down on his face, and he basked in it, never feeling more at home. This was where he belonged. He felt the same way about the court as he did when he held a camera in his hands.

And of course…

He glanced toward the visitors side of the stands, smile growing as he spotted Taehyung on the bench, drilling his team on warmups. He’d promised Hwang he wouldn’t move, but he was clearly taking every liberty he could with that order, watching in satisfaction as his team went through dynamic and static stretches.

Having Taehyung here really did motivate him to do better. Work harder. Prove himself.

He’d missed him.

Warmups flew by in a blur of running, jumping, tossing, and passing. Just catch, dribble, shoot, rebound, pass, over and over again in a loop until the ref blew his whistle and both teams met with their coaches one last time before gathering on the court.

The Hongik team were exactly as his coach described: tall, thin, and toned. But if he compared by looking at Mingyu, most of them maxed out at six feet, whereas their team had several players six and over. Not a whole lot of good that did them if they didn’t play well, but it at least assuaged his fears a little. They didn’t look too mean, either. Determined, yes. But no cruelty or desperation shone in their eyes, which meant the game should be clean.

Excitement coursed through him.

Even if it had only been a couple weeks, it felt like months had passed since he last played a game. Time moved in strange ways lately.

Speaking of, the ref blew his whistle once more, tossed the ball, and suddenly they were off.
Mingyu got it at once, taking off down the court, side-stepping the defensive wall the Hongik team hastily constructed. His dribbles were low and fast, easily throwing off any stealing attempts. Still, Jeongguk raced after, guarding anyone who tried to get in his way.

As soon as Mingyu’s toes touched the three-point line, he tossed, a smooth, flawless arc that landed the ball directly through the basket. The ref blew his whistle and they all hustled back to half.

Most of the first half continued in much of the same manner. Hongik scored four times, managing an admittedly impressive throw from a meter or so away from the three-point line. The first period ended with them at 24:20 SNU, while they pushed to widen the gap in the second, with a score of 45:38 called at half.

“Bring it in!” Coach Yun called, beckoning them towards the bench. “Looking good out there, guys,” he greeted them, handing over water bottles. “Namjoon, I want you in for third, you’re looking great. Yoongi, absolutely flawless on defence during second, I’m gonna put both you and Minho on for third because they’re starting, and you know they always come back with a vengeance during third. Jeongguk, I want you to sub out for this one.” He opened his mouth to protest, but his coach cut him off. “Don’t worry, you’re going back out for fourth, but this time is gonna be all about our defensive line. Chanyeol, you’re going in with Yugyeom.”

“Yes, Coach,” they all agreed.

“This time is yours,” Coach Yun finished. “Hydrate, stretch, watch the dance team.” And then he glared at Jeongguk. “But not too closely, you hear me, Jeon?”

He grinned. “Yes, Coach.”

He had absolutely no intention of following that order.

And the routine Taehyung had put together was breathtaking. Fast-paced, high stakes, with plenty of flips and spins.

But Jeongguk couldn’t even bring himself to watch, instead solely focused on his boyfriend, who sat dutifully on his bench looking torn between misery and pride. Miserable, because he couldn’t dance. Proud, because he got to watch his teammates perform in a stadium away from their own, doing moves and combinations that he put together. Jeongguk could see him mouthing counts off, wincing whenever someone’s footing was even remotely off beat, but beneath all the criticism was an underlying joy, visible in the lifted corners of his lips and the lights in his brown eyes.

This was Taehyung’s favourite place to be, too.

His teammates made plenty of sarcastic comments and kissy faces when he stood up at the end of their routine, giving them the standing ovation they deserved. Hongik’s cheer team had the winter season, so they took the court next, but Jeongguk wasn’t paying them any attention as he stood and picked his way over to the dance team’s benches.

“Incredible, guys,” he caught Taehyung saying as he greeted his dancers making their way off the court. “I’m so proud of you. That was good enough to take to competition, really. Not that we will. I’ve got something special planned for that, but this was really, really good.”

“I can’t believe you made me end in splits,” Jimin complained. “I thought I was going to rip my pants holding the ending pose.”

Taehyung just rolled his eyes. “You looked good and your ass stayed in your pants. Although, I bet
if they did rip, our ratings would’ve gone through the roof.”

“You’re damn right they would’ve,” Jimin affirmed with a mollified nod. “Especially seeing what I put on underneath as a victory or consolation prize for Yoongi.”

Hoseok laughed, sliding a hand in his boyfriend’s back pocket. “Nice, babe.”

Taehyung wrinkled his nose. “You guys are fucking nasty.”

Jeongguk figured that was his cue to step in.

“Hi, baby,” he greeted him, mimicking Hoseok and slipping his hand into Taehyung’s back pocket, giving his ass a light squeeze.

“I take it back, everyone’s nasty,” Taehyung decided, but made no effort to move. “Also, if one of the cameras catches you, the media will eat you up. You know they air these games. Stop groping me.”

Jeongguk let out a sigh, but removed his hand. “Your routine was great. Both of you were perfect,” he informed Jimin and Hoseok. “You, on the other hand,” he turned to his boyfriend, “looked like you were chanting violent incantations under your breath the whole time.”

“I was counting!” Taehyung exclaimed, indignant.

“Sure, Taehyungie,” Jimin said. “We all know you were cursing us. It’s okay, really, we’d look good even with tails growing out our asses.”

“Oh, honey, if I were to curse you, it wouldn’t be no simple tail-out-the-ass curse,” Taehyung replied with a cheerful smile.

He was scary sometimes.

“Okay, well, I just came over to say hi,” Jeongguk hurriedly excused himself. “I’m gonna go now. Yun wants me out for third, so I’m gonna down about three bottles of water until fourth starts. Love you!”

“Love you!” Taehyung said with a wave. “You’re killing it baby, keep it up!”

Jeongguk saluted him, heading back to his team.

Now he understood why Seokjin, Bogum, and Minho always headed over there during halftime. Talking to Taehyung felt like an immediate energy boost. He suddenly felt refreshed and eager to get back on the court.

Which was why he was bummed when the whistle blew and he found himself stuck on the bench. He wanted to be out there, playing, helping his team take this home. Not that they needed him at the moment. Namjoon, Yoongi, Chanyeol, Minho, and Yugyeom were doing just fine. They kept Hongik from scoring in the first five minutes, while they got eight points in before the end of the period. When the ref’s whistle blew again, the score stood at 53:43 with SNU still in the lead.

When his team came back on, Coach Yun spent the last two-minute break telling them to keep their minds on defence, and organising their final lineup for the game. Bogum, Jeonghan, Sungjae, Seokjin, and him, thank god.

Jeongguk practically flew onto the court, itching to play. A Hongik player with the number 15
printed in gold on his blue jersey tried to stare him down, but Jeongguk just gave him a polite smile. It would take more than a little eye contact to intimidate him. He was dating Kim Taehyung.

Unfortunately, the ball tipped in Hongik’s favour, and he had to race after the guy who’d attempted to scare him off, guarding him closely. The Hongik player with the ball, number 20, apparently underestimated Jeongguk and passed to 15. Internally scolding his carelessness, Jeongguk jumped effortlessly, snatching the ball out of the air before running back down the court, pounding footfalls tailing him. A cacophony of noises tried to distract him, calls of location, yelling of names, cheering from the stands- but he couldn’t lose focus. He had a choice to make. He could pass or he could shoot. He didn’t have much time, number 20 already bearing up on his right.

Which made it nearly impossible to pass. None of his teammates were positioned on his left.

Fuck.

Jeongguk wasn’t a forward or center. He didn’t shoot. Not usually. His job was to run, rebound, and steal.

But he didn’t have much of a choice.

Gathering his strength in his legs, he zeroed in on the red square marking the backboard and shot. The ball hit the rim.

Then swivelled and sank into the hoop.

Yes! he internally shouted, gladly returning Bogum’s high five.

The fourth period ended as quickly as it had begun, with a perfectly celebratable score of 66:54.

They had won.

They were in the championship.

His teammates swarmed each other on the sidelines, hollering louder than the stands, clapping each other’s backs and praising their plays. Coach Yun puffed out his chest, proud as he shook hands with the Hongik coach. Jeongguk felt a brief pang of sympathy for their team as they exchanged respectful good sportsmanship displays. It always sucked to lose on your home turf.

After they finished sending off the other team, they rushed back into the locker room, adrenaline still pumping through all of their veins.

“Did you see Yoonoh’s rebounds during second though?” Chanyeol exclaimed from the showers. “Fucking magic. Dude was like tossing every shot that missed back in the basket like he was cleaning up laundry. Easiest shit in the world.”

Jeongguk agreed along with the rest of the team, surprised when his phone vibrated in his locker.

When he pulled it out, a single text glowed on his lockscreen, which had recently become a picture of Taehyung cuddling Yeontan on his sunroom sofa.

❤️Baby❤️

wait for me in the locker room?
Curious, Jeongguk sent him back a quick confirmation.

“Five minutes off the court and Jeon’s already on his phone,” Mingyu commented, pulling snickers from his teammates. “Wonder who he’s texting.”

“Oh sorry.” Jeongguk put his phone down, flashing Mingyu a smile. “It was your mom, scheduling her next dick appointment.”

The chorus of “Oh, shit!” and whistles that followed didn’t exactly instill him with pride but Mingyu laughed, so he figured they were still chill. They’d been walking that line for a while.

“You’re hanging out with Taehyung too much,” Yugyeom remarked, drying his forehead with his jersey. “That was a line straight out of his mouth.”

“I have yet to find the line of too much with Taehyung,” Jeongguk replied honestly.

Yugyeom shook his head with a chuckle. “I always knew you guys would end up like this. I think we’re all gonna go get drinks, you coming?”

“Nah, I’ve gotta do dinner with my family.”

“Dude, lame, but also, I totally get it. Don’t worry, I’ll probably drunk text you.”

Reassured, Jeongguk said easily, “Better me than some ex. Try not to drink too much, Gyeomie.”

“You’re no fun,” Yugyeom responded with a pout. “But I’ll try my best. You chilling here or…?”

“Tae’s meeting me here,” he explained. “We’re going together.”

“Oh, meeting the parents. Except they’ve kind of already met, but whatever. Good luck!”

“Thanks, we’re gonna need it.”

Yugyeom shot him a sympathetic look before hauling his bag over his shoulder and heading out with the rest of the team, leaving him alone in the locker room.

Jeongguk sighed. He felt sweaty all over, and he was finally coming down from his adrenaline high, so more than anything, he just wanted to shower and take a nap, but he couldn’t do either of those things.

“You look beat,” Taehyung’s soothing baritone remarked from the doorway.

“Exhausted, actually, but thanks for noticing,” he answered with a weak smile, leaning against the bank of lockers.

“You were fantastic, Jeongguk.” Taehyung slipped over to his side, kneading his sore bicep. “And look, now you’re in the top two teams in the country. For the second year running. That’s gotta feel good.”

“It feels incredible,” he admitted, talking both about the championship and Taehyung’s fingers delicately working his muscles.
He must’ve noticed the change in his expression because Taehyung started tugging him over to the showers. “C’mon, get naked and I’ll massage you in the shower. I brought my body wash so you would smell pretty.”

“I don’t deserve you,” Jeongguk sighed as he yanked his jersey over his head, tossing it on the bench.

Taehyung rummaged around in his bag. “Don’t be stupid. Also that’s my line. If you’re going to say it, commit to it and spout some self-deprecating bullshit after.”

“I think I’m too tired for that.”

When Taehyung turned back to him, he had a bottle of vanilla body wash in hand. “Poor baby.” Then his gaze travelled down Jeongguk’s body, and it was his turn to sigh. “When I said get naked, I meant get naked. Not get half naked and stare at me with your shorts still on.” Without giving him a chance to do it himself, Taehyung grabbed the waistband of his shorts and boxers and pulled, exposing him to the cool locker room air. He didn’t even pause to look as he marched over to the showers, turning on the water, occasionally checking the temperature until he deemed it suitable for Jeongguk.

“I think I’m in love with you,” he finally brought himself around enough to say, dumbfounded by Taehyung’s sheer nurturing capabilities.

“My, my, we’re doing a lot of thinking today, aren’t we?” Taehyung mused, leading him by a careful hold on his wrist over to the spray of water.

Jeongguk could feel himself immediately relax as the warm water hit his skin, soothing over his aching muscles. He barely noticed when Taehyung discarded his own clothes and joined him under the shower. Fingers tugged at his hair until the hair tie was pulled free and his long locks cascaded from their tight hold. The flick of a bottle cap echoed off the tiles and another sigh was pulled from his lips as Taehyung massaged strawberry scented shampoo into his scalp. He could feel his body pressed up against his own, but if anything, the skin-on-skin contact just calmed him more.

“Nothing felt better than having Taehyung close.”

“Tilt your head back for me, Jeonggukkie,” Taehyung murmured in his ear.

He did as he was told, allowing Taehyung to scrub the bubbles from his hair, surprised to feel the cool metal edges of his rings scrape ever so slightly against his skin.

Blood quickly replaced the adrenaline that had been coursing through him earlier, now laced with something headier, and he felt his cock stir with interest at each press of Taehyung’s lips to his skin.

Jeongguk willed his boner away to no avail, arousal only heightened when Taehyung began rubbing sweet vanilla body wash all over him, and finally, Jeongguk could see his fingers, glistening red gems and thick silver bands winking up at him from every inch of his body that Taehyung touched.
He watched as Taehyung, whose forehead was currently pressed into Jeongguk’s shoulder, ran his fingers down his sides and over his stomach, spending plenty of time lathering up his abs before trailing lower.

And then, Taehyung brushed his ring-clad fingers against his cock and stilled immediately the second Jeongguk let out a low moan.

“Babe...you’re hard.”

“I fucking noticed, thank you, Taehyung.”

“This was supposed to be nice,” his boyfriend pointed out, but his words paired poorly with his actions, as he wrapped his hand around Jeongguk’s swollen cock. He had to bite his lip to keep himself from letting out another embarrassing moan, Taehyung pumping him with slow, languid movements. With every stroke, Jeongguk could feel the cool metal just barely pressing into his flushed skin.

“It’s your fucking rings,” he confessed, trying not to lean all his body weight on his boyfriend.

“Oh.” Trickles of water trailed down his back as Taehyung ducked his head, pressing hot, wet kisses between his shoulder blades. “I didn’t know you liked them that much.”

“I didn’t either.” The words came out breathless, hitched at the end when Taehyung dug his thumb into his slit, flicking over the head before picking up his pace.

“Guess we’ll just need to take care of this first, then.”

“Tae…” he practically whined, fucking into the tight circle his hand made.

“What? This is all you’re getting. I’m not getting on my knees in a public shower, and I’m sure as hell not letting you fuck me in a public shower. Now either use my hand like a good boy or let me finish cleaning you up in peace.”

Oh.

So that’s what it sounded like when Taehyung got dominant.

He knew that, on a normal day when he wasn’t exhausted and drained after a game, he wouldn’t let Taehyung talk to him like that. He’d spin him around, push him against the wall, and make him take it back. But right now, Taehyung was taking care of him and it felt nice.

So, he let it slide, in more ways than one.

With Taehyung’s hand still coated in sweet smelling body wash, everything felt hot and slick, and for once, he simply took what Taehyung gave him, moaning as he tightened his grip, creating the perfect hole for Jeongguk to thrust his hips into. Not nearly as perfect as Taehyung’s ass or mouth, but he’d already been reminded that he was in no position to be picky, and he didn’t feel like receiving another scolding.

“Just relax, hyung,” Taehyung hummed, lips now trailing their way from his shoulder up his neck. Another broken sigh was wrestled from him as Taehyung began sucking hickeys wherever he could reach while keeping up the pace of his hand, marking and jerking him off in succession.

“No- fuck, Tae- we...we have to see my family after this. N-nothing permanent,” he tried to get out between desperate pants.
He felt teeth tease the skin just over his pulse point before Taehyung opted for his tongue instead, swirling water in tantalising patterns. Of course, he lived to watch Jeongguk suffer, and simply teasing him with his mouth would never be enough. Jeongguk’s breath hitched as he felt blunt nails rake ever so lightly along the sensitive skin of his cock, Taehyung’s rings pressing harder now.

“Fuck, please, just like that,” he pleaded, the extra stimulation providing a layer of heat to their exchange. He knew he wouldn’t last. Not with Taehyung working his mouth on him in rhythm with his hand, the flash of his rings in the cascading water an oddly erotic sight. A single large ruby (or knockoff ruby, knowing Taehyung) gleamed under the faint light just as Taehyung twisted his wrist, stroking him faster. Jeongguk could feel the knot in his abdomen coming undone, hot and fast, as he gasped, “Fuck, Tae-”

“Shh.” Taehyung gripped his head with his palm, diverting each spurt of come directly into the stream of water and down the drain.

Jeongguk dropped his head back on Taehyung’s shoulder, eyes falling shut while he caught his breath. He felt as Taehyung’s hands wandered back up from his softening cock, heard him squeeze more body wash into his palm before returning to massage down his aching thighs and calves.

“That...was not how I was expecting this to go. Um, sorry,” he finally mustered enough energy to say.

“Don’t apologise. I told you that I wanted you to relax, and nothing is more relaxing than an orgasm,” Taehyung replied cheerfully. “So,” he said as he turned the water off and fetched Jeongguk’s towel, drying every inch of him. “My rings?”

“I don’t even know,” Jeongguk admitted, taking the towel from him to return the favour. He took his time cleaning every drop of water from Taehyung’s skin, admiring the way he practically glowed golden, droplets looking like little crystals against his skin. “I think it was just hot...you know, how you took everything else off but kept the rings on. Or maybe it’s just your fingers. Your hands are pretty.”

“You’re sweet,” Taehyung decided, a content hum escaping him as Jeongguk finished drying him off. He gathered his toiletries, drying them as well before returning them to his bag. “Thanks for letting me do that.”

Surprised, Jeongguk said, “Um, no problem? Thanks for doing it.”

“It’s just...you never let me take care of you. You’re always the one taking care of me, and I don’t think that’s fair. So I’m happy you let me do it.”

Taehyung kept his back to him as he spoke, mumbling into the white sweater he slipped over his head, light blue jeans already tugged up and in place.

“I’ll try to let you take care of me more,” Jeongguk promised, locating his own clothes. A white t-shirt tucked into tight black jeans. He didn’t want to piss his father off too much.

But Taehyung took one look at him and sighed. “Babe, it’s cold. Please tell me you brought a coat.”

“Yes, Taehyung, I brought a coat.” He hefted up his leather jacket for proof.

An insistent vibration came from Taehyung’s bag. He retrieved his phone, and Jeongguk slipped on his boots only to hear Taehyung chuckle.
“Jimin’s asking if we fucked in the shower.”

“Tell him you gave me a massage and let him figure it out from there.”

“I should tell him about your ring kink.”

“Oh my god, it’s not a ring kink.”

He glanced at Taehyung, who was just watching him skeptically.

“Also, I hate when you wear that sweater.”

Taehyung looked down at his clothes, offended. “Why?”

Grabbing both of their bags, Jeongguk headed for the door. “Because. It makes you look innocent. And you’re anything but innocent.”

Taehyung gave him an indignant huff. “I could be innocent if I wanted to. That’s the point. You look like the bad boy, which makes me look great in front of your parents. I mean look at me. I’m precious. And I’ll keep everything I say G-rated! And I’ll only talk about classes, and volunteer work, and church, and puppies.”

“You have never once in your life been to church,” Jeongguk snorted. “Any kind of church. I think you would burn if you set foot on hallowed ground.”

Hurrying to catch up, Taehyung linked their arms together. “I would not. What kind of demon do you take me for?”

Jeongguk shook his head, unlocking his car. Thankfully, he’d been allowed to drive over since the game was still in Seoul. Otherwise, he couldn’t imagine the comments his father would make if they showed up in Taehyung’s car. “The scary kind.”

“I’ll show you scary,” Taehyung muttered, slipping into the passenger seat. Jeongguk deposited their bags in the back before starting the car. “I got your dad ginseng wine, I figured that was a safe gift.”

“He does love his alcohol,” Jeongguk agreed, bracing an arm on Taehyung’s seat as he backed out, checking behind them.

“Imagine that.” Disregarding any other attempts at conversation, Taehyung turned the radio on, kicked his legs up on the dashboard, and spent most of the drive flicking through stations, unsatisfied with everything they came across. He would let a song play for two minutes, nearly it’s full duration, before muttering something about tastelessness and switching channels.

“We’re going to be there in five minutes, I think you might have to give up and admit defeat,” Jeongguk finally intervened.

“There’s gotta be something good on,” Taehyung complained.

“You’ve gone through every station. It would’ve been faster to just connect your phone and play your own music.”

Taehyung shot him a dirty look. “You think I didn’t think of that? I just wanted to have faith in the public radio system, it’s not my fault they let me down.”

And because Jeongguk couldn’t technically disagree with him, he just conceded and let him mess
with the radio for the remainder of the drive.

“Damn,” Taehyung whistled as they got closer, eyes glued to the houses lining the street. “This is rich rich people country.”

“You don’t have to tell me,” he replied under his breath, glad to find the gate already open for them.

Taehyung took one look at the house and immediately declared, “I like your old one better.”

“No disagreement there. But try and pretend you like it? For my stepmom? And don’t bring up my actual mom? Please?”

“You act like I’m tactless,” Taehyung sniffed, getting out of the car. He extracted the carefully-wrapped decanter of ginseng from his bag, cradling it like a delicate baby.

Jeongguk killed the engine, watching him with a bemused smile on his face.

“You’re not tactless. I’m just nervous.”

“Don’t be nervous. I’m gonna be a fucking angel, watch.”

Jeongguk stared at him.

Taehyung blinked.

Then clapped a hand over his mouth, mumbling a cute little, “Sorry.”

His anxiety returned tenfold, less like before a game and more like before a test. High stakes. He had a lot to lose if this went wrong. Still, he trusted Taehyung, so he slipped an arm around his waist, guiding him down the driveway and up the stairs.

“Sae-eomma’s really nice,” he said. “And Junsoo’s a sweetheart. Really, everything should go fine. Abeoji will keep himself in check for them.”

He knew he was babbling but he had to do something to ease his racing heart.

“Exactly.” Taehyung squeezed his arm. “It’s going to be fine, Jeongguk. Calm down.”

“I am calm. I’m very calm. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He was not calm.

“If you don’t relax right now, I’m going to make you sit down on these stairs, take ten deep breaths, and recite the entire Iron Man intro because I know you know it by heart.”

Jeongguk took one single deep breath.

“Okay, okay, I’m good.”

“Good.” Taehyung stared at the large oak double doors. And once Jeongguk looked, as in actually looked, he couldn’t help but notice the trace of nervousness in Taehyung’s eyes, and the way he gulped. This was probably harder for him than it was for Jeongguk. His father had bullied him all throughout his childhood, no cruelty or sharp words spared. Suddenly, Jeongguk felt a surge of protectiveness rush through him, reminding him to hold Taehyung just a little closer. He wouldn’t let that happen tonight. Not ever again. “So...do we knock, or…?”
“I guess so?”

Usually, Jeongguk would just barge right in and make his presence known, but for some reason, that felt like improper etiquette for today’s occasion. So, he lifted his hand and knocked twice, surprised when the door flew open instantly.

“Hyung!” Junsoo exclaimed. “I saw your car pull up and I came running down the stairs! Eomma’s in the kitchen right now, but she said she’d be right out. And Abeoji is home! He’s in the living room, reading the paper. We watched your game on tv, you looked so cool! Even he was impressed, said you were making him proud, especially when you shot that basket, he stood up and clapped, and-” His rambling stopped abruptly, although Jeongguk was still stuck on the part where his father said he was proud of him. “You’re hyung’s friend, right?” he asked Taehyung, drawing himself up to his full height, no doubt in an attempt to look cool in front of his older brother’s friend.

“That’s me,” Taehyung confirmed, surprising Jeongguk when he bowed. “And you’re hyung’s brother, Junsoo. He talks about you all the time.”

Junsoo gaped, awe written on his face as he returned Taehyung’s bow. “Jeongguk-hyung is your hyung too?”

Taehyung glanced at him. “Unfortunately,” he teased.

“Hey, don’t be mean,” Jeongguk retorted, swatting his shoulder. “I’m a great hyung. Right, Junsoo?”

He nodded confidently. “Hyung’s the best.”

Taehyung shook his head. “You’ve trained him too well. Don’t worry, Junsoo, I’ll teach you how to rebel.”

“Two minutes in and you’re already starting a mutiny,” Jeongguk muttered, to which Taehyung just flashed him a bright smile. “Alright, let us in, Junsoo, it’s freezing.”

Junsoo held the door open for them, still watching Taehyung in slight reverence.

He wasn’t the first, and he most certainly wouldn’t be the last.

“Jeongguk?” he heard his stepmother call out from the kitchen. “Is that you?”

“Yes, Sae-eomma!” he replied as both he and Taehyung changed into house slippers.

Taehyung spun in a slow circle, mouthing the word Wow more than once.

Footsteps pounded on wood floors, and Jeongguk knew it must be his father emerging from the living room. And indeed, he was proven correct as his body filled the hall, still in his suit from the workday. Disdain was written on every feature of his father’s face as he examined Taehyung like a particularly offensive specimen, although faint surprise lingered there as well. Like he’d expected Taehyung to be different.

Taehyung stared back just as adamantly, never one to back down from a challenge.

“Good evening, Jeongguk,” his father finally broke the tense silence. “And Kim Taehyung.” His name sounded like a curse when he said it. “How lovely it is to have you in my house again.” The words were spat like nails, but Taehyung’s lips just curved into a smile that never quite reached his
“Thank you for having me, sir,” he said politely, offering him a respectful bow and presenting the bottle of ginseng wine. “I’m very grateful for your hospitality.”

His father accepted the bottle, holding it gingerly as if anything that touched Taehyung would burn him immediately on contact. Jeongguk could only seethe quietly, already furious with the cold reception.

“Dinner’s just finished cooking.” His father examined the bottle, looking for quality. Price. Jeongguk was pleased with the next note of surprise in his eyes upon realising the alcohol was well-made. Taehyung knew the right things to spend his money on, and peacemaking was certainly one of those things.

“Junsoo, come set the table!” his stepmother’s voice filled the house.

Tearing his gaze away from their little exchange, Junsoo raced into the kitchen with a hurried, “Coming, Eomma!”

“May we help in any way?” Taehyung inquired, gesturing to himself and Jeongguk.

His father just gave Taehyung a skeptical side-glance. “Better not. I particularly remember you having an affinity for breaking expensive things.”

Taehyung’s cheeks reddened at that, but he simply dipped his head, accepting the insult.

“He was twelve, and that vase was ugly anyway,” Jeongguk defended him.

“And worth twenty-four million won. Then again, that’s more money than you’ve ever seen in your life, isn’t it, Taehyung?”

The jab sounded almost kind, coated in sugar the way his father said it.

Taehyung rubbed his shoulder, clearly trying to stave off how uncomfortable he felt. Jeongguk had to resist the urge to just bundle him up in his arms and haul him back outside.

“Yep. You figure that one out with your 120 million won doctorate degree?”

Taehyung’s patience was only so thin.

“We should probably go help Junsoo,” Jeongguk muttered, dragging Taehyung off by the arm before their conversation turned volatile.

“Don’t let him touch a single spoon, Jeongguk,” his father requested lazily, heading into the dining room. “Otherwise, he’d have to pay for any damage. And I know how much of a burden that might be.”

As soon as his father was out of earshot, Jeongguk decided, “Disregard everything I said about playing nice. Screw him. Give him hell.”

Taehyung shot him a worried look. “Are you sure? I didn’t mean to say the thing about his degree, it just sort of slipped out. Sorry.”

“No, I’m definitely sure.”

If anyone had the courage, wit, and sheer stubbornness to go head-to-head with his father’s ego, it
was Taehyung.

“He’s going to hate me,” Taehyung warned.

“He already hates you. You don’t really have anything to lose.”

“Yes, but you do. I don’t want to mess this up for you.”

“Just...stand up for yourself if he tries to be a dick, okay?”

Taehyung sighed, “Fine,” just as they rounded the corner into the kitchen.

Junsoo stood by the counter, struggling to get down a stack of red porcelain plates while three pans simmered on the stove, the mouthwatering scents of beef and onion permeating the air. His stepmother turned instantly upon hearing them, gasping the moment she laid eyes on Taehyung.

“Oh, goodness!” Her spoon landed on the edge of the counter as she rushed towards them, drying her hands on her apron. “So you’re the Taehyung I’ve been hearing so much about!” Enamoured, she cupped a shocked Taehyung’s face, squishing his cheeks and analysing him from every angle. “You’re so cute! Jeongguk-ah, why didn’t you tell me how adorable he is? Look at him!” She pinched one of Taehyung’s cheeks, smiling when she got a small giggle in response.

“Trust me, I know exactly how cute he is,” he agreed, thankful that at least the majority of his family seemed to get along with Taehyung.

“Thank you, um-”

“Eomonim is fine, Taehyung-ah.” She was practically beaming, taking in Taehyung like a breath of fresh air.

He returned her bright smile. “Thank you, Eomonim.”

“So polite! And your voice is so deep!” she exclaimed. Whirling on Jeongguk, she asked, “How can he look like that with such a deep voice? Jeongguk, you’ve kept him away for far too long. Honestly, I thought you knew better.”

His heart warmed upon seeing Taehyung get such a warm reception from his stepmother, confidence restored. “My apologies. I’ll make sure to pass him around adequately in the future.”

She nodded sharply. “You’d better.” Then, she turned back to the stove, accepting the plates Junsoo managed to pass her without dropping them. “I heard you like japchae, Taehyung-ah, so that’s what I made. I hope you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind it all,” Taehyung replied sincerely, gratitude plain on his face. “Thank you.”

Despite his father’s attitude, Taehyung helped him and Junsoo carry everything out to the table, ignoring the heavy eyes on him. Jeongguk tried to catch his father’s gaze, desperately wanting to plead for mercy for Taehyung, but he didn’t look at him once.

Finally, after what felt like hours of agonising stares, they sat.

And the staring resumed.

But Jeongguk soon found that Taehyung had met his chattering match in his stepmother, both of whom eagerly carried the conversation.
“This is fantastic, Eomonim, thank you so much,” he immediately praised the meal. Jeongguk could tell he meant it, too, by the way his eyes lit up every time he took a bite.

“It’s my pleasure, Taehyung-ah. So, forgive me for being uninformed in all of this, as I know the history is long, but how did you two meet?”

Jeongguk glanced at him, only to see Taehyung’s mouth full. Chuckling fondly, he answered, “Taehyungie and I grew up together. We went to the same schools and rode the same bus, so we were bound to meet. We hated each other when we were little. I thought he was a baby and he thought I was mean, but we had the same teacher in grade one, so we ended up becoming friends then. And we were best friends up until we were sixteen.”

His stepmother was fully engrossed by now, elbow on the table and everything. Even his father leaned in; he hadn’t heard this part of the story yet.

“What happened?” she asked.

They looked at each other again, but Jeongguk still saw unease on Taehyung’s face, so he responded once more. “It was a misunderstanding, really. We were both going through really tough times in our lives. Obviously, I was dealing with…” he gestured vaguely to his parents. “And Taehyung…”

He didn’t want to speak for him.

Luckily, Taehyung had gathered the courage to speak for himself.

“My mother passed that year. She’d been battling cancer since I was fourteen, but she didn’t make it through her last bout with chemo. I didn’t handle it well. I shut all my friends out, and unfortunately, that included Jeongguk. Neither of us knew what had happened to each other, and we just sort of lost contact. Right after that, my dad got diagnosed with leukemia, so I didn’t have the time or energy to focus on fixing our friendship, but I wish I would’ve tried anyway. Otherwise we wouldn’t have spent the past five years at each other’s throats,” he finished, squeezing Jeongguk’s hand discreetly under the table.

“Oh…” his stepmother said, dark eyes burdened with sympathy.

Even his father took a moment.

“I didn’t know your mother had passed,” he admitted, sounding thrown-off. “She was a lovely woman.”

“She was,” Taehyung murmured in quiet agreement.

An awkwardness had fallen over the dinner table, one his father surprisingly took it upon himself to alleviate.

“Well, what do you do now? Jeongguk’s a film major, and he mentioned something about you still dancing.”

Taehyung’s pain seemed to lessen once the subject of dance was brought up. “Yes, I’m majoring in dance, with specialisation in contemporary and jazz. I just got certified to teach introductory last semester.”

“He’s also the captain of our university’s dance team,” Jeongguk added, never passing on an opportunity to brag about Taehyung.
His father hummed. “Yes, I noticed. Weren’t you involved in some scandal a month or so ago? I never looked into the details, but I heard in passing.”

“It’s been resolved,” Taehyung replied through gritted teeth, the brief moment of amiability lost.

“Mm, I’m sure. So, you must work, don’t you, Taehyung? Support your family? Unlike Jeongguk here, you’re not simply dead weight on the wallet, I’d hope.”

_Gee, thanks_, Jeongguk thought, a flash of guilt coursing through him. More importantly though, he was curious as to how Taehyung would answer the question, and wasn’t surprised when he glanced at Jeongguk first for approval. He nodded but looked at Junsoo, reminding him to keep it PG.

Taehyung kept his tone neutral as he responded, “I’ve been supporting my dad for three years, since he can’t work and we still have hospital bills leftover from my mom.”

A little bit of sympathy leavened his father’s heavy accusatory gaze.

“Doing what?”

Lifting his eyes, Taehyung met his father’s stare and replied, “I dance at a club in Itaewon.”

His stepmother let out a small gasp, clearly thinking the answer too indecent for someone like her perfect angel Taehyung. Her napkin flew to her mouth, covering herself as she witnessed their exchange.

“Ah, yes, that would be your section of the city, wouldn’t it?” his father responded loftily, referring to the gathering of LGBTQ establishments in the area. “I can’t say I’m surprised to see you ended up with such a job. It suits you.”

Taehyung visibly winced at the remark.

“Jeongnam!” his stepmother hissed just as Jeongguk growled a low, “And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“Junsoo, go to your room,” his father ordered, eyes never leaving Taehyung.

“But, I haven’t finished eating!” Junsoo objected, although the conversation was lost on him.

“Take your plate and go to your room.”

Grumbling, his brother obliged, carrying his food upstairs.

“I don’t understand quite what you mean, sir,” Taehyung finally answered, attempting to stand his ground.

His father simply took a draught of his wine, appraising him. “Well, you’re a stripper, aren’t you? That’s what you were saying, wasn’t it? Or am I wrong?”

Taehyung bit his cheek. “No, that’s what I said.”

“Exactly. I always knew you’d end up whoring yourself out somewhere, because that’s what people like you grow up to be, Taehyung. Obnoxious, useless, attention-seeking people who do nothing all their lives but complain and expect other people to do everything for them.”

“What the hell is your problem?” Jeongguk burst, unable to stand it any longer. “What did he ever do to you?”
“He hates me because he’s so fucking convinced I made you gay,” Taehyung spat, temper far from in check. He’d reached his limit. “He thinks that if we’d never met, you’d be straight as a board and wouldn’t bring shame on the whole family or some absurd, homophobic bullshit like that. Well, sorry. Okay? Is that what you want to hear? I’m sorry I was the first gay person you ever realised you came into contact with. I’m sorry you hate the fact that your son decided to be friends with me. I’m sorry you never loved your own kid enough to look past his fucking sexuality and see him as a real person. I’m sorry your inflated ego and narrow mind drove your wife out the door and shattered your precious little home. I’m sorry that your life is miserable because you wasted so many years valuing money more than your family. I’m sorry Jeonggguk’s tried to mend his relationship with you a thousand times only for you to shove him aside and tell him he doesn’t matter to you. I’m sorry I came into your house and expected you to act like a civil human being. And I’m sorry I have to work a thankless, degrading job that offends you so much seven nights a week just to make sure my own dad has a roof over his head.” Taehyung’s chest rose rapidly as he struggled for air. “Is that enough? Have I apologised for everything yet? Feel free to tell me if I missed something, I’d love to hear you criticise me all night.”

A stunned silence fell over the room. Jeongguk fumbled under the table for Taehyung’s hand but couldn’t find it, desperately wanting to link their fingers together and give him some show of support.

“No,” he father breathed, sounding just as winded. Pain and loathing were written in every line of his aging face, dark brows drawn together in shock. “No, I think you hit everything.”

Taehyung let out a broken little laugh that sounded more like a choked sob, and when Jeongguk looked at him again, he saw tears cutting tracks down his face.

“Great.” Taehyung rose to his feet, keeping his tear-stained gaze on the floor as he said quietly, “Thank you for dinner, Eomonim. It was wonderful. I’ll be in the car, Jeongguk. Take your time.”

And with that, Taehyung disappeared down the hall and out the front door before Jeongguk could even move.

The second feeling seeped back into his veins, he rounded on his father, not bothering to keep the ice out of his voice. “Are you happy now? You finally made him cry in front of you. He always kept it in when he was a kid. Waited until you were gone before he broke down, always wondering what he did wrong each time. What he did to make you hate him so much. He didn’t want you to think he was weak. But now you’ve finally done it. Congratulations.”

His father’s eyes looked empty as they stared down the hallway. Blank. No spark of the usual anger Jeongguk would expect. No trace of disgust or hatred. Just emptiness. And resignation. And perhaps...regret.

“He’s right.”

The words were hushed. Jeongguk wasn’t expecting him to say anything.

“I thought that maybe...maybe if things had been different...you would’ve been different…”

Jeongguk fought back his own urge to cry as he practically shouted, “Why do I have to be different? Why can’t you just love me the way I am? The way you made me? What’s so hard about that?”

“Because I was so scared for you growing up!” his father shouted back, slamming his hand down
on the table. “I didn’t want people to treat you the way they treated him! I was terrified that the other kids would bully you, and beat you up, and tear you down the same way they did to every other gay kid because I knew you were too fragile to take it. People like Taehyung can go through that and be fine because they’re built resilient but you weren’t, Jeongguk. You were shy, and introverted, and so so fragile. You wanted to get along with and appease everyone, and the minute you did something someone else didn’t like, you’d change to make them like you more. You wouldn’t be able to take the backlash, and you know how I knew?”

He could feel his heart breaking over and over, every time they talked, insecurities laid bare as he whispered, “How?” even though he didn’t want the answer.

His father shut his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I knew because you never once stood up for Taehyung. You sat back and watched as me and half the kids in your school tormented him on a daily basis. And yes, you’d gather your courage every once in a while and scare them off, and Taehyung would act like you were his knight in shining armor, but rarely. You so desperately wanted everyone’s approval that you were willing to put him through hell. You couldn’t take it if you were suddenly subjected to the same thing. That’s why I knew it would be safer if you remained closeted. And maybe that wasn’t my choice to make. Hate me for it all you want, you already hate me for plenty of other things. But that was the sacrifice I, as your parent, felt like I needed to make, because your safety will always be of the utmost importance to me. But I get it. You’re an adult now. I don’t need to protect you. Just...seeing Taehyung always made me furious because he got everything you wanted. Everything I couldn’t give to you. His courage, and curiosity, and sense of adventure...things I know you admired about him, but could never emulate. It made me mad. It made me want to push you to strive to be more of those things so you wouldn’t need him. But...” His father took a deep breath, gathering himself, like his next words hurt to admit. “You do need him. I see it. I don’t have to like it, but it’s not my place to like it. You...you balance each other out. You always have. And I knew the day would come when you would tell me you were in love with him. I knew, and even when the day did come, I still wasn’t prepared. Because I was still praying I could give you your best shot at life, you know? But we’re all dealt different hands. And I can’t ask you to play with one card face down any more. So...” He glanced up at Jeongguk. “I want you to live your life the way you want to live it. I don’t agree with a lot of your choices. But as I said, you’re an adult. You’re twenty-one. You have time to figure that out for yourself. I think your major is a waste of time. I think both of your majors are a waste of time, actually.” And then his gaze flicked to the vacant hallway. “But what’s not a waste of time is caring for your family. Especially when you’ve lost someone. I didn’t know he’d been hit by such a major tragedy, and I didn’t treat the subject with enough care. This job of his...”

Jeongguk was overcome with emotion from everything his father had just said. He’d been trying to protect him. That didn’t excuse his behaviour, but he’d been trying to protect him. He wanted him to live his life now. He was giving him the choice. But even though his heart was racing and he couldn’t think, he knew he needed to try and speak for Taehyung.

“He hates it. He doesn’t want to be there. He’s never wanted to be there. But he can’t get a job anywhere else that will pay him enough money to deal with his family’s debt, his own tuition, and his dad’s living expenses.”

His father nodded, mulling it over. “I don’t like him. But I respect him. And I respect how much he means to you. Give me the name, and I’ll write a check to the hospital, as long as he quits that job.”

“Really?” His heart soared, thinking about how much pressure and stress this would lift from Taehyung’s shoulders.
His father chewed his cheek but nodded once more.

“He’s gonna cry,” Jeongguk whispered.

“He’s already crying,” his father pointed out. “I’d rather him cry out of gratitude than anger.”

“And...and you really mean it? Everything you said about me? Did you...think I was a coward?”

His father’s eyes clouded with hurt. “No, Jeongguk. I thought you were a child. And a child shouldn’t have to deal with the trials and pain of an adult.”

He sat back in his chair, feeling dizzy and stunned all at once. “So...you don’t hate me?”

“I don’t hate you,” his father confirmed softly. “I wish things were different. But I don’t hate you. I’m proud of what you’ve accomplished and the person you’re becoming.”

A small part of him didn’t believe his father. Not after all this time of feeling unwanted and unloved. But he wanted to believe him.

“Oh...thank you.” And then, steeling himself, he added, “I’m going to make you proud of my major, too. I don’t care if you think it’s a waste of time. I’m going to prove you wrong.”

His father took a sip of his wine like he didn’t believe him, but said, “I can’t wait to see it, then. I just have to be sure...are you certain this is life you want to lead, Jeongguk? It’s not going to be easy. You’re going to struggle for employment, healthcare, insurance, and anything else that might rely on a partner. It would be hard to even buy a house if you filed him as your romantic partner. These are things you need to think about.”

“I’m sure,” he stated firmly. Besides, he really didn’t see them buying a house anytime soon. “Although, if the laws were different,” he continued pointedly, “then some of those things could be easier for LGBTQ couples.”

“I refuse to be the one to bring something like that to the floor,” his father shot him down immediately. “I’m not looking to destroy my reputation, thank you. However, if it’s brought up again in a few years...I won’t necessarily vote against it.”

He figured that was the most he was going to get.

“You should probably go check on Taehyung,” his stepmother intervened gently. “Take some of the leftovers with you.”

Jeongguk nodded, numb, as he got to his feet and followed her into the kitchen. After she boxed up some of the food for him, she led him to the door where he found his father already waiting.

“Drive safe,” his father said gruffly, avoiding his gaze.

“Thanks.”

After an awkward moment, his father handed him a slip of paper. With trembling fingers, Jeongguk accepted it, still feeling winded when he saw a check for 300 million won. That was enough money to buy a decent sized house. Or save Taehyung’s life.

“Thank you,” he whispered. There was nothing else he could say.

“Don’t let him come back in here and try to fight me on it,” his father requested. “Because I know he’ll want to. Tell him that it’s...an apology. And a thank-you for always being there for my son.”
Jeongguk nodded, clutching the check tightly in his hands.

“I’ll tell Junsoo you had to go, but that you’ll be back soon,” his stepmother promised. “He’s really looking forward to those guitar lessons.”

“I’ll be back in a week or two. I’m sorry tonight didn’t go as planned, and I’ll make it up to him.”

“He’ll like that,” she said through a watery smile. “Take care, darling. And give Taehyung my love.”

“Will do.” He slipped his boots on and made his way over to the door. “Thanks for everything. I’ll see you soon.”

Outside, the cool air hit him hard, wind tousling in his hair and stinging his ears. His headlights were on, and steam drifted from the car where warm air met icy wind. He could see Taehyung’s silhouette in the passenger seat.

Carefully, he walked down the slick stairs and over to his car, tapping on the window.

Taehyung didn’t look at him, but unlocked the car.

Jeongguk slipped into the driver’s seat and set the food in the back.

“Hey.”

Taehyung said nothing for a moment. And then, so soft Jeongguk almost missed it, “I’m sorry.”

“Oh, Taehyung, no, don’t be sorry.” He leaned over, wrapping his arms around him and holding him as close as he could with the console in between them. “That wasn’t your fault. None of that was your fault. It was his fault. It was years and years of it being his fault.”

But Taehyung shook his head, frantically protesting, “No, he’s probably furious now. I screwed everything up for you, as if I was going to do anything else, because that’s all I know how to do it, and I’m so sorry, Jeongguk, and I don’t know how to fix it because I always fuck everything up, and now you won’t be able to mend your relationship and-”

“Shh,” Jeongguk soothed him, stroking his hair. “That’s not what happened at all, Taehyungie. He’s not mad. Not even a little bit.”

“But-”

“Hush, baby, let me talk.”

Taehyung blinked up at him with wide teary eyes, looking lost and heartbroken.

“O-okay.”

“He said you were right. About everything. And we talked a lot. Mostly about my childhood and the way things were, and why he always tried to hurt you. He was angry because he admired you, Tae. He wished that I was strong like you, and it made him want to push you harder just to see if you would break. It was cruel and unfair, but that’s why he did it.”

“He...he wished you were like me?”

The words were so scared and timid. So much like he used to when he’d finished crying after another bout of bullying from Jeongguk’s father.
“Yeah. You were brave and you didn’t care what people said about you but...I cared so much. I couldn’t be like you. And he wished that I was like you so I would have been happier. But since I wasn’t like you, he thought I would be safer if I didn’t come out. I don’t agree with him. I don’t think it would’ve mattered. But that was his reason. He wanted to discourage me from putting myself in danger. And a part of him was hoping that I would change given enough time. As if it ever worked like that.”

Taehyung let out a shaky breath, wrapping his arms around him and mumbling into his shoulder. “Jeonggukkie, I don’t ever want you to change. Please don’t ever change.”

“I’m not gonna change, baby. It’s okay. I’m just telling you what happened.”

A little sniff came from him, but he nodded, burrowing further into the crook of his neck.

“He didn’t want me to need you,” he explained slowly. “But then he realised that I’m going to need you no matter what. He’s trying to come to terms with it.”

“Y-You need me?”

Jeongguk nosed his hair, breathing in the familiar scents of strawberry and vanilla. “I’ve always needed you, Taehyung.”

“Oh.”

“Obviously, he doesn’t support it. But he’s not going to continue to make either of us feel like shit about it either. He feels bad for the way he treated you. And he’s not courageous enough to say sorry in person but...um, he sort of...wanted to give you an apology gift.”

Taehyung lifted his head, eyes narrowed. “I don’t want any gifts. Especially not from him.”

Jeongguk held up a hand in defense. “Just...here.” He offered the piece of paper to him.

Gingerly, Taehyung took it from him, regal brows shooting up when he read it.

“Take it back,” he said flatly, folding the check up. “Fuck, I’ll take it back myself. I don’t want his pity money. That’s not how I wanted to do this. I wanted to work for it.” Taehyung moved, as if to get out of the car, but Jeongguk grabbed his forearm.

“Wait, Taehyung, listen. It’s not out of pity. You know what he said to me when he decided to write it?”

Taehyung glanced back at him, anger diluted only by caution. “What?”

Jeongguk held his gaze as he repeated, “He said, ‘I don’t like him. But I respect him.’ And he respects how much you mean to me. You’re probably never going to like each other. That doesn’t mean he wants to help you out of pity. He was beyond guilty when he heard about your family. He thinks you’re one of the strongest people he’s ever met. It’s not sympathy money. He’s doing it because he wants to. He wants to see you succeed and help your dad. Besides, he won’t take it back anyway. He already told me that you’re not allowed to try and fight him or I on this. Okay?”

“But…” Taehyung shut his eyes. “I can’t...It’s too much, Jeongguk. I don’t want to owe him.”

“He doesn’t want you to owe him. That’s a little too much contact with you for his liking, and you know it. This is a one-time thing. He’ll probably never even bring it up again. Please, Taehyung. Please just...take all of this stress and pain off your shoulders. Pay off your hospital bills. Split the
rest between yourself and your dad. Please.”

He knew that if he didn’t beg, if he didn’t highlight every good thing about this, Taehyung would ignore his warnings and march right back up his father’s doorstep anyway, ready to pick a fight over a check that he had earned. Even if he didn’t see it that way.

“Get a real job,” he continued. “Get fully reinstated on the dance team. Start thinking about yourself for once.”

Taehyung sighed, knowing he’d lost. “I’ll pay off the hospital bills. The rest goes to my dad,” he decided. “I can make my own damn living, I don’t need charity.”

They had come to a stalemate.

“Fine.”

Realising the conversation was over, Jeongguk buckled his seatbelt and started the drive back to campus. Taehyung didn’t put his feet on the dashboard. He didn’t even turn on the radio.

“Does this make me a bad person?” Taehyung eventually whispered once they were back under the city lights. “Am I selfish for doing this? We should go back. I should take it back. I can’t-”

“Stop, Taehyung,” he said tiredly. “You’re not a bad person, and we’re not going back. This isn’t selfish. It would be rude if you tried to return it to him. Think of it like a cashout for the years of trauma he inflicted on you. This is more than fair, if you look at it like that. Hell, use some of it to go to therapy. Just don’t try to give it back.”

Taehyung didn’t answer, but Jeongguk could hear the wheels in his head turning, hard at work over-analysing and evaluating thousands of possibilities.

His thoughts grew too loud for Jeongguk to bear. He turned on the radio and cranked the volume, letting a hip-hop station narrate the rest of their drive.

Most of the parking lot at Taehyung’s dorm stood vacant when he pulled in, students busy celebrating their win and drinking their way through the start of a new semester.

Out of habit, Jeongguk walked Taehyung upstairs to his room, and they spent a moment lingering awkwardly by the doorway.

“So…” Jeongguk shoved his hands in his pockets, leaning against the wall.

Taehyung fiddled with the strap of his bag, room already unlocked. “Thanks for having me over.”

“Thanks for starting the revolution.”

And with that, a small smile made its way onto Taehyung’s face. The first one he’d seen in hours.

“There it is,” Jeongguk said softly, brushing along his cheek.

Taehyung clasped a hand over his own. “There what is?”

“Your smile. My favourite view in the world.”

“That’s so cheesy.” But his smile grew brighter, and that made the line completely worth it.

Jeongguk returned his smile. “Only for you.”
“Sure, golden boy.” With a roll of his eyes, Taehyung leaned in, pressing the softest of pecks to his cheek. And then he glanced behind him at his vacant room. “I...um...” Sighing, he pushed the door open further. “You want to stay the night?”

Jeongguk strolled inside without confirmation, remarking, “It only took three minutes of standing awkwardly outside your door for you to get it.”

Taehyung shut the door behind him, retorting, “I was giving you the option, okay? What if you’d had enough of me for one night? I’m a lot to handle, and you do it on a daily basis. I can’t even handle me on a daily basis.”

“Why do you think I brought my stuff in if I didn’t want to say?” he asked, exasperation seeping into his tone as he plopped his bag down on Taehyung’s bed.

“Because you’re weird and I wasn’t going to question it?”

Jeongguk gasped in mock-offense, dropping down next to his bag. “Oh, I’m weird. Says the guy who would’ve spent all night hugging a pillow if I hadn’t decided to stay.”

Taehyung crossed his arms. “I’ll have you know, my pillow provides better emotional support than you do.”

“Really?” Jeongguk caught him by the waist, tugging him forward until their knees collided. “So you’d rather sleep with your pillow than with me?”

Taehyung lifted his chin, pretentiously sniffing, “That’s not what I said.”

Grinning, Jeongguk pulled him all the way up to straddle him, letting the bed hold most of their weight. “That’s what I thought, princess.”

Taehyung’s eyes immediately narrowed. “What did I say about calling me that? I’m not a fucking princess.”

Jeongguk hummed, letting the argument slide for now. “Sure you’re not,” he murmured, coaxing him down for a kiss. Luckily, Taehyung opted to let it go, too, preferring to kiss him nice and slow. Jeongguk’s hands slid up his back, supporting him as they slowly sank down onto the bed. He found a grip in Taehyung’s soft white sweater, holding on tight through every careful slot of their lips and drag of their tongues.

Eventually, they broke apart, Taehyung’s head resting on his chest while he toyed with the hem of his sweater.

“Hey, Jeongguk?”

Less anxiety than usual at the question.

“Yeah?”

“Did you bring your laptop?”

“Mhm. It’s in my bag. Why?”

“Because. I want to watch your film. The one you were talking about when we went out to dinner. The one for your semester project.”

“Oh...” Nervousness and anticipation coursed through him all at once. “Really? I sort of forgot we
talked about it, to be honest.”

A half truth. He’d thought that Taehyung forgot. He never forgot, desperately wanting to share the piece with him at some point. After all, Taehyung was one of the muses behind it.

Taehyung propped his chin up, suddenly looking so innocent with his deep brown puppy eyes and messy hair. “I didn’t forget. I just didn’t want to push you to share. But if you’d be comfortable…I’d really like to see it.”

He nodded, gently easing out from under Taehyung. “It’s not very long,” he warned as he extracted his laptop and booted it up. “And it’s a silent film, and it’s not amazing or anything.”

“But you worked hard on it and I know it means a lot to you,” Taehyung finished for him, saying all the words he couldn’t. “And I really, really, really want to see it.”

Taehyung hauled himself up into a sitting position, leaning against Jeongguk as he started up his software and located the file.

“‘Chrysalis,’” Taehyung noted, reading the file name. “What’s it mean?”

“I’ll explain after if you want. It’ll probably make more sense then.”

Taehyung nodded, dropping his head against Jeongguk’s shoulder.

Heart racing so loud and fast that Taehyung could probably hear it, he pressed play.

His favourite part of this project had been scouting locations. They were all outdoors, and he had to be very specific about the time of day he went to capture the right lighting, because half of the film was black and white. And if the sun shone oddly on the lens when the filter was applied, it could mess up the whole scene. He’d filmed mostly in scenic areas, capturing receding rivers, shedding expanses of trees, hillsides overlooking roads, anywhere he could go that resembled his themes. And once he figured out what those were, the film sort of made itself. The first part of the film began in colour, and showed timelapses of things growing, expanding. Jeongguk decided to use shoes as his focal point. Footsteps were important. The start of the film featured a pair of white tennis shoes from when he was a kid. Standing in a deepening puddle as it rained. Tied to the swaying bough of an emerald-leafed tree. Tiptoeing over the precipice of a hill overlooking an expressway. And then, as he drained the colour from the scenes, he replaced those shoes with his basketball shoes from high school. Worn and ragged. Water seeped into them as the black puddle receded. Fallen leaves, grey and brown, stuck to them as the tree decayed in preparation for winter. They backed away from the dark edge of the precipice. But when colour began to return, bleeding through the film, his current basketball shoes, black and heavy, dominated the scene. The puddle had dried, but the shoes walked away from it. The leaves had been stripped from the tree, but his shoes were now tied on a higher branch. The final shot was made to look as though he’d jumped off the edge of the precipice. Metaphorically taking the plunge, as the saying went.

And then it ended.


“Yeah…”

He didn’t know what else to say. It had been hard enough sharing the film with his class, knowing they would ask questions, but it was both infinitely easier and more difficult to share it with Taehyung. Easier because he knew he wouldn’t criticise him. Harder because he knew Taehyung
would understand.

“Oh, Jeongguk.” Taehyung turned to him, taking his hands in his, and looking at him with so much pride. “It’s beautiful. It’s so expertly crafted. Elegant, emotional storytelling delivered with nuance and grace. Layers of meaning and depth.”

“I was trying to come up with themes,” he explained, stroking his thumb over Taehyung’s knuckles. “And I kept coming back to my experience, obviously, but something else, too. Forgiveness. I still had a lot to forgive, and I didn’t know how else to process it, so I used film as my outlet. That’s one of the elements I tried to capture with the colour. Letting it ebb and flow with blame and regret and loss.”

“You did it masterfully,” Taehyung reassured him. And when their eyes met again, Taehyung cupped his jaw. “I’m really happy to have you in my life, Jeongguk.”

His breath caught.

“Me too. I missed you so much. And I’m so glad I have you back.”

That same glimmer of innocence and childhood that Jeongguk remembered shone in Taehyung’s eyes once more.

“Let’s stay in each other’s lives forever, okay, Gukkie?”

Jeongguk stared.

That was the first time Taehyung had called him Gukkie in five years without being drunk.

“I’d like that a lot,” he whispered, throat constricted, near the verge of tears when Taehyung leaned in to kiss him, tasting like everything that made him feel happy and safe. Strawberries, and banana milk, and ice cream, and cherry lip balm, and Taehyung, Taehyung, Taehyung. Nothing filled his heart and eased his mind like Taehyung. Nothing would ever come close to even comparing. The familiarity of the hand cupping his jaw, the way Jeongguk could find the dip of his waist in near pitch-blackness, the gentle push and pull of Taehyung’s mouth against his, full pink lips he knew without a doubt that he’d kissed more than anyone else. But what made kissing Taehyung feel like coming home lay in the way he could feel every emotion Taehyung gave him without a word. His healing heart, his anguished regret, but most importantly, the undeniable love he felt for him. Love they’d both tried for most of their lives to pretend never existed. To keep each other safe. To keep themselves safe. But they knew now. They were safest with each other. In this space they created, sacred only to them, sheltered in each other’s embrace.

The way it was supposed to be from the start.

Chapter End Notes

so i’ve topped my biggest chapter length. welcome to mister 84 pages. on the flipside,
the next (last) chapter will be significantly shorter. mostly just domestic taekook scenes and the finale i have planned, so if there's anything specific you want to see, feel free to comment it below! i'll take every suggestion into consideration, since the last chapter is mainly just to wrap everything up nice and neat. thank you so much for reading. all of the support this fic has received has absolutely blown my mind. feel free to check out my other works! thank you <3

you can also reach out to me on twitter!
If You Learn to Stay

Chapter Notes

You may notice that I’ve taken both the title of this work and the title of this final chapter from Brandi Carlile’s "The Eye," a song that my own mother loves and that sparked my ideas for this story.

Here are all four tracks remixed in Taehyung's competition.

Warnings: homophobic language, derogatory use of the words slut and whore

“Get out of my fucking way!” Taehyung snarled.

“Oh, I’m sorry, is there a problem?” Jeongguk shot back. “Is Taehyungie mad?”

“Yes, I’m fucking mad, you piece of shit! I was in first place until that blue shell came out of fucking nowhere!” As Taehyung spoke, he increased his pressure on the Switch Remote button until his thumb ached although he knew it wouldn’t actually increase his speed. It still felt good to try.

“Sucks to suck,” Jeongguk replied smugly, easily gunning into first place and over the finish line.

Taehyung finished in third.

“I’m going to murder you.”

Jeongguk’s eyebrows shot up as the post-race video began to play. “Ooh, scary.”

“Shut up, I’m terrifying,” he huffed, crossing his arms.

“Tae, you’re pouting. You’re wearing my hoodie and a pair of pink boxers with strawberries on them. You have whipped cream on your top lip. But if you’d like, I’ll cower in fear just for you.”

“Wait, what?” Immediately distracted, Taehyung brought his hand up to his top lip, searching for Jeongguk’s prophesied whipped cream. “I drank that hot cocoa two hours ago, and you’re just now telling me?…Did I get it?”

Jeongguk leaned in a little closer, squinting at him. “No...a little lower...a little more to the left…”

Taehyung fruitlessly followed his directions, brushing along his lip in search of the fabled dot.

“Nope, more towards the corner.”

He blotted his lip, then examined his finger. Nothing.
“Did I get it now?” he blinked up at Jeongguk.

Jeongguk cupped his chin, tilting it to get a closer look. “I think so. Wait, no, it’s still there.”

“Hyung,” Taehyung whined. “Get it for me.”

“It’s right…” He traced the pink bow of Taehyung’s top lip, leaning in until their lips brushed. “Here.”

Oh, he thought he was so fucking smooth. With a small sigh, he braced his palms against Jeongguk’s chest, pretending to lean into the kiss only to shove him backwards with all his strength.

Surprised, Jeongguk slammed his hands down on the floor of Taehyung’s dorm to catch himself.

“Hey! What was that for?”

He shrugged, rather pleased with his accomplishment. “For you. You really think you get to try and pull something like that on me? After being an unsympathetic shit? This isn’t some rom-com, mister. I refuse to swoon over a little bit of corny romancing.”

“You refuse to swoon over anything,” Jeongguk muttered. “C’mon, I thought I was being smooth! I was trying to apologise for the Mario Kart match!”

“A little kiss will not compensate for the massive and humiliating loss I suffered.”

“You’re so dramatic, you should change your major.”

“Out of all of the inconvenient times to change my major, I believe the night before the winter competition in the middle of the competitive season just might be the worst. Good idea, though.”

“Speaking of,” Jeongguk leaned back, propping himself up properly to observe him. “When are you leaving again? Do you travel on a bus like the basketball team?”

Taehyung grinned. “Oh, we travel on a bus. But it’s less sweaty high school locker room and more champagne party lounge.”

“I’m going to pretend to be surprised now,” Jeongguk informed him, cute doe eyes going wide as he clapped a hand over his mouth. “Oh my gosh, really? Aww, that’s so unfair. I can’t believe you guys get a classy party bus, I never saw that coming.”

“You know, maybe Yugyeom’s right. Maybe we are spending too much time together,” he conceded after witnessing Jeongguk’s frighteningly accurate impression of his own sarcasm.

With a smile, Jeongguk fell back on the floor, gesturing vaguely to the ceiling. “You mean me sleeping here almost every night? And you watching our practices? And us getting lunch every day?”


He yawned, dread slowly building in him at the thought of the rest of his night. With a sigh, he sat up.

“I should probably go get ready.”
Jeongguk sat up as well, eyeing him glumly. “I wish you’d quit.”

Taehyung massaged his temple, frustrated. “I know, I...I’m going to do it soon. I just…”

“Want to be secure first,” Jeongguk finished for him. “I know. The hospital hasn’t processed the check yet. You’re anxious about it not going through for some reason. Don’t listen to my whining, I’m just being a baby. You want me to drive you?”

As appealing as that sounded, there was no way he’d take the offer. “Thanks, but then you’d have to pick me up at four in the morning, and I’d rather you get a good night’s sleep. And you can’t stay here, either, because I know you’d just wait for me to get back. Go home, Gukkie. Get some rest.”

Sighing, Jeongguk reluctantly agreed, “Fine. What time do you think I should leave tomorrow?”

“Leave for what?”

“For your competition? I know it starts at five because it takes forever or something, but I was just wondering what seating looked like and when I should show up for a good view.”

“I-” His throat suddenly felt tight. “You’re coming to my competition?”

Jeongguk blinked. “Did you think I wasn’t?”

“No one’s...ever gone to watch me before...” A local competition in his sophomore year of high school had been the last one anyone attended for him. No one had ever gone to a university competition of his. “Not that I need someone to!” he tacked on defensively. “Jimin and Hoseok are obviously competing with me so it doesn’t matter. You shouldn’t waste your time going, actually, it won’t be very interesting. You should rest and go to the gym and study. You’re right- they take forever. So many teams are there and it’s really boring if you’re not invested and the scoring takes a long time, and really, you probably should just stay home, it won’t be-”

Hands cupped his cheeks, cutting him off as Jeongguk looked him directly in the eyes.

“If you think I’m not going, especially after that, then you must be insane.” A feather-light kiss landed on his forehead, one that amazed Taehyung more than Jeongguk would ever know. “I am going to go to every competition. Every. Single. One.” He punctuated each word with a kiss. “I’m gonna be that annoying overly-supportive boyfriend in the crowd. Oh, wait, I should make gear. Signs. I’ll make signs that spell out ‘Kim Taehyung’ in purple flashy lights and wear a shirt with your name painted on it.”

“Oh my god, stop,” Taehyung complained even as he giggled. “Don’t make any gear, you absolute nerd. You...really want to come?”

“Oh, yes, baby, I want to come so bad,” Jeongguk moaned obnoxiously, breaking into a laugh when Taehyung shoved him again.

“Shut up! I’m being serious, stop moaning at me!”

“Oh, okay,” He raised his palms in defeat. “I’m being serious, too. No innuendos. Yes, I want to come support you. And watch you dance. And keep my dick in my pants and my overwhelming pride for you in check.”

“It should be pretty easy to keep your dick in your pants. Our competition routines are always PG because the judging panel is ancient.”
“You underestimate how hard I get simply by being around you,” Jeongguk informed him cheerfully. “I’m really excited to see your routine. I know Hwang was head-over-heels for it a few months back, and Lisa gushed all about it, too, so the standards are high.”

“Oh, great,” Taehyung muttered, thinking about their routine. He thought it was good, one of his best so far, actually, but he wasn’t sure if it was good enough to meet standards. “Prepare to be disappointed.”

Jeongguk laced their fingers together. “I don’t think you could ever disappoint me,” he admitted. His words warmed him from head to toe. When Jeongguk spoke like that, squeezing his hand, it was impossible not to believe him.

“I love you,” he breathed.

Jeongguk kissed him, short, sweet, but carrying so much depth. “I love you, too.” He got to his feet, tugging Taehyung up along with him. “I should probably head out. I’ll leave an hour or so before the competition, okay? Battle traffic and all that.”

“Yeah, yeah that should be fine.”

Someone was really coming to one of his competitions.

“Okay.” Jeongguk pulled him close, kissing him again, and he struggled not to melt into it- just cling to Jeongguk’s shoulders, hold on tight, and ignore where he was supposed to be tonight. With people who weren’t Jeongguk. What a waste of time. When they finally separated, Jeongguk fluffed the hair at the base of his nape fondly. “Be safe tonight, please. Text me when you get there and when you leave, even if you think I’m asleep. I just feel better having the confirmation.”

“I will,” he promised before snickering, “You’re like a fretful mom.”

“Well, one of us will have to be the concerned parent!” Jeongguk retorted, hands on his hips. “Otherwise our kids are gonna grow up to be hooligans.”

*Our kids.*

Mayhaps his heart fluttered just a little.

Still, it would be highly unlike him to admit as much, so he just said, “That’s a little presumptuous, don’t you think?”

“The part where you stay with me long enough for us to adopt kids or the part where they grow up to be hooligans?”

“The second one, obviously. I’m stuck with you. No one else is going to put up with me for that long.”

“At least I know you’re in it for the long run,” Jeongguk teased, tugging his chunky black boots on. Taehyung had never entertained the thought of having his dick stepped on before he saw Jeongguk in those stupid boots. Still, the word *run* brought up bad memories.

“I will never be in it for *any* run ever again thanks to you and your torture.”

Jeongguk’s nose crinkled cutely as he smiled. “C’mon, it wasn’t that bad! We had fun! We got an A! You got to eat cake! And we bonded.”
Taehyung fluttered his lashes, purring, “Oh, we certainly bonded, hyung.”

“Don’t flirt with me. It makes it even harder to leave,” Jeongguk huffed, clutching his shoulder to place a kiss on his cheek.

“Sorry, sorry, no flirting over here. Have a safe walk back. Don’t talk to strangers. Or if you do talk to strangers, lie to them and see how they react. It’s an interesting social experiment.”

He truly tried to give the best advice.

“Good bye, Taehyung,” Jeongguk emphasised, heading towards the door. “Love you.”

Taehyung waved after him. “Love you, too! Bye!”

The door clicked shut.

And he was alone.

Interesting how the second Jeongguk left, he felt the overwhelming urge to cry.

He didn’t want to go to work tonight. He didn’t want to be touched, or degraded, or propositioned. He just wanted to curl up in bed and daydream romantically about his wonderful boyfriend and stress about the competition tomorrow.

Simple things.

But alas, his life had rarely been simple.

Sometimes being Kim Taehyung had its drawbacks.

So, he showered, shaved, and lathered his skin in alluring vanilla bodywash and lotion before picking an outfit for the night. After a moment of deliberation, he just packed the red and black combo into his bag, snatching up his matching heels and any spare makeup he’d need. He no longer felt the urge to give each night his all. The performances still made his heart race. But the moment he got off stage, the moment he stopped dancing for himself and had to dance for someone else, he felt every thrill drain from him, leaving only his aching feet and sore thighs.

The drive to Sin seemed longer than usual, a sure sign that the night would drag on.

The usual line had already gathered at the front entrance, but Taehyung hardly paid them any mind, stopping only to say hello to the evening’s bouncer before slipping inside. Lights flashed, music pulsed, the voices of men chattered away in every direction, and the unmistakable scents of alcohol and barely contained sex swirled throughout the room.

He’d come to hate this place.

Hurrying along, he hoisted his bag farther up his shoulder, slinking through the crowd to the backroom. Only his manager occupied the space.


His lips had always been his selling point, challenged only by his eyes and his ass.

“Are you still giving me the silent treatment?” Jang eyed him humorously through the mirror.
Taehyung still didn’t find anything about it remotely funny.

“You know I wasn’t trying to be an ass about it.”

Oh, but he was.

“I just think...I mean, you’ve threatened to quit before. Remember that time some guy spilled his drink on himself and blamed you, saying you had to lick it clean so you’d get paid?”

Yes, he fucking remembered, thank you very much. That was only a few months ago.

“Well, you threatened to quit then. Said you’d had enough. Stormed out, made a whole big deal of it. And then the very next night you were right back here, reporting for duty as usual. And that was only the most recent one. So, sure, think what you want. It’s cute. But I’m still putting you on the rotation for the foreseeable future.”

Taehyung didn’t say a word until he’d finished his makeup.

“When are my stages tonight?”

“Midnight, one-thirty, and three.”

Taehyung whirled around, irritated. “Seriously? That many? That close together? How am I supposed to make any fucking crowd tips? Who else is working?”

Jang just raised his eyebrows, obviously unimpressed with his attitude. “Yejun, Sehun, and Kwangsu.”

“Make someone else take the one-thirty stage. Have Sehun do it. He’s new. He needs the exposure.”

“I thought you’d want the slots,” Jang remarked coolly. “Seeing as you practically only want to do stages these days.”

Yeah, to lower the risk of getting drunk, high, or letting someone actually touch him. But he just really wasn’t feeling it tonight. His energy wasn’t there.

Taehyung sighed. “Please have Sehun take it. I’m tired. I have a competition tomorrow. You know, for actual dance.”

Jang crossed his arms, staring him down. “You know, you’re starting to get pretty fucking pretentious. Acting like you’re better than everyone else here. I remember when you came to me three years ago. Barely eighteen, eyes big and terrified, never looking anywhere but the floor when you talked to me. I remember how you cried, begging me for a job even though you had no experience. You remember what you said?”

Of course he remembered.

“‘I’ll do anything as long as you’ll take me.’ And that was it. You were hired because of your determination. I didn’t care about your face. I didn’t care about your body. I cared that you were a desperate kid who needed help. I’ve never once thought of you as my employee, Taehyung-ah. You’re like my little brother. If you want to move on from this place, then do it. I want to see you spread your wings. But I don’t want you to stick your nose in the air and act like you’re above the rest of us all of a sudden. I’ve watched you spiral into a mess of drugs, and drinking, and depression that lasted months, and now you’re suddenly fine, and suddenly so much fucking better.
than everyone else. I don’t know what happened. I’m not going to ask because it’s not my place. But don’t get a superiority complex now. Don’t ask me to just change around the schedule to whatever suits your needs like I don’t have a dozen other dancers on my rotation that deserve the same treatment and accommodations. Understand?”

Guilt and anger reared up inside of him, battling for dominance. He didn’t have a superiority complex. He asked for one thing. One thing because he had a competition tomorrow, and he was tired. So maybe he shouldn’t have acted like his life outside of this place was more important. Fine. But he hadn’t asked for a lot. There was no need for Jang to guilt him into thinking he wasn’t doing enough.

Still, maybe it wasn’t worth the fight.

“Fine. Sorry. Forget it.”

Jang opened his mouth, looking somewhat contrite, but Taehyung just cut over him.

“Give me a ten-minute warning before my sets. I’ll give Hojin-ssi my songs for the night.”

With that, he brushed past his manager and out the dressing room door. Pausing in the doorway separating him from the club, he spent a moment simply surveying his surroundings.

He had an hour until his first set.

He could squeeze in a few dances.

A group of men seated around a vacant pole caught his attention, all middle-aged in rumpled suits, tired from a long workday, and looking slightly bored.

They wouldn’t be bored when they got a minute with him.

Equipped with a sway of his hips and his most alluring smirk, he sashayed over to his selected table. Their eyes fell on him immediately as he leaned over the table, propped up on his elbow.

“You boys are lookin’ a little bored over here,” he noted, plucking up one of their drinks. Examining its contents with disinterest, he took a sip. Straight whiskey. Gross. Still, he kept his face straight, making eye contact with them over the rim of the glass. “I’d be happy to entertain.”

Dark, heavy gazes raked over him from head to toe.

“You do that, baby,” one of the guys finally decided. “Get on that pole for us, hm? Put on a show?”

Fuck you.

“It’d be my pleasure,” he cooed instead.

All four pairs of eyes watched him closely now. Tongues darting out to swipe at lips. Hands placed inconspicuously on thighs.

The air smelled like vodka and sweat.

Suppressing a sigh, he hooked a leg around the pole and began to dance.
The final straw snapped right after his first set.

He’d just gotten off stage, Jang tossing him a red silk scarf to drape over his shoulders while he counted his money, when a man approached him.

Older. More sophisticated than most of their clientele. He had a sharp look in his eyes, gazing down at Taehyung from the high bridge of his nose, salt-and-pepper hair gelled back in a charming, gentlemanly side-sweep.

And he looked oddly familiar.

“Hello, darling,” the man greeted him, leaning against the wall separating the stage and the dressing room. Upon hearing the sound of his voice, Jang’s head snapped up.

“Oh, Seo Hanjae-ssi!” his manager exclaimed, immediately bowing. “What a surprise to see you here tonight.”

The man shrugged, barely looking away from Taehyung. “Just doing a routine check-in. It’s been a few months, so I figured I’d stop by.” He roamed Taehyung’s body, making his skin prickle uncomfortably. “Although I think I might indulge in a bit of fun.” Before he knew what was going on, Hanjae took a step closer, caressing his cheek. “You’re a beautiful piece of work, you know that? I missed seeing your pretty face, Taehyung-ah. Even when you’re glaring at me like you are now.”

And then, hearing his name come out of his mouth, he suddenly remembered.

Hanjae owned the club.

He’d danced for him before. More than once.

He’d let him take him in a champagne room. The only time he’d let a client fully have him before that disaster a few months ago.

Shame crept over him. He said nothing, simply jerked his chin out of Hanjae’s grasp. Surprise jumped in Hanjae’s gaze, and he peered closer. A thumb pressed to Taehyung’s lips.

“Are you on something? A little too much to drink tonight, perhaps?”

“No.” He turned from his touch again, ignoring the anger that sparked in his eyes. “I’m just not interested.”

“Taehyung,” Jang chided under his breath. “Don’t be rude.”

“Oh, he’s not being rude,” Hanjae decided with a chuckle, analysing him. “He’s just playing hard to get. You know how he is. Always such a little brat. Come, darling, I have several bills with your name on them. No need to act up. We’ll play like we always do.”

For a moment, he considered it. Hanjae paid well. Lavishly well. Taehyung could take a bath in the money he might earn tonight if he played his cards right.

But then reason took over. He had a boyfriend. And he loved him more than anything.

Adjusting Hanjae’s tie, he murmured, “I don’t think you quite heard me, sir. I’m. Not. Interested.”
An insistent hand closed over his wrist.

“I’d really like it if you’d come with me, Taehyung-ah.”

He glanced up, only to find eyes hard as ice chips staring him down.

The hand holding his wrist began to move his own palm down Hanjae’s body, over the older man’s hard chest and stomach, down to his belt buckle.

Taehyung swallowed, receiving the message loud and clear.

“I really don’t want to, sir. But I’m sure there are plenty of other dancers who would happily oblige.”

“I don’t want them,” Hanjae growled. “I want you. And if you’re not in room number eight by the time I finish my conversation with your manager, then consider this your last night.”

As much as he wanted to spit in his face, tell him that was just fine by him and he really couldn’t care less...his check still hadn’t gone through.

And even though he wanted to trust Jeongguk’s dad, it seemed like exactly the cruel trick he’d play. Raise his hopes up so high only to watch the tears fall when he realised he’d been scammed.

He didn’t trust him.

And he had a check due tomorrow.

Curling his fingers in the waistband of Hanjae’s slacks, he hissed, “I will dance for you and that’s it. If you want anything more, you’re going to have to get someone else.”

Without giving him a chance to respond, he spun on his heel and marched across the room to the back hall, ignoring the whistles and calls of his stage-name. Thankfully, the eighth room stood vacant, beaded curtain pulled aside to let the cascade of sultry red light slip through.

Furious with himself, with his situation, and the man he was now waiting on, he collapsed back on the leather lounge, arm draped over his eyes. His black and silver bracelets clinked together, mocking him. He wanted to call Jeongguk. He wanted Jeongguk to tell him what he should and shouldn’t do. He wanted Jeongguk to say he shouldn’t let the owner of his club take advantage of him, but he should come home and snuggle up in his arms.

He wanted Jeongguk to forgive him if he made a mistake tonight.

*No, fuck that.*

Taehyung steeled himself, gathering his courage.

He wouldn’t make a mistake. He wouldn’t do that to Jeongguk. No matter how much money Hanjae offered him.

Feeling bolder, Taehyung got up from his place on the lounge and examined the raised platform upon which his pole for the evening gleamed. It didn’t take long to get into position, kneeling on the platform with his wrists locked around the pole behind him.

His clients liked when he looked ready and waiting for them.

Hanjae loved it.
With a start, he realised this would be his first private dance in almost a month, seeing as he’d stuck to stage and main floor routines since Jeongguk found him that fateful Friday night.

A beautiful, emotional, tumultuous Friday night.

He wasn’t given much time to reminisce as the beaded curtain swayed and clacked together, announcing the arrival of his guest.

“Would you look at that?” Hanjae breathed, drinking him in. “Already tied up in your place like a puppet on a string, aren’t you, darling?”

And although the words burned on his tongue, Taehyung knew he had to suck it up and play his part. So he batted his lashes, purring, “You wanna be my puppet master for tonight, sir?”

If there was one person he couldn’t piss off in this building, it was Seo Hanjae.

“I’d like that very much, kitten.” He settled into place on the leather lounge, watching him hungrily, a tumbler of scotch in hand. “Dance for me.”

And so, Taehyung did just that, moving to the sultry rhythm that poured from the overhead speakers like honeyed wine, languid, teasing, leisurely, the way he knew Hanjae liked. Spun slow, tempting circles that had the money littering the platform piling up. They talked. Mostly, Hanjae talked, telling him about his business deals, CEOs he didn’t trust, his good-for-nothing cheating wife, how lonely he felt, how he’d been thinking about adopting a dog, how his son never called. Taehyung did his best to comment while he manipulated the pole, giving his occasional thought or a simple *Mmm* when he knew Hanjae just wanted to be heard and recognised.

Most of his clients just wanted to talk.

Until the drinks worked through their systems.

“Come closer, baby,” Hanjae rasped nearly an hour later, beckoning him with a crooked finger. The ice in his glass shook when Taehyung climbed onto his lap. He let Hanjae’s free hand wander as he rolled his hips above him, giving lap dances a mindless activity at this point. “You’re my favourite, y’know?” Fingers tugged at the chains on his lingerie. “So sexy. Such a good listener. So mean when you’re telling me no.”

Hanjae squeezed his ass, pressing the glass of scotch to Taehyung’s lips. Ignoring his inhibitions, he drank, letting the liquor flow over his tongue. When Hanjae set the glass down, he gripped Taehyung’s hips more firmly, forcing him to grind against his crotch when he moved.

“But you’re not going to tell me no any longer.” Taehyung felt a jolt of fear as Hanjae rolled his hips hard, gripping the jewelled collar around his throat. “Get on your knees for me, baby.”

“Not a chance in hell,” he snarled, trying to push him away. “I’m done with that kind of shit. Get your hands off me.”

But Hanjae just tightened his grip, effectively choking him. And not in the fun way.

“You know you’re not good for anything else but this. Do what you’re good at, Taehyung-ah. Make me feel good.”

Taehyung tore his hand off him, scrambling to his feet. “No.”

Hanjae’s eyes hardened.
“Are you really telling me no? After everything I’ve done for you? It’s just a fucking blowjob, you really wanna lose your spot here over that?”

Taehyung just bit his lip, fury coursing through him. He couldn’t say yes, but he definitely wasn’t going to say no.

Hanjae stood, shoving him back towards the wall. Thanks to his stilettos, he stumbled, but Hanjae caught him, shoving a knee between his thighs, caging him in with his relentless hands.

“You have one chance.” His breath fanned over him, smelling strongly of scotch. “Show me you’re not just some worthless whore, not some useless fucking slut like the rest of them. Do as you’re told or get out of my sight.”

And that was it.

He was done being called a whore.

Taehyung shoved him. Hard. Relished the shocked gasp that escaped Hanjae as he fell on his ass.

“Never call me a whore again. And tell Jang I fucking quit.”

He didn’t wait to hear the slurs and profanities hurled after him. But he spared a moment to retrieve the money he’d earned. And then, yanking the curtain aside, he escaped into the main room, disappearing only long enough to find his bag from the changing area before exiting the club.

Cool night air washed over him, and he just drank it in.

Winter filled his lungs, cleared the haze of red, sex-soaked air from his head.

Men called to him even as he walked down the street, cat-calling, shouting drunken requests from where they smoked outside shitty bars, neon lights cutting harsh patterns across their faces while they jeered.

Taehyung just clung to his bag, chin raised high as he strutted to where he’d parked his car earlier. But the moment he was inside and the doors were locked, he breathed a sigh of relief.

And then he cried.

Bitter, hot tears that stung his eyes and burned his throat. He didn’t even have any fucking right to be upset. That’s what he’d signed himself up for. He’d dealt with being treated like shit for years, why was it suddenly hitting him so hard?

Because I finally know what it feels like to be loved.

The realisation was instant. Fleeting. But no less true.

He had a supportive dad, an amazing boyfriend, and wonderful friends. He no longer felt the need to fill the void in his heart with meaningless praise from strangers, which made their insults and self-interested compliments only hurt more.

Tears blurred his phone screen as he texted the one person he needed to make him feel better.
hey i know it’s late. are you up?

A terrifying minute passed in which he thought Jeongguk wouldn’t respond to him. And he’d earned that right; it was nearly three in the morning. Still, his heart skipped a beat when his phone vibrated.

**gukkie ❤️**

i am now. what’s up?

Shit. He didn’t mean to wake him up. Or maybe he did, but he still felt bad about it.

**Me**

is yoongi home?

**gukkie ❤️**

yeah sorry baby. he got back a little while ago

His heart sank. Whatever. It was fine. He could wait.

**Me**

oh lmao nvm. go back to sleep. see you tomorrow ❤️

Except a few minutes passed, and he didn’t get a text back. Although he’d sort of wanted a goodnight in return, he felt content knowing that Jeongguk had passed out. His baby needed sleep.

Getting himself together, he just drove back to his dorm, ignoring the tears drying on his cheeks and the flare of anger that coiled in him every time he thought about what had just happened. Unsurprisingly, the parking lot was pretty empty when he pulled up, most students out and about enjoying their Friday nights. He’d always wondered what it was like to be like them. Going to parties. Getting wasted with friends. Having fun without worrying about when bills were due or who would be feeling him up that night.
Although, when he went to grab his clothes and change before going up, he realised he had a bit of a problem.

He’d left his clothes on Sin’s makeup counter, so eager to grab his phone and leave that hellhole.

Which meant he’d have to trek up to his dorm dressed like a skank.

His throat tightened once more, but he shoved his feelings aside. Screw it. It’s not like everyone on campus didn’t know. And he barely had any modesty left to preserve anyway. Besides, only a few cars littered the lot, and most of the lights upstairs were out. It shouldn’t be that bad.

Fuck it.

Grabbing his uselessly empty bag, he slammed his car door shut behind him and climbed the stairs up to his residence hall. Stiletto heels clacked against cold concrete, even louder against the tile inside. His whole ass was out on display, and he pressed the call button for the lift maybe a little harder than necessary in his rush to get upstairs. Someone must’ve been looking out for him because the doors slid open to reveal an empty elevator. Thank god.

His floor was vacant, too. No bass pounded from Yugyeom’s room. He must be out.

At least his key was tucked in the small pocket where it was supposed to be. Taehyung unlocked the door, surprised when he found the lights on inside.

He could’ve sworn he turned them out.

With a shrug, he kicked his door shut and rounded the corner, very shocked to see someone seated on his bed.

“Hey,” Jeongguk greeted him, yawning. And holy shit, Taehyung had never been more glad that he’d given Jeongguk his spare key. Because Jeongguk always knew. Always knew when he was having a bad night and needed his company like he needed to breathe. His long hair had been hastily tied up, t-shirt and sweats rumpled, sleep still softening his bleary eyes. And then he blinked, sight seeming to clear a bit as he got a full view of his barely-clothed body. “I- Wow, I mean...um, hey.”

Taehyung didn’t care. He tossed his bag aside before throwing himself on Jeongguk, toppling them both back on the bed.

“I hate it, I hate them, I quit, I’m never going back, never again,” he mumbled over and over again into the safety of Jeongguk’s chest.

“Oh, no, Taehyung. You’re beautiful. And talented. And worth so much more than every fucking guy who walks in there thinking he deserves a second of your time.” Jeongguk pressed a delicate kiss to his forehead, brushing over it with his thumb. “Do you want to tell me what happened?”
And so, Taehyung told him. About how the owner of the club propositioned him, and the history they had, and how he couldn’t say no because Hanjae and Jang were pressuring him and he could lose his job if he turned him down, but he set boundaries, and how Hanjae tried to force him to do more, and how Taehyung had finally just lost it and stormed out. Through all of his retelling, Jeongguk cradled him in his arms and simply carded gentle fingers through his hair, letting him talk until he didn’t know what else to say.

“Did I do the wrong thing?” he whispered.

“You acted way more civil than I would’ve,” Jeongguk informed him with a light chuckle. “I think I would’ve clocked the guy in the face and told him to stick a firecracker up his ass, so no, I don’t think you did the wrong thing. He was trying to manipulate you and use you. And that’s really fucked up.”

Even though Taehyung enjoyed the visual Jeongguk presented, he still found himself worrying. “But I’m out of a job now.”

“A job you won’t need soon,” Jeongguk reminded him. “I know you think the check isn’t going to process, but it will. I promise. And until then, I’m more than happy to take care of you.”

Taehyung believed him. But instead of saying it, he nuzzled Jeongguk’s cheek, teasing, “Oh, yeah? You wanna be my sugar daddy that bad, huh?”

“I don’t think you realise. I’ve been trying to be your sugar daddy this whole time, but you’re so fucking stubborn.”

“Fine, daddy, take me out after my competition then if you’re so desperate.”

Jeongguk placed a suggestive hand on his waist, but it didn’t feel invasive like the other touches he’d received earlier. It felt warm, and safe, and exactly what he wanted.

“I’ll take you anywhere you want, baby. Say the word, and I’ll fly you to Paris.”

Taehyung believed that, too, as he searched the well of trust and unbroken promises in the depths of Jeongguk’s inky wide eyes.

Smiling, Taehyung leaned down to kiss him, overwhelmed with how happy he was that Jeongguk had shown up tonight when he needed him most. “I think I’d prefer Italy, daddy.”

Jeongguk met him eagerly, lips roving over his with slow and sensual movements, dragged out to make him feel every roll of his tongue and caress down his side.

“Then let me take you to Italy, baby,” Jeongguk murmured against him.

Taehyung simply laughed, enjoying their little joke.

“I think right now I’d like it if you’d take me for a little ride first, daddy.”

Yes, he had to leave for pre-competition practice at two in the afternoon. And yes, they fucked until eight in the morning.

…

“Jeez, Hoseok, what’s with the tote?” Taehyung inquired, indicating the stuffed plastic tote bag
slung over his friend’s shoulder as they boarded their bus for the day. “Planning on dressing the entire team in Balenciaga?”

“Pfft, you fucking wish you could get a hand on some of this shit.” Hoseok flashed him a good-natured smile. “This is just a change of clothes for after. Don’t wanna be all sweaty, you know. And a couple water bottles. And a face cloth. And my lucky socks.”

“Ah, obviously. Don’t know why my first thought wasn’t, ‘Oh, yeah, it’s probably just his lucky socks.’ Weird.”

“Definitely a you problem,” Hoseok agreed, whistling when they climbed aboard. “This is even nicer than our last bus,” he exclaimed.

As Taehyung took in the midnight blue walls, clean glossy floor, and purple velvet couches, he had to admit Hoseok had a point.

“Damn,” he breathed. Being on the dance team definitely had its advantages. Unfortunately, being captain of the dance team had a couple disadvantages. “Store this for me, will you?” he asked Hoseok, passing him his duffel bag after he grabbed the roster out. “Hwang wants me to take roll.”

“Figured that’s why we showed up early.” Hoseok took his bag and tucked it on one of the racks above the seats while Taehyung flipped to a clean name list. “You remember that time Jimin puked his guts up on the way to our winter competition last year?”

Taehyung wrinkled his nose at the memory. “Dude, I can still smell it. Fried rice everywhere. And the wine he drank the night before. Didn’t Chungha lose it after that, too, and spewed all over the champagne cooler?”

Hoseok made a fake retching noise, finger pointed down his mouth. “Hwang lost her deposit on the bus and she had to figure out a way to dry-clean the upholstery. Hopefully history doesn’t repeat itself,” he snickered.

“Thought I’d find you two here talking shit,” Jimin announced his arrival, duffle bag thrown casually off his shoulder as he glared, hands on hips. “I thought we agreed to never speak of the fried rice incident again.”

“Aw, c’mon, we can’t help it, Chim!” Taehyung defended them, gesturing to their lavish surroundings. “The bus brought back good memories.”

But of course, Hoseok had to stay in Jimin’s good graces. “Sorry, babe, I don’t even know what you’re talking about. Fried rice incident? I have no recollection of such a thing.”

Jimin smiled at that, pressing a kiss to Hoseok’s cheek. “Mm, that’s right. But as for you,” he whirled on his heel, jamming a finger at Taehyung. “I knew there was only one loyal bitch in this house.”

Batting his lashes, Taehyung mocked sweetly, “Sorry, babe. Don’t I get a cheek kiss?”

“You can kiss my ass,” Jimin scoffed.

“Absolutely not.” Hoseok growled, placing a protective hand on Jimin’s waist.

“Aw, you two are so cute!” Taehyung gushed. “But let’s limit the groping, yeah? Some of us would prefer to not have a repeat of the fried rice incident just because his best friends are getting nasty on the bus ride.”
“Who’s getting nasty?” he heard Lisa call, right before her blonde head popped up, taking the stairs two at a time. “Oh, it’s Jimin and Hoseok, I should’ve known. Gross. Guess it’s just you and me, Taehyung.”

A warmth and appreciation for Lisa washed over him. She was the first official person Jeongguk had ever come out to, and she’d received him kindly enough to encourage him to continue being his true self. That earned her a special place in Taehyung’s heart, no matter how much she’d initially irritated him that year.

He slung an arm over her shoulder, glaring at his two friends. “She is the only loyal bitch in this house. Screw you, Park Jimin.”

Lisa laughed, navigating her way to a seat on the back couch. “Oops, I didn’t mean to get in the middle of something.”

“Too late, you’re committed.”

Taehyung snatched a pen off the bus’s large dashboard, checking off their four names as Present. Soon, a stream of dancers were filing on, greeting him, making jokes, and finding seats. A few minutes after the last dancer showed up, Coach Hwang stepped onto the bus, followed by their driver for the day who quickly got herself into her seat.

“Everyone present and accounted for?” she inquired, gesturing for the roster.

He handed it over, confirming, “Yep. Not a hair out of place.”

She eyed him while scrutinising the list. “Your hair is all over the place. Fix it.”

“You can’t just fix my hair,” Taehyung muttered, attempting to comb his fingers through the mess of curls his used-to-be-straight dark hair had become from years of tampering with it using cheap product and damaging tools every night.

“At least this looks good,” Hwang decided, setting the roster down. “Find a seat, Taehyung-ssi.”

He did as she asked, plopping down beside Jimin and immediately throwing his legs over him. Hwang gave them a short talk about bus etiquette, competition etiquette, and team etiquette before reviewing their practice from earlier, giving nothing but compliments and constructive criticism to help them during their performance. Anything else would just be distracting at this point.

The ride over to the Seoul Arts Center was short seeing as Gwanak-gu and Gangnam weren’t that far apart. Most of the time consumption could be chalked up to traffic.

But Taehyung couldn’t stop bouncing in his seat, swinging his legs dangerously close to Jimin’s face, excitement bubbling up uncontrollably. Nervousness, too, obviously. But mostly excitement.

“My nose, Taehyung, mind the nose!” Jimin exclaimed as he randomly raised his leg.

He dropped it with a sheepish smile. “Sorry. Just excited.”

Jimin locked his phone and set it aside, watching him with a curious fondness. “We’re all excited.”

“No, you don’t understand. He’s coming.”

“That’s creepy. Who is he?”

Taehyung sighed, exasperated. “Jeongguk. Jeongguk is coming.”
“We really don’t want to know when your boyfriend comes,” Hoseok snickered from Jimin’s other side.

“Fuck you guys, I meant he’s coming to the competition.”

“Oh!” Jimin perked up at that, wrapping his arms around him and squeezing tight. “That’s amazing, Taehyungie! I’m so glad he decided to come support you. I think Yoongi will be there, too.”

“Yoongi’s been to every competition for the past year, okay, let me pretend like this is special,” Taehyung said, pouting.

“No, it is special!” Jimin immediately amended. “I just meant that they could probably sit together if they wanted.”

“Oh.” Taehyung relaxed. “That’s a good idea. I’ll text Jeongguk. He’ll feel less out of place if he has someone to sit with.”

---

Me

hey btw yoongi should be at the competition

if you guys want to sit together

Me

sorry if i’d known sooner i would’ve said you should carpool

gukkie ❤

no worries. i’ll shoot him a text

gukkie ❤

see you soon baby

---

He could feel Jimin peering over his shoulder. Quickly, he tilted his phone screen down. “Stop nosing!”

“Well guys make me want to repeat the fried rice incident.” Hoseok laughed at Jimin’s comment, leaning over to try to read his text messages as well. “You’re just so...ugh, you’re that couple, you know?”

Taehyung glared at both of them. “No. I don’t know. What couple?”
“The gooey, cheesy, attached at the hip couple?” Hoseok offered.

“Yes, babe, exactly,” Jimin confirmed.

Taehyung rolled his eyes. “You’re imagining things. Absolute delusion.”

Jimin pried his phone from his hands, pointing at the texts. “He sent you sparkling hearts, sunshine, and rainbows. Jeon Jeongguk sent you hearts, sunshine, and rainbows!”

“So? I told you, he’s the world’s biggest softie. He’ll do that for anyone.”

“I’ve texted with Jeongguk multiple times and he most definitely will not,” Hoseok snorted. “He’s so whipped for you.”

Although the statement secretly pleased him, Taehyung just muttered, “In your dreams,” and snatched his phone back. “As for attached at the hip couple? Yeah, please, as if anyone fits that description better than you two. When was the last time you slept in your own dorm, Jiminie?”

Jimin flushed a bright shade of pink. “That’s none of your business, Taehyungie.”

“So what, five months ago? Six?”

“Stop!” Jimin swatted his chest playfully. “I slept in my dorm last night.”

“With Hoseok and/or Yoongi?”

“Yes,” Hoseok replied cheerfully just as Jimin spluttered, “Maybe!”

Taehyung reclined back, making sure to kick his feet up on Jimin again. “Speaking of, what’s it like? Like, the three of you together finally?”

“Magical,” Jimin sighed, looking dreamy.

“Dramatic, but okay. More importantly, what’s the sex like?”

“Definitely magical,” Hoseok answered this time with a cheeky grin.

“Best friends get all the details, right?” Taehyung inquired before he made them spill their guts. They were the only ones occupying their couch and besides, everyone else was talking loud enough for their conversation not to be completely crude.

Jimin cocked an eyebrow. “I suppose so, but only if it works both ways.”

Yeah, Taehyung never learned the word shameless.

“Deal. So what do you guys do? Just switch constantly? Or does Yoongi usually top and you guys like, cater to his every big-dicked whim?”

For some reason, both Jimin and Hoseok burst out laughing.

Confused, he asked, “What?”

“Oh, baby.” Jimin cupped his cheeks, cooing like he was some innocent puppy. “Yoongi’s usually our designated bottom.”

He blanched.
“No way. Absolutely not. Min Yoongi—”

“Likes taking it from dancers because, and I quote, ‘The stamina is fucking impressive,’” Hoseok interrupted him, looking extremely smug.

Taehyung blinked. “My whole reality has shifted. I don’t know what’s real anymore.”

Jimin patted his thigh in comfort. “I didn’t realise you’d thought so long and hard about our sex life. So, what about you?”

Taehyung raised his eyebrows, propping himself up on his elbow. “Oh, I fuck Jeongguk’s brains out, obviously.”

Once again, his friends burst out laughing, but at least this time he was in on the joke.

“Taehyungie, I think the last time you fucked someone was in high school.”

He tugged on the collar of his shirt, trying to remember. All he could conjure were distorted memories of bright neon lights and loud music. “Nah, it was last year. I drank way too much, banged some twink in Taemin’s bathroom, and ate absolute shit trying to go down the stairs because for some reason I was too drunk to take the elevator.” When both of his friends eyed him skeptically, he defensively added, “The orgasms are better, okay? At least with a decent top. Oh, c’mon, You know I’m right. I know you both switch.”

“Yeah, yeah, fine you make a decent point. But what about Jeongguk?”

Taehyung had to take a moment just to...bask in the knowledge of what having consistent sex with Jeon Jeongguk felt like.

“He’s...incredible, honestly. He’s so good to me, and he can switch from rough to gentle so fast, and he takes care of me and it’s...nice. Yeah. It’s really nice.”

Jimin nudged him with his elbow. “You deserve to be taken care of a little, Taehyungie. Especially after a day like yours. Even if you sound like such a fucking sap when you talk about it.”

“Could you three please stop discussing your rather disappointing sex lives at the top of your lungs?” Coach Hwang requested loudly from in front of them.

“Sorry, Coach!” Hoseok answered, smiling warmly even though she couldn’t see them.

Meanwhile, Taehyung scoffed, “‘Disappointing?’”

“She’s just bitter because she probably hasn’t gotten any in twenty years,” Jimin affirmed, crossing his arms as if that made his assumption more true.

The three of them laughed at that, continuing their discussion in a slightly quieter manner for the rest of the ride.

They arrived at the Seoul Arts Center, and suddenly, everything was a blur of signing in, getting numbers, meeting judges, intermingling with other teams, evaluating their competition, getting into competition attire, running through their routine once more in an empty room, before finally gathering in the hallway beside the door leading to backstage.

Hwang had disappeared for the moment, and Taehyung took the opportunity to check his phone while he stretched.
gukkie ❤️

i’m with yoongi-hyung! we’re sitting right up front, but there’s a row of girls decked out in yonsei colours in front of us. should make us easier to spot honestly

gukkie ❤️
i won’t say anything because i know it’s bad luck other than i love you and you’re going to do great! i can’t wait to see you perform

Me

you’re so sweet baby thank you ❤️

Me

love you so much

His nerves were beginning to catch up to him now, but he’d sort of expected as much. After all, he’d done this a few times. Still, Jeongguk’s text instilled him with a force of confidence he’d never felt before, and knowing he was out there in the audience, here to support him, made him want to work harder and perform better than ever. Jeongguk had once said it wasn’t the same, playing when Taehyung wasn’t watching from the sidelines. And now he’d begun to understand what Jeongguk meant.

“The routine is okay, right?” he inevitably fretted to Jimin, who sat stretching beside him.

“Little late now, don’t you think?” Jimin joked. But upon receiving Taehyung’s icy glare, he hastily amended, “It’s a mind-blowing routine, Taetae. Seriously. I’ve never seen anything like it. It’s so gorgeous and unique. Sorta like the person who thought it up.”

“Aw, you’re gonna make me blush.” Taehyung scrubbed his face quickly, clearing himself of any trace of nervousness. “Okay. This is cool. This is fine. We can do this. We’ve done it a million times before. It’s fine.”
But it wasn’t fine. If they messed up, or if the judges weren’t impressed, the blame would fall on him. This was his team, his choreography, his tracks. If they didn’t score well, ultimately, it was his fault.

No pressure.

“I think I might pass out,” he whispered, feeling dizzy.

Jimin wrapped his arms around him, pulling him to his feet in a tight hug. He saw little black spots when he stood up. “Absolutely not, Kim Taehyung. I’m serious. Remember, Hwang drooled over it. She thinks it’s brilliant. You’re brilliant. And beautiful. And talented. And the best best friend in the universe. Have some faith in yourself, please. You’ve earned it.”

Taehyung nodded; even if he couldn’t speak, his best friend’s words were reassuring.

The rest of their team was chattering loudly, but they instantly quieted when Hwang’s voice filled the busy hall. She stood proudly in front of them, black track jacket and leggings standing out against their all-white attire.

“Okay, listen up. As you know, we’re going last. This is good and bad. Bad because the judges will probably be tired by the time they get to us. Good because it means our routine is the last one on their mind. We have a reputation. They’ll be eager to see us no matter what. They’re going to look forward to your performance, which means each and every one of you have to deliver on every aspect. There should be no holding back. Leave that in practice. This is the real deal.” She paused, and they all nodded to show their understanding. A small smile lit up her typically stoic face. “I’m really proud of all of you, and this performance you’ve put together. I think you’ll take the judges by surprise. I’ve never seen another university do this, but it’s a risk worth taking. I have no doubt it will pay off. I’d also like to thank our recently reinstated captain, without whom we wouldn’t have this beautiful routine. I know Taehyung-ssi spent several long nights in the studio with Hoseok-ssi working on it, and I couldn’t be more grateful.” He ducked his head, cheeks pink, smile shy. It felt weird receiving praise from his coach. Those of his teammates who could reach clapped him on the back and shoulders and ruffled his hair. Jimin slapped his ass. “That being said,” his coach continued. “This is a team, and the teamwork I’ve seen even in the past few weeks has been beyond my expectations in every way. Let’s show that to the judges tonight, okay?”

“Yes, Coach!” they all called, clapping echoing off the dark tile floor.

She nodded her approval. “You can head into the green room. They’ll show the competition from the television, and that way you can keep track of everything. I have to go rendezvous with some of the other coaches, but I’ll be back fifteen minutes before we take the stage. Until then, if you need anything, go to Taehyung-ssi, and if it’s a big issue, he’ll contact me. I’ll see you all soon.”

They said their goodbyes, then ducked into the green room they’d been assigned. Last semester, they’d had to cram three teams in a room for the autumn competition, but they seemed to have located more space this time around, and they had the room all to themselves. Snacks and drinks littered the counters, but none of them were interested. Taehyung considered it bad luck to eat for a performance, Hoseok didn’t trust the packaged food, and he knew Jimin got sick if he put anything in his stomach before he danced, so they abstained, and instead trained their eyes on the large television screen displaying the stage. Their competition would be aired nationwide for every participating university’s city, which meant they could watch it from backstage.

The competition was good, obviously. They were the top university dance teams in the country. But he noticed something else. Something he’d predicted.
“They’re all sticking to ballet or contemporary,” Hoseok noted, voicing his thoughts aloud.

“It happens every competition,” Seulgi pointed out, toying with the collar of her white cropped hoodie. “The judges will always score higher for it. The classical mindset and all that since they’re a panel of old traditionalists.”

Taehyung drummed his fingers on the counter. “Which is why we’re shaking things up. I’m confident we’ll still earn points where it matters. Skill, movement, synchronisation, spacing...they can’t dock us for things like that just because of our tracks. Sure, if they decide to be prejudiced elitists we might lose a point or two in musicality, but I don’t think we will.”

University dance team competitions were typically open-variety. Any type of dance was accepted, be it ballet, contemporary, hip hop, modern, jazz, etc. However, the teams that scored the highest were always those who performed ballet, and occasionally those who did contemporary, because they were the most traditional in terms of technical dance. The judges were older, typically retired dancers who’d done maybe one style their whole lives. And Taehyung thought the blatant prejudice was getting a little old. He had done two styles of dance for twelve competitions over the past three years, and he was getting sick of it. So he’d decided to make a change.

Hwang thought his idea was brilliant. He still wasn’t so sure.

But, the closer it got to their performance slot, the more eager he felt to show them all what a real dance team could do. Screw the fabricated, people-pleaser bullshit.

Dance was his art. And he refused to dance for anyone else besides himself for the rest of his life.

His heart raced, probably loud enough for his whole team to hear, and it just increased with every team that went on stage. They performed, their score was recorded, they were asked to leave for the next team. Same order as always. Every team received their score at the end, and the top three were announced for the entire country.

Obviously, he was scared. They had placed first and second in every competition since he’d been on the team, except for that fluke last year when they’d somehow landed in fourth during the autumn competition. Whatever. It wouldn’t do him any good to dwell on past victories and failures.

Fifteen minutes left. Hwang returned to their green room. There was a bounce in her step, the faintest shine of a smile on her lips. She looked excited, alive. As if this was all she lived for. He understood that.

All of his teammates' gazes were on the screen. Focused on the competition.

And he realised, that wouldn’t help them at all.

“Alright.” Taehyung grabbed the remote, muting the television. “Fifteen minutes to go. Ignore them for a minute. Gather around me in a circle.”

Since he’d become captain, he noticed the thing their team had lacked most was an emotional bond. They were just a group of eight dancers who came together occasionally to pull off a routine. And he hated that. So he’d tried to focus on building cohesion between them, both in the studio and out.

Once everyone had formed a circle, with Taehyung standing between Jimin and Chungha, he said, “I could go on a whole tangent and give you a big speech about how wonderful you all are and
how proud I am, but that’s just me talking. So instead, I’d like us each to go around and say our favourite memory from the season so far.”

It was palpable, real, relivable. Nothing inspired quite like a memory.

“I’ll go first,” he decided. “My favourite memory from this season was our first half time performance. I was terrified because it was my debut as captain to the rest of our university, but I had absolute faith in all of you, and to see the crowds cheering for you guys...that’s all I ever wanted. And I could see that, no matter how many times we do it, being able to get up there and perform a set that we’ve worked on for months will always be the happiest days of our years here. When each one of you graduates with your degree…” He felt a pang in his chest as he thought of Hoseok, who would be moving on in his career in just a few months. “...These are the memories you’re going to look back on. Not the classes, or the late nights in the library, or the scraping by for dinner, but these moments. Surrounded by a team who will love and support you through anything. I got to witness that bond during that game, and I’m so glad I did.” He squeezed Chungha’s hand. “Chungha, your turn.”

And so they went around, telling all of their favourite memories, making each other laugh and tear up and simply look back on the great season they’d had so far.

It was therapeutic. It was invigorating. It was inspirational. And it carried them all the way through to the second to last performance before theirs.

Taehyung led a round of stretches, talked through their routine once more, then followed Coach Hwang through the door to backstage. The team from Ilsan were just finishing their scoring. Once the judges gave them the all-clear, they bowed and departed the stage.

And then it was their turn.

Taehyung gave his team one last smile before leading them confidently on stage. As usual, the theatre they were given to perform in was beautiful. Darkness shrouded the audience, but bright lights illuminated the panel and the stage. Jeongguk was somewhere out there, and the idea filled him with courage. The panel was made up of four judges, three women and one man, all stern-looking with lithe dancer’s builds that had decayed slightly due to age. Glasses perched atop noses. Pens in hand, hovering over scoring cards.

They said nothing, which could have been intimidating if Taehyung wasn’t well versed with the protocol by now. He motioned, and the team bowed, already settled in formation.

“Dance team number eighteen,” Taehyung spoke clearly. “Representing Seoul National University.”

The judges scribbled down their university name, then stared expectantly. Some teams declared their tracks beforehand, some preferred to just dance. The judges had the list in front of them as well, if they were truly curious. Taehyung decided it would be better to let their movement speak for itself, and simply stepped back into his place.

“We hope you enjoy our performance.”

Coach Hwang must have communicated to start their music, because the violins to Alexander Glazunov’s *The Seasons: Winter: Snow* stirred to life, and they began the ballet portion of their routine. Elegant, capturing the feeling of winter and the excitement portrayed by the intricate string section at the memory of fresh snowfall, the enthrallment and innocence of childhood Glazunov had strived to create. Light movements, sweeping arms. However, the track melded seamlessly into
a simple EDM instrumental titled *Ice*, in which they glided smoothly out of ballet and into hip hop. Sharper, creating flawless formations and popping with the beat, fluidly tracing through steps that mimicked the cool, high melody running underneath the hi-hats and bass. Their clothes flowed with them, layers of white individual to each dancer but cohesive enough to earn their costume points. But the track switched again, a gorgeous instrumental jazz remix of Khalid’s *Winter* that prompted them to step out of hip hop and into jazz. Their steps shifted. Kick-ball-changes, axel turns, and chaine turns replacing popping and locking, guiding them through the smooth saxophone narrating a lonely, snowy day, and the way love grows cold as the seasons change. Taehyung didn’t know if the judges liked it. But he knew they had their attention. They’d done three styles in under three minutes. He could feel every eye on him, the eagerness of the audience, the energy from his team. He couldn’t focus on anything else besides moving to the beat, using every inch of the stage required of him, unafraid to stake his claim and push his body to its limits. And if they didn’t like it now, he had a feeling they would when the music shifted for the last time. Saxophone melted into winter piano, supported by sleigh bells and soft chimes in *Winter Memories* that allowed them to turn from jazz into contemporary, blending each element of dance they’d used throughout the performance into one final stretch of music.

He’d known coming into this that ballet and contemporary ultimately resulted in a higher placement. But he’d also known that these judges loved storytelling and a theme to which they could uphold the dance. Their theme was the beauty of winter, and the inevitability of seasons changing, just as dance was beautiful in every form, and would continue to change as time passed. He moved where the music told him to move, outlining the steps he’d traced over and over in his mind upon new ground. It didn’t matter if he’d never set foot on the stage before. He knew the steps. And now the stage did, too. They became one; a platform for art, for performance. Taehyung was nothing but a vessel for his art, no matter how masterfully he executed a glissade, or the leaping fan kick that brought him center stage.

The track stopped.

They stopped.

Silent, apart from their heavy breathing.

The judge sitting farthest to the left peered at them through her glasses before giving them a short nod, telling them to relax their positions.

All of them were on the edges of their seats.

And then the applause rang out, filling the theatre. He couldn’t see due to the lights but it sounded as though a few people got to their feet.

Taehyung couldn’t help the relieved smile that broke out on his face, and he gladly accepted the hand Jimin extended to him, taking Taemin’s in his other.

The judges still didn’t speak, simply examined their score cards, wrote furiously for a moment, then glanced back up at them again before repeating the process.

Taehyung’s heart beat nervously, blood rushing through him. They’d done that. They performed a routine he choreographed with Hoseok at a nationwide competition, and they’d managed to put hip hop and jazz in it.

Practically unheard of at their level.
As soon as the judges set aside their pens, his team bowed.

“Would all dancers please return to the stage?” the male judge requested, and soon the stage was teeming with teams, all huddled in their safe clusters. His team retreated a little farther back to give the other seventeen universities space to stand.

The woman who had been looking at them earlier rose from her seat.

“Your attention, if you would.” As if she didn’t have every eye in the theatre trained on her. “The individual team scoring for this year’s nationwide winter competition, university level, has come to an end. Your coaches will receive your team’s scorecards in due time, to study and improve upon as you will. However, not only is this an evaluation. This is a competition, which implies the presence of winners upon whom will stand the honorary pedestal.”

They didn’t have an actual stand, but Taehyung always thought it would be cool if they did. His mind raced with possibilities, most of them being their inevitable failure since they took too many risks. What if he’d been too bold? Too arrogant. Not exactly out of character for him, and maybe it was finally time he faced the consequences for it. He’d put his teammates at risk. Sure, they’d agreed. He’d showed them the blended routine and the strict contemporary routine, and they’d chosen the former, but still, the choreography was his. What if it wasn’t enough? Too boring? Not thematic enough? He could sit here and come up with a world of possible failures and shortcomings, but the judge had continued speaking and nothing else mattered.

“As always, honors positions will rank from third place to first place.” Taehyung squeezed Jimin and Taemin’s hands, the constriction around his heart lessening a smidge when they squeezed back. “In third place is the team representing Pusan National University, for their excellent display of musicality and staging.”

Excellent musicality in their case certainly meant the fact that they’d stuck to classical. But Taehyung didn’t have it in him to be bitter. He smiled as they bowed and accepted the plaque gifted to them, as well as the check for their university’s program. There was no reason to fault them for abiding by the unspoken laws- their routine was flawless, all beauty and grace, and they’d earned their place on the podium.

The female judge standing beside the first one who had spoken stepped forward. Two silver necklaces decorated her neck, one plunging with her black neckline while the other glimmered on her throat. Her dangling silver earrings caught the spotlights as she tilted her head to speak.

It was Jimin who squeezed his hand this time.

“In second place, for their bold choice in music, cohesive visuals, and outstanding display of technical skill is the team representing Seoul National University.”

Taehyung felt another spark of disappointment, but looked around to locate the second place team and show them some support. But then Jimin was tugging on his hand, glancing anxiously at the judges and saying something that sounded like “Come on, Taehyung, that’s us.”

And holy shit it hit him.

They were the team representing Seoul National University.

They’d somehow managed to win second place.

Taehyung stumbled after Jimin, felt Hoseok’s arm wrap around his waist for a brief hug before they were bowing in front of the judges. His hands only shook a little as he took a hold of the check
for 2.5 million won and the elegant silver plaque given to them. Engraved on it was the name of the competition and the confirmation that, yes, they’d truly won second place.

The judge with the glasses stopped him just as he turned to go stand back with his team, and said quietly, “I’ll be looking forward to what you show us in the spring, Kim Taehyung-ssi. The Korean National Contemporary Dance Company has an eye on you.” She patted his arm, giving him a soft smile.

He felt as if the air had been knocked out his lungs, fully roundhouse kicked in the chest by a few simple words. He bowed graciously, mumbled a promise about showing the full potential of his team, and practically ran to hide behind Jimin.

“And finally…” The man spoke now, consulting a sheet of paper. “In first place, the winner of this competition, selected for their execution of skill, flawless uniformity, and complexity of movement, please congratulate the team representing the University of Incheon.”

The crowd roared, and each team on stage joined in. Taehyung tucked the plaque under his arm to applaud loudly for the winning team, still in a daze from the mere thought that they’d managed to clinch second. Incheon deserved their win. Their routine was beautiful, and it was an honour to compete against them. They stepped out in their pretty pastel gradient outfits to accept their check and award, gave their bows, and the judges waved everyone off stage.

Hwang stood waiting for them in their green room.

“I’m not saying I didn’t think you guys would pull it off, but still, be proud of what you accomplished today,” she greeted them, pride shining in her eyes. Taehyung gladly handed over both items in his hands, enjoying the smile it brought to her face.

“We couldn’t have done it without you, Coach,” Lisa piped up, prompting another round of applause.

Hwang waved off the compliment but a faint pink tinged her cheeks and the tips of her ears.

“I...go mingle with your family, friends, and the other contestants in the lobby, then meet me back here in twenty.”

They laughed, but followed her direction, chatting and congratulating each other as they took the long, convoluted hall out into the lobby of the Arts Center. The last time he was here was in November, when he went to see the Nutcracker with Jeongguk...oh shit.

Jeongguk was here.

The lobby was teeming with people. Taehyung hurriedly pulled out his phone, texting as he walked, trying to type out a quick message to his boyfriend only to run into something very solid.

He stumbled, phone flying out of his grip. A hand pressed against his back, catching him just as Taehyung exclaimed, “Sorry! I wasn’t-”

An adorable rabbit-tooth grin decorated his view, and his heart skipped a beat.

“Found you,” Jeongguk said happily, and Taehyung found himself trapped in the tightest hug ever.

“Oh my god, Jeongguk, we-”

A small yelp escaped him as he was suddenly in the air, spinning fast circles.
“You got second!” Jeongguk shouted joyously. Taehyung clung to him for dear life, although soon enough he was giggling.

“Jeongguk!” he managed to get out through his laughter and the lack of air in his lungs. “Put me down!”

After a few more spins, his feet were planted on the ground once more, but Jeongguk didn’t let go of him.

“You did it,” Jeongguk breathed, looking just as exhilarated as him. “You performed hip hop and jazz at a national competition. And you got second. I’m so proud.”

“I-” Taehyung reached out, cupping his cheeks. “You came. You really came.”

A feather-light kiss landed on his nose. “Of course I did, baby. I promised I would. And you were incredible. I couldn’t take my eyes off you.”

“That’s the idea,” Taehyung teased, tracing his cheekbones with his thumbs. “Thank you for being there.”

“I’m going to be here from now until the day you don’t want me.” Jeongguk returned his teasing, but to be honest, the thought made his stomach turn.

He took a step closer to Jeongguk; they were practically nose-to-nose.

“I’m never not going to want you.”

The moment was perfect; distracted crowd, victory humming in his veins, Jeongguk right there-

But of course…

“Wow, I can’t believe we just did that!” Jimin slung an arm over his shoulders, effectively yanking him back from Jeongguk. “Taehyungie, you wouldn’t believe some of the stuff the other teams were saying to me. Incheon called us an icon. A literal icon.”

Taehyung took one look at those happy crescent eyes and knew he couldn’t be mad.

“Damn, that’s some high praise coming from first place.”

Jimin nodded. “Yeah, no kidding. Hey, where’d my boys go? Yoongi-hyung? Hoseok-hyung?” he called into the crowd, and a moment later, two heads of black hair and matching soft smiles joined them.

Taehyung shot Jeongguk an apologetic look, but he just shrugged and took his hand. A promise to resume their conversation later.

Technically, they did resume the conversation later. That night, to be exact, as Taehyung finally got home after a round of celebratory drinks with his team. Jeongguk was already in his dorm waiting for him, in his sweats and black t-shirt, watching anime on his laptop.

“New season of Haikyuu,” was all Jeongguk said, barely glancing at him.

“You fucking traitor!”

Taehyung practically tore his competition clothes off, not bothering to put on anything over his briefs before dropping his entire body weight on Jeongguk.
“Oof,” his boyfriend wheezed, but made no move to shake him. “I wasn’t watching the new stuff! I wouldn’t do that to you! I was rewatching the last two episodes of season three, I swear!”

“The absolute betrayal.” Even as Taehyung spoke, he nosed Jeongguk’s hair, smelling his delicately scented Tresemme shampoo. Cute baby and his cute sensitive nose. He kissed the top of his head, trailing down his nape to between his shoulder blades.

“How was your celebration?” Jeongguk reached back to tickle his side, but Taehyung swatted his hand away. He was busy kissing, thank you very much.


“At least you don’t have to go into work.”

Leave it to Jeongguk to always find the silver lining.

“That’s true. Thank god. Never again.”

“Never again,” Jeongguk agreed, finally rolling over. Taehyung fell on the bed directly next to him, so close he could smell the mint on Jeongguk’s breath.

Jeongguk blinked once, beautiful wide eyes shining in the near darkness. “Hi.”

“Hi.”

“You said something earlier, y’know.”

“Mm? What did I say?”

“Something about you never not wanting me.”

Taehyung smiled. “And I meant it.”

Jeongguk caressed his cheek, always so gentle. “Is it stupid to make promises so early into our relationship?”

He’d had the same thought a few times. Jimin had commented more than once that they acted more like an old married couple than two university students who had been dating for barely two months.

And then he realised something.

“Our relationship started when we were four and five years old, Jeonggukkie. I think we can make whatever promises we want. It’s been years.”

“That’s the answer I wanted to hear,” Jeongguk admitted, a bashful half-smile on his lips. “Because I promise I’m going to be there for every competition. Every halftime show, every performance, every showcase. I’m going to be there. Mostly because I love you but also the concessions are bomb.”

Taehyung can’t help but laugh, ducking his head into the dip between Jeongguk’s neck and shoulder, feeling both their bodies shake with his chuckles.
“It’s the cookies, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Jeongguk whined. “They’re so fucking good. Like warm and gooey and everything. I think I ate four before they made us find our seats.”

Taehyung slung a leg over Jeongguk’s bulky thigh. “You’re ridiculous. I can’t believe you love the concessions cookies more than me.”

Shrugging, Jeongguk replied, “Maybe if you tasted like chocolate chips we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

“Maybe if you don’t change your attitude, you’ll be sleeping alone tonight.”

The effect was instantaneous. Jeongguk rolled fully on top of him, pinning him against his bed by the wrists.

“Oh?” he breathed, a sudden playful aggression in his voice. “And where exactly do you think you could go, Taehyungie?”

“I don’t know. The floor, maybe?” Jeongguk just snorted incredulously. “Or Minho’s room, he’s right down the hall.”

That got his boyfriend’s attention.

“I think the fuck not.”

Jeongguk forced his knee between his legs and any idea of resistance disappeared from his mind. Taehyung bit his lip, trying to ignore the sudden friction. It only struck him now that he was almost naked.

“Tell me again.” Jeongguk leaned down to murmur against his ear. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“Nowhere,” he said, quickly shaking his head. “I’m staying right here. C’mon, Gukkie, I’m too tired to play. We’ll play in the morning. It’s a Sunday. We’ll have all day.”

“Mm, that’s right,” Jeongguk sighed, relaxing on top of him. “You get some sleep, baby. I might watch one more episode.”

Taehyung gave his best attempt at shoving him off. “I’ve still gotta shower and brush my teeth, don’t try to get rid of me so soon.”

Reluctant, Jeongguk rolled over, freeing him.

“Hey, are you going to do your competition routine for the championship game?” Jeongguk called after him as he got up and ducked into the bathroom.

“Nope,” he called back. “I’ve got a surprise planned for that. And yes, before you ask, it’ll be raunchy. It’s not a championship halftime show if you don’t out-slut the other team.”

“Charming.”

“You’re welcome in advance.”

“Thanks.”
“People are staring,” Jeongguk hissed, words coming out more like a grunt as he strained his arms.

“Yeah. it’s me. I’m people. Keep going.”

Taehyung watched him almost hungrily from where he lay sprawled on a weight-lifting bench, predatory gaze trained on Jeongguk as he worked on his chest and triceps.

“So, what’s this machine called?” Taehyung inquired after a minute.

Jeongguk glared at him, irritated for having to stop his workout again. “The Hammer Strength Machine.”

A burst of laughter came from his lounging boyfriend. “Oh my god. You’re kidding, right?”

“Nope,” he answered through gritted teeth.

“Guess we found your pornstar name.” Taehyung mischievously eyed the workout machine. “Jeonny Hammer Strength Machine.” And as if that were somehow more helpful, Taehyung rolled onto his back, informing him, “Jimin already came up with mine. So now all we have to do is film our sex tape.”

“I love you, but can we please have this conversation some other time?” Jeongguk begged, desperately just wanting to get on with his workout.

He knew letting Taehyung tag along to his daily gym trip was a mistake waiting to happen. But he didn’t think it would be this bad. So far, Taehyung had talked about how easy it would be to suck him off while he did his leg extensions, made way too many jokes about the preacher bench, proved that he could do a front flip on the bar holding the cables, and laid on top of him while he tried to plank. And now Jeongguk apparently had a pornstar name and they were apparently making a sex tape.

“Wait, what’s yours?” he had to ask, the question hitting him as soon as he sat back up. His biceps and pecs ached, but in the way where he knew it meant he was making progress on his body.

Taehyung blinked, a small smirk slowly curling at his lips. “Guess.”

Jeongguk just gave him another glare. “C’mon, move your ass. I want to use that bench.”

He sighed, but stood and let Jeongguk lay down where he’d just been, instead kneeling beside the bench for the closest view possible.

Jeongguk positioned himself under the bar, testing his grip, placing his hands just a little over shoulder-width apart. But he could still feel a pair of eager eyes on him.

“I’m not guessing your pornstar name, Taehyung. I already know your stripper name, and that’s not even fake.”

V. Cutie.

“For all you know, my pornstar name isn’t fake either.”

He barely glanced at him as he muttered, “I wouldn’t be surprised.”
“Hey, that’s mean!” Taehyung actually sounded kind of hurt.

“Sorry, sorry!” Jeongguk instantly retracted his statement, finally turning his head to see Taehyung kneeling there, big brown eyes and pink pout on his face, hands balled into fists on his lap. “You know I didn’t mean it, baby.”

Taehyung lifted his nose in offense but said, “If you lift that in the next ten seconds, I’ll forgive you.”

He went to work instantly, planting his feet, checking his grip one more time before unracking the weight, preserving tension in his arms and chest while moving the bar directly over his chest. As he breathed, he lowered the weight downward, then drove it back up.

“Fuck,” he heard Taehyung breathe beside him. And yeah, okay, that made all the jokes and interruptions worth it.

Still, Jeongguk tried to tune him out as he kept lifting, because honestly, all of Taehyung’s little gasps and barely contained moans were distracting. Not only that, but there were other students around, and Taehyung’s reactions bordered on pornographic.

“Fuck, I want to bite your biceps so bad,” Taehyung whined, chin propped on the edge of the bench. “Gukkie, let’s go home. I wanna go home. Wanna ride your thighs and-”

“Please, oh my god, Taehyung. Stop.” Jeongguk cut him off, breathless and perhaps pink from something other than muscle strain as he re-racked the bar. “I still need to do squats and pushups. I have a championship game in two days, I’m not missing a workout.”

Taehyung tilted his head, giving him his best angry pout. Eyebrows drawn, eyes shining and threatening tears, bottom lip jutted out.

Fuck.

“You’re the world’s biggest baby,” Jeongguk sighed even as he caved, standing up to retrieve his bag and water bottle.

A happy grin immediately broke out on Taehyung’s face and he clutched his bicep. “We can do the squats and pushups together at home! I’ll stand in front of you while we do squats so you have a nice view, don’t worry.”

Jeongguk was a simple man. With simple wants and needs. He wanted to do squats. He needed to see Taehyung’s ass in a pair of tight shorts while they did squats together.

And sometimes things work out in a way where you can get everything you want and need at the same time.

He slung his bag over his shoulder while Taehyung linked their arms together. “Yeah, yeah, fine, sure I guess, whatever, that’s cool, we can do that.”

“Mm, right, it’s not like you’re into that or whatever. You hate it when we get all hot and sweaty together.”

“Do you ever think about waiting until there aren’t other people around?” Jeongguk asked as they exited the on-campus gym, genuinely curious.

Taehyung considered it for a moment, tapping his lips. “Hm, I think about it. And then I realise
there’s absolutely no fun in that. I like watching you blush like you did when we were kids. It’s still cute.”

Jeongguk reached up to self-consciously pat his burning cheeks. “Shut up. I didn’t -and I don’t-blush. You’re just...vulgar. Yeah, that’s it. You’re gross and explicit and really, a menace to society, and it’s nerve-wracking to be around you sometimes. The colour is just from stress, actually.”

“So, you’re stressed when I’m sucking your dick, then? And talking about how big you are, and how much I love getting on my knees for you? Is that stressful for you, hyung?”

The pink colouring his tan skin burned as it deepened to scarlet. “Okay, that’s enough talking for now. Timeout for Taehyungie, I think.”

“Bitch, you are not as funny as you think you are.”

And yet, for some reason, Taehyung went quiet for a few minutes anyway.

Midnight unfolded around them as they walked back to Taehyung’s dorm. The cool air stung his skin and stole his breath, but it felt good against the heat thrumming through his body from his workout. They both had pretty packed schedules on Wednesdays, but they tried to make it work as best as they could, even if that meant squeezing in a gym session after his basketball practice and Taehyung’s dance practice, dragging Taehyung along if only to spend some time with him before the day ended. They didn’t have any classes together this semester, and Jeongguk had found himself missing their early-morning Philosophy lecture more than once. Not because he liked sitting in a lecture hall at eight in the morning, but because he missed Taehyung’s bleary eyes and dull sleepy wit. Then again, instead of being the shoulder Taehyung napped on, he now got to share a bed with him every night, so some things had changed for the better. Even if they didn’t talk all day, he still somehow ended up in Taehyung’s bed come nighttime. They’d long since stopped trying to pretend like he was going to sleep anywhere else.

Really, the only time he slept in his own dorm was when they fought. And of course they fought. A good five years of their relationship were spent fighting. The occasional argument or debate taken too far was inevitable, considering both of their dominant, combative personalities, and yeah, sometimes that resulted in both of them just needing their space. And then a day or two would pass and they’d miss each other too much to be angry anymore, and probably forget what they were arguing about in lieu of cuddling up in front of Crunchyroll with a hot cocoa and caramel macchiato, sharing sweet apologies between cocoa and caramel kisses.

“Gukkie, I’m sorry!” Taehyung wailed last Tuesday, knocking incessantly on his dorm door. “Please open up, I didn’t mean it. You were right, okay? Jane Foster isn’t a valid next Thor, I was just excited about the feminism. The actress playing her isn’t great, and the character has no personality. Please don’t be mad at me anymore.”

Needless to say, he’d opened the door pretty quickly and they’d spent the night binging the Thor trilogy.

“Oh!” Taehyung exclaimed suddenly.

Jeongguk glanced at him. “What?”

“I forgot to tell you! I sent in my dance portfolio to Park Minjun-ssi! I was waiting to include shots from the winter competition and for the check to process, but now that both are done, I sent it in! I know he won’t get back to me for months but I’m so excited.” Tugging on his arm, Taehyung
sighed. “And I’ve started looking at real jobs and oh my god, I’m qualified to teach contemporary and jazz to kids and I got an interview at this studio in Gangnam, and I’m just so…” Taehyung paused, then gave him a shy side-look. “Well, happy. I’m so happy. With you and with my dad and with my life. I- yeah. Happy.”

If anyone had earned the fucking right to be happy, it was the beautiful man next to him. And hearing that he was finally happy, after years of suffering and loneliness, and that he was a part of his happiness…

Jeongguk turned into him, catching Taehyung in a tight hug. “I’m so glad, Taehyungie. I’m so glad you’re happy. And I’m so glad to be a part of your happiness. You’re going to score an incredible teaching gig to hold you off until you get accepted into a company, and I can’t wait.”

Taehyung hugged him back before linking their hands together so they could continue walking. “Are you happy?”

He hesitated, unsure of how to answer. He felt...in a weird spot, and he wasn’t sure how to explain it.

“I’m happy when I’m with you, and Junsoo, and my friends, and when I’m on the court or behind a camera. I think I’m still waiting for some of the pieces of my life to fall together, you know? I don’t have my future planned out, and that makes me a little anxious sometimes. But then I remember all the good things I have right now, and remember that there’s no need to rush into anything. I should just be happy in the present, and worry about all those other things later. Does that make sense?”

stroking along the side of his palm, Taehyung murmured, “That makes perfect sense, Jeonggukkie. I don’t think you need to have your future all planned out. You still have time. Okay? You’re right. Be happy now. And let me worry with you when the time comes. Besides, nothing should be in that head of yours right now apart from your game,” Taehyung teased, poking him in the forehead.

“Hey!” Jeongguk caught his wrist, pressing a quick kiss to the back of his hand. “I’m focused, I swear. I’m also very, very stressed out but that’s beside the point.”

Taehyung squeezed his hand in sympathy. “Want me to give you a massage once we’re back?”

He let his head sag on Taehyung’s shoulder for a second. “What have I done to deserve you?”

“Breathed. Now c’mon, let’s hurry up so we can shower and get massaging. I think we’ll skip on the squats today.”

Jeongguk hated to miss part of his workout routine but the thought of a nice hot shower and Taehyung’s magic fingers ultimately won out. “Yeah, okay, my ass and thighs can go a day without getting toned.”

A soft slap landed on his ass. “Mm, that’s right,” Taehyung confirmed. “You’ll stay plenty perky.”

Jeongguk rolled his eyes, returning the gesture. Taehyung’s ass was significantly softer than his. “Why worry about it when I have Korea’s ass right here?”

“Oh, harder, daddy,” Taehyung moaned, and Jeongguk felt no remorse when he shoved him away. Taehyung staggered, but the mischief never left his eyes.

“That’s it. Back to two feet between us at all times. You’re nasty.” Jeongguk stuffed his hands in
“You like it when I’m nasty,” Taehyung noted, happily sidling up beside him again.

“I hate you.”

“Now, that’s not true, and you know it. You love me. I’m the love of your life. Your best friend. Your soulmate. You love me so much.”

“Yeah, whatever.” Jeongguk looped an arm around his waist. “Take me home, mister.”

Taehyung flashed him a bright boxy smile. “Yes, sir.”

Happy.

Yeah. Jeongguk was happy, too.

... 

“Wow,” Yugyeom marvelled, elbowing him as they entered the massive stadium. “I know we were here last year and the year before, but still. You don’t get used to Jamsil.”

“You don’t get used to Jamsil,” Jeongguk echoed in agreement. The stadium had a ground floor and two elevated floors of seats composing the dome, making the court look like the center of a massive fish bowl with its curved, sloping green half-walls and blue sidelines.

The rest of the team flooded in behind them, loudly Ooh-ing and Aah-ing at the stadium.

“Oh, fuck, we’re so going to own this court,” Chanyeol declared.

“Hell, yeah we are!” Jeonghan’s hand shot up for a high five, which Chanyeol took in a second, the sound of their palms slapping together echoing loudly throughout the stadium.

“Sick,” Youngjae said with a grin, spinning a slow circle to take it all in.

“Hoseok wants to dance here someday,” Yoongi commented quietly, coming up on Jeongguk’s other side. “He talks about it a lot. Not as part of the team, but as his career. Still, he gets super excited whenever we make it to the championship. He said it’s something about the floor, and the way his shoes grip the wood, I don’t know. Something you only get at Jamsil. He’s weird. I like that about him.”

Jeongguk laughed, nudging Yoongi with his shoulder. “I think that’s the sweetest thing I’ve heard you say in weeks. Should I pass on the message?”

Thanks to Taehyung, he had finally cleared up his misunderstanding with Hoseok and they were talking again. He’d approached Jeongguk after his Film Criticism class, lingering awkwardly by the door. And as they walked, Hoseok basically spilled his guts out about that year and Jeongguk was honestly stunned. He’d had no idea. He hadn’t even stopped to think how Hoseok might have felt when they were both playing point guard. He was just so thankful to be on the team freshman year that he hadn’t paid attention to anything else. Least of all the feelings of the guy he looked up to and basically idolised during their first eight pre-season games. Looking back though, it made sense. Jeongguk would’ve been pissed at himself if he were in Hoseok’s position. And now he could see the issue with Namjoon, too. They’d been messing around when Hoseok was clearly
pining for him. Even Jeongguk had seen that. And he’d just figured it was better to let Namjoon deal with it. He had to admit, though, his younger self was pretty selfish, and there’s no way he would’ve let that shit fly today. No sacrificing friends for guys who didn’t even want to take him out on a date. Funny how things worked out, though. Namjoon ended up with Seokjin, which both made perfect sense and was the last outcome anyone would’ve seen coming.

But, most importantly, he’d apologised profusely for the ways he’d wronged Hoseok freshman year and got to be on the receiving end of one of his trademark sunshine smiles for the first time in ages which felt pretty much like heaven, so things were good.

And it meant all of their friends could hang out sometime without there being any drama. Maybe Namjoon’s hepta-date was closer on the horizon than they’d initially thought.

“Pass. I don’t need you spilling my secrets,” Yoongi grumbled.

He laughed again, stopping only at the sound of the doors opening behind them.

Oh, fuck.

Their team came to a halt, openly surveying the second team that had entered the stadium dressed in shades of white, green, and purple.

The team that had blatantly cheated to beat them during their first regular season game. Now in the championship with them.

Oh, how sweet revenge would taste.

Of course, being the diplomat that he was, Namjoon offered them a warm smile. “I’m glad we could meet again before the game. It was certainly...different playing against you at the start of the season, and I’m sure today’s rematch will be quite interesting.”

A guy from the other team stepped forward. He looked tall and lean, a rude curve in the arch of his brows. His jersey read Hyun, 11. “You mean losing against us at the start of the season?”

His team snickered, but Namjoon just extended his hand.

“A rematch will certainly be interesting.”

Hyun glanced at the outstretched display of good sportsmanship and snorted. “I think I’ll pass. I heard SNU’s team is made up of a bunch of cock-suckers, and I’d rather not catch anything.”

“A little late for that,” Yoongi pointed out, stepping forward to stand beside Namjoon. “It’s pretty clear you’ve already caught the wildly contagious ugly and homophobic. Unsurprising that they’re usually a package deal, but I must admit, it’s tragic to witness in person.”

Another guy in green stepped forward, eyeing Yoongi with contempt. “And we’re supposed to be intimidated by you? You’re what, 4’0”? Twelve years old?”

Yoongi just gave them a dangerously calm smile, ignoring the insult that made even Jeongguk’s blood boil. “I think intimidation should be the least of your concerns. You might play dirty, but we can actually play. I say we let the game speak for itself.”

“Let’s just head to the locker room,” Jeongguk muttered, already starting off. Conflict wasn’t really his area of expertise, and the last thing he needed was a pre-game fight to mess up the team’s headspace.
“Hey, you! Jeon!” Hyun called after him. “Isn’t your daddy famous? Does he know he’s got a fucking fairy princess running around and taking it up the ass?”

Okay. Maybe conflict suddenly became his area of expertise.

He whirled around, snarling, “You keep your filthy fucking mouth shut and stay in your fucking lane. You don’t know a goddamn thing about me.”

Thoroughly undeterred, the guy stuffed his hands in his pockets and jeered, “Our dance team was gossiping about it the other day, and I couldn’t help but overhear that SNU’s star point guard was hooking up with a stripper. They had pictures of the guy and everything. I mean at that point, why not just fuck a girl? Between the heels and the makeup, can you even tell the difference?”

Jeongguk felt seconds away from snapping the guy’s fucking neck.

“It doesn’t take a fucking genius to use their eyes and see a dick, dumbass,” Yugyeom chimed in, but he wasn’t really helping. In fact, he just added fuel to the fire.

“Oh? Maybe he likes him then because it makes him feel like less of a disgusting excuse for a man, fucking a guy who never learned how to act his fucking gender. Does it make you feel better, Jeon? More like a man even when you’re sucking cock? You know, I heard he’s a slut. The guy you mess around with. Will get on his knees for pretty much anyone if they pay. Is that what you do? Does your rich daddy’s money go to getting some desperate little whore to spread his legs just to boost your self esteem?”

He didn’t even think. He just pulled his fist back and then suddenly he heard a crunch and blood was spraying everywhere. On his knuckles, his chin, coating Hyun’s face, dripping down his shirt.

“You fucking bitch!” Hyun screamed through his broken, bleeding nose, punching him straight in the jaw. A sharp pain blazed through his skull, laced with needles and fire, and he staggered back.

“Oh my god, Jeongguk!”

His teammates immediately crowded around him to shield him from another retaliating blow but all he could hear was Taehyung’s voice, who came tearing through the team to yank him back a step.

Apparently the dance team had arrived right before everything went to hell. He felt numb, his face hurt, his hand hurt, but mostly he was terrified he’d fucked up the game for his team.

Careful fingers cupped his face. “Gukkie, baby, are you okay? Oh my god, you’re swelling up. Jiminie, can you go see if there’s ice anywhere? Maybe see if concessions are open and ask them for some wrapped in a towel?”

The sound of footsteps pounding on hardwood floor filled the stadium as Jimin presumably ran out.

Jeongguk finally blinked his eyes open, ignoring the painful throb every movement sent through his skull. Taehyung’s dark eyes blinked back at him, wide with concern and fear.

“Are you okay?”

“Y-Yeah,” he managed to force out. “Just...a little bruised, I think.”

Taehyung’s brow furrowed, concern transforming to plain worry. “Why’d you do it, Gukkie?”
Jeongguk knew that the guy had thrown about a hundred insults at him in less than two minutes, but the only one that stuck in his mind was, “He called you a whore.” His mouth felt cottony, as if it were filled with gauze.

Taehyung gave him a small smile, shaking his head. “Always so valiant, Jeon Jeongguk, but I’ve been called much worse. You don’t need to defend my honour next time, okay?”

But he shook his head, his father’s words ringing in his ears. “I knew because you never once stood up for Taehyung. You sat back and watched as me and half the kids in your school tormented him on a daily basis.”

He was right. And Jeongguk was determined to finally stand up for him.

“I had to, Taehyungie. You don’t understand. I never did when we were kids. I can’t fix it but…” His injury was making it hard to think. “I had to,” he repeated.

Taehyung just shook his head again, although his eyes shone with the light of Seoul’s cityscape at night, and that was enough for Jeongguk.

“C’mon, tough guy, let’s just get you in the locker room.”

Jeongguk nodded, head pounding too much to protest as Taehyung supported him with an arm around his waist, draping Jeongguk’s over his shoulders.

“So that’s the skank everyone’s talking about?” the guy who’d argued with Yoongi commented. “I don’t really see the hype.”

Taehyung, although often wise, rarely had the self-control to back down from a challenge. He shot the player a filthy look, laughing mirthlessly, “Yeah, that’s me. SNU’s favourite skank. Now if you’ll excuse us-“

“Don’t let him fucking say that,” Hoseok growled, cracking his knuckles. All of a sudden, he looked a far cry from his usual happy, sunshine self.

“It’s not worth getting all riled up over, hyung,” Taehyung said with a dismissive wave. “They’re just scared because they know they’re going to lose tonight, and they’ll stoop to just about anything to throw off our team. It’s really a pathetic tactic but we can’t all just rely on the skills of our players, hm? Now you can go cry about your poor little nose to your coach, and Jeonggukkie can tell him every detail about all the nasty shit you had to say, and the game will probably be suspended. Forfeited if you’re lucky, but let’s face it, that won’t fly. Or we can keep this between us and you can let out all that pent-up aggression on the court. Fair?”

Jeongguk clung tight to his shoulder, waiting for the verdict. It never failed to amaze him how quick Taehyung could think, how easily he analysed every possible outcome of even the worst situations, and shot back witty, sharp remarks to boot. Yeah, Taehyung might say it got him into a lot of trouble, but Jeongguk had always admired him for it. And so had his father, apparently.

The opposing team looked to Hyun, who must either be their center or point guard, and he just muttered a low, “Yeah, whatever. See you on the fucking court.”

“Ooh, scary,” Taehyung mocked under his breath, and Jeongguk let him guide him all the way to the locker room on the far right side of the court, although his vision had started to clear and his head didn’t feel as fuzzy. “Seriously, screw him,” Taehyung declared as he helped Jeongguk sit on a bench inside. The Jamsil locker rooms were nicer than any of the university ones he’d ever been in, with glistening white tile and glossy walls, padded benches and the sweet smell of apple air
Jeongguk sighed and planted his forehead on Taehyung’s shoulder to steady the spinning room, only glancing up when he heard loud footsteps.

“Here,” Jimin said, passing Taehyung a washcloth. Cold flooded his skin as Taehyung pressed it against his jaw, feeling the ice seep into the injured area.

As Jeongguk looked around, blinking against the bright lights, he noticed his team surrounding him for the first time, all wearing looks of equal concern and anger. Were they angry at him? Had he fucked up?

“Sorry,” he murmured, gently pushing Taehyung away. He didn’t deserve his nurturing. “I shouldn’t have let my temper get the better of me.”

“Don’t apologise.” Namjoon crouched down beside him, a hand placed on his shoulder for comfort. “He had it coming.”

If even Namjoon condoned his violence, maybe he hadn’t screwed up as much as he thought.

“He’s a prick,” Seokjin agreed. “And his sense of humour is shit. That’s enough for a broken nose right there if you ask me.”

Jeongguk laughed in spite of his injury, and didn’t fight as Taehyung returned to his aching jaw with the pack of ice.

“We’re not gonna get penalised for it, right?” he fretted.

“No way, dude.” Yugyeom held up his phone for Jeongguk to see. “I recorded the whole thing. If the officials decide to question it, I can show them all of the disgusting shit he was saying. They’ll be on your side. Besides, he punched you back, so he can’t argue that you attacked him for no reason.”

“Sweet.” He relaxed against the wooden slats separating the benches and let his eyes fall shut while Taehyung continued to soothe his swollen jaw.

After a few moments, his teammates dissipated to change out and do their regular pregame hype, and the dance team went to go set up on the sidelines, so for a moment, it was just them.

The way he liked it.

“It was really sexy watching you throw that punch, you know,” Taehyung whispered into his ear.

Jeongguk opened one eye, watching him while a smug smile made its way on his face. “Yeah?”


“Where’s the fun in that?” His words still sounded garbled, every movement of his mouth increasing the pain.

“The fun is in not breaking your jaw, dumbass.”

Jeongguk attempted to speak properly. “S’not broken. Just hurts. Kiss it better.”

“I’m not kissing your bruises. That’ll just make it worse.”
He reached out, clutching the front of Taehyung’s (his) jersey. “Kiss it better,” he demanded. “Or I’m gonna be sad.”

Taehyung’s soft smile lit up his entire world. “Well, we can’t have a sad Gukkie on game day.” Cupping Jeongguk’s cheeks carefully, he planted a soft kiss on his forehead, then the mole under his lip, and finally his jaw, and he swore some sort of soothing magic dissolved through that one kiss and felt as if he could win a thousand games. “Better?”

Jeongguk grinned, able to fully ignore the dull throb in his skull. “Perfect.”

“Good. Now turn around and hold still so I can put your hair up.”

He did as asked of him, trying to look straight ahead as Taehyung set the ice down and slid the hair tie off his wrist.

“This is the last time I get to do this, you know. End of the season and all that,” Taehyung hummed. He felt delicate fingers gather his hair, stroking through more than necessary just to help him relax.

“I’ll always let you put up my hair, Taetae.”

“Cutie,” Taehyung mumbled, sounding distinctly more flustered than he’d been a minute ago. A small tug and then a few twists as Taehyung finished the bun, wrapping the hair tie around it twice to keep it all in place. “There. Good to go.”

Without giving him a chance to step away, Jeongguk looped his arms around Taehyung’s waist and pulled him to stand between his legs, kissing him slow and sweet.

“Do I get anything special if we win?” he murmured against his soft, glossy lips. Of course he was all made up. He had his biggest performance of the season today.

“You get crowned the national champions,” Taehyung replied, kissing him again before adding, “Isn’t that enough?”

Smiling, Jeongguk answered, “A little personal incentive never hurt.”

Taehyung pulled back to scrutinise him. Finally, when he realised Jeongguk was being serious, he tapped his lip before deciding, “If you win, you get to pick anywhere on my body to pierce however you’d like.”

Oh fuck.

Yeah, he’d desperately wanted to win beforehand. Would sacrifice pretty much anything to clinch this game, especially to see the look on the Incheon team’s faces. But this promise? Upped the ante considerably.

And he already knew exactly where and what that victory piercing would be.

“That’s a pretty damn good deal. Better wear that jersey loud and proud, baby.”

“Always, golden boy.”

He got in one final kiss before reluctantly escorting Taehyung to the exit. Once he left, Jeongguk turned back to his team and easily fell into their light banter, joining in with everyone who teased Yoongi when he came back after a mysterious fifteen minute absence.
When Coach Yun first arrived, Jeongguk felt a wave of anxiety. What if the Incheon players had ratted him out? But his coach said nothing, and Jeongguk’s nerves slowly eased. It wasn’t worth being nervous about anything else besides tonight’s game.

Except right after his long and inspirational pep talk, his coach pulled him aside.

“Jeon? Could I talk to you for a moment?”

Anxiety returning full-throttle, he took a step forward and allowed his coach to herd him off to the side.

He fixed Jeongguk with an intense look, something brewing in his dark eyes. “I heard about your little incident earlier.”

Gaze dropping to the floor, he mumbled, “I’m sorry. I know I shouldn’t have retaliated or gotten involved. My feelings got in the way of thinking clearly. It won’t happen again. Please don’t bench me.”

To his surprise, Coach Yun shook his head. “I’m not going to bench you, kid. Sure, violence isn’t the answer, yaddah-yaddah-yaddah, but sometimes people just needed a little sock to the nose every once in a while. The things that guy said to you deserved more than a punch if you ask me, but you can’t tell anyone else that I said that. I just want you to know that this team should feel like a safe place for you, and if it ever stops feeling like that, then I want you to tell me so we can solve it as a group. Okay? I’ve talked to some of the other guys who I know are going through the same thing as you, but I just wanted you to know. You mean a lot, not just to me, but to everyone here, and I can’t wait to watch you give that guy what he deserves on the court today. Without getting penalised, of course. Don’t want to give them more free throws than necessary.”

Jeongguk grinned, ducking his head. “Of course not, Coach. And thanks, for, uh, talking to me and the other guys, too.”

“Yeah, yeah.” His coach waved him off, pretending to act tougher than he really was. “No need to get all sentimental, Jeon. You just worry about winning today, got it?”

“Yes, Coach.”

All he had to do was worry about winning. No big deal. He could do this.

“Then let’s head to the court.” His coach spoke up a little louder, motioning everyone out of the locker room. They did one last chant to hype each other up before racing out, feet pounding on the hardwood floor as they burst out of the locker room and onto the court. The stands erupted, an intimidating but exhilarating mix of red, white, black, green, and purple roaring out players’ names and their chosen university. Instinctually and immediately, his eyes were drawn to the sidelines where Taehyung stood warming up with his dancers. He caught Jeongguk’s eye, flashing him a wink before bending over to touch his toes.

He’d gotten so fucking lucky.

But now was not the time to be distracted by Taehyung’s ass. He could see the Incheon team on the far side of the court, already shooting free throws, looking mean and sweaty as usual. Hyun shot him a glare, but the cameras were in place and filming, and not much else could be done, thank god for that. He put the adrenaline coursing through him to use, fetching a ball before jogging back to their designated warm-up basket.

Just as he went to shoot, Namjoon elbowed him.
“What’s up?”

Namjoon jerked his chin towards the stands. “Is that your family?”

Following his gaze, Jeongguk felt a wide smile blossom on his face at the sight of Junsoo jumping up and down in the stands, still in his school uniform, waving a white and red homemade sign that read in glitter glue: Jeon Jeongguk - 05 ❤ His father and stepmom stood next to him, pride beaming from his stepmom’s pearly smile while his father watched him in careful analysis, holding Junsoo’s shoulder.

They came to see him.

And suddenly, he understood why Taehyung had been so excited when he showed up at his competition. Yes, his family always watched his games on television, but they hadn’t ever physically come to support him, and feeling their presence in the massive, daunting stadium made all the difference.

He had two big reasons to win, and both of them were standing just past the sidelines.

On some kind of miraculous fluke, he managed to sink every single one of his warm up shots, accepting the high fives from his teammates every time he caught his rebound.

The ref blew his whistle to signal the end of warm ups, and he knew the cameras were rolling now. Coach Yun motioned them to the bench where they got their lineup for the first quarter, and Jeongguk practically had to beg for a slot.

“I don’t want you tiring out before the second half, Jeon,” his coach protested, attempting to put Mingyu in for him.

He didn’t understand. Jeongguk needed to know he played a role in taking this home for his team.

“Please, Coach, you know I can do it, I’ve done it before, just let me play.”

Coach Yun gave him a critical look, but finally succumbed. “Fine. Jeon, I want you out there with Sungjae, Minho, Yoongi, and Seokjin.”

He bowed furiously. “Thank you, Coach, thank you!”

The ref blew his whistle. They raced out to the screams of the crowd and found their spot at half.

Every member of the Incheon team had a set face simmering with anger over their fight earlier, snarls barely controlled, and his team didn’t mind reciprocating in the slightest.

They were going to make them pay.

The last whistle.

And they were off.

Jeongguk felt seemingly random stabs of pride throughout the entire first quarter. He had gotten to play with some of the best guys in the world this season. Even as the other team played dirty, throwing elbows and sticking their feet out for trips whenever possible, his team remained respectable. They played a clean game. They waited for the refs to do their job, and got more free throws in the first quarter than they got in most games. The opposing team slowly realised that their tactic from their first match wasn’t going to work, and they shifted to playing a cleaner game by the second quarter, which was fine by him.
He preferred it this way, knowing they’d earned every shot they made. He focused on his job, getting in the Incheon players’ space and under their skin, using everything he’d learned over nine years of honing his sport coupled with the tips he’d picked up from Taehyung this year, and managed eight steals in the first half alone.

When the whistle blew to signal the end of the half, Jeongguk was sweating bullets, heaving for air, and feeling the best he had in years.

He loved being on the court, fighting tooth and nail for a victory he knew his team deserved.

They crowded together immediately, hyping each other up, congratulating particularly good plays, and receiving Coach Yun’s briefing for the second half.

Jeongguk would sit out for third so he could recoup his energy for fourth. Predictable, but annoying nonetheless.

For now, he plopped down on the metal bench, downing a bottle of water and curious to see what the dance team had prepared. Taehyung had said it was a surprise. He’d also said it was raunchy but Jeongguk tried not to get his hopes up.

Incheon’s dance team took the court first, but all Jeongguk could think about was the fact that they had been dissing Taehyung behind his back. Trash talk was normal in competitive sports, but still, it made him furious seeing how much support Taehyung had given them at the competition. He tried to focus on their routine, evaluate it in some way, but honestly he didn’t give two fucks if Taehyung wasn’t the one dancing. They chose an overplayed pop song, no doubt to make sure the crowd recognised it, but they were fairly decent dancers. No Taemin, Kai, Hoseok, Chungha, Seulgi, Lisa, Jimin, or Taehyung, but obviously good enough seeing as they’d won first at the winter competition.

Their routine continued on for about four minutes. The crowd clapped and sang along, marvelling at all the proper spots, but thankfully, it ended. Jeongguk’s interest wandered to Taehyung, who was watching the other dance team with a surprising amount of intensity. He could see the gears in his mind at work, analysing their moves and calculating the best way to beat them come the spring competition. But a small smile remained on his face the entire time.

To Jeongguk, it looked like pity. Like he knew that once they got out there, the crowd wouldn’t even remember what song the Incheon team had danced to.

As soon as the applause died down and they vacated the court, Taehyung motioned for his team to stand up. They somehow managed to look massively superior in their perfectly coordinated outfits and unmatched confidence, all sporting players’ jerseys like medals as they made their way to half while the announcers voiced them in.

Jeongguk made eye contact with Taehyung, who stared at him directly from dead-center with a devilish gleam in his pretty, dark eyes. And then the beat dropped, and Jeongguk once again remembered Taehyung’s comment about picking the music that best suited his audience.

IU’s Jam Jam glossed through the speakers, pouring like liquid sugar over the entire stadium and Jeongguk felt as if he were drowning in the beat.

Instead of matching the choreography to her voice, Taehyung had decided to move in rhythm with the hi-hats during the verses, so while her voice glided through the stadium, slow and seductive, the dancers moved with sharp, accentuated grace, which melted perfectly into the chorus. Jeongguk only spared a second to glance back, but the entirety of the stands were on their feet, and
the younger crowd sang along. The part that roped everyone in, aside from the hair-tossing and
hip-rolling, however, was how clear it became that the dancers were having fun. They were
smiling, and parts of the choreography had them interacting—catching hands, doing complex
partner spins, and tossing each other into the air—which made it so much more engaging. Jeongguk,
of course, couldn’t even consider glancing away from Taehyung, resisting the urge to devour him
whole when he dropped to his knees during the bridge, rolling his neck and doing positively sinful
things with his slender arms above his head. He breathed out a sigh of relief when Taehyung
sprang to his feet, boosting Jimin up for an elevated butterfly flip. It seemed like the song passed in
the blink of an eye. The dancers struck an impressive formation pose, and suddenly it was over, the
rise and fall of their chests the only sign of movement.

Jeongguk had never felt more proud of the Jeon 05 on Taehyung’s body.

The stands absolutely lost it, cheering and waving various university propaganda. When the danced
team relaxed, Taehyung’s usually so carefully-crafted stoic facade slipped and the brightest, most
shy smile Jeongguk had ever seen from him shone through, eyes scrunched into adorable little
crescents as he adjusted his cute red bandana and bowed along with his team.

He and the rest of the basketball team got to their feet, applauding and hollering louder than
anyone in the crowd. Jeongguk wanted to greet him and tell him what an incredible job he did, but
since the SNU team went second instead of first, the basketball players didn’t have any time before
Coach Yun was calling them together for a last minute rundown, then sending his selected five for
this quarter back onto the court.

The ref blew his whistle once more and the game resumed.

Jeongguk had to sit through an agonising fifteen minutes on the bench, but the score remained
consistent. They were winning, 52:44. Frighteningly close. He was itching to get in and just finish
it, but he had to wait until finally the whistle blew and he jumped to his feet, barely sticking around
to hear his Coach’s instructions before dashing onto the court. Namjoon, Bogum, Yoongi, and
Seokjin followed him.

Not a bad final lineup. He trusted them. They could win this.

The other team had rotated their players as well, and Jeongguk found himself eye-to-eye with that
Hyun prick, whose nose had been bandaged severely.

It was a good look on him, more flattering than the ugly sneer he wore.

The ball tipped in Incheon’s favour. Namjoon raced after the guy dribbling down the court while
Jeongguk took off after Hyun, keeping just enough to his side to make him look open to his other
teammates. But as soon as the ball arced through the air, Jeongguk leapt in front of him, snatching
the ball and sprinting back to the other side. Bogum kept pace with him, and as they neared the
basket, Jeongguk passed it his way, feeling a rush of pride as Bogum shot and the ball sank cleanly
through the hoop.

His heart continued to pound as they continued to rack up points. And soon enough…

The final whistle blew.

“SNU wins against INU, final score counting in at 68:60!” the announcers' voices boomed over
the huge stadium as the crowd rose to their feet and let out a cacophony of celebratory hollers,
claps, and chants.
Jeongguk grinned, joining his teammates in the center of the court where they high fived and hugged to their hearts’ content, and even pitching in when they decided to hoist Yoongi up on their shoulders and parade him back to the sidelines.

Yet the constant stream of Taehyung, Taehyung, Taehyung never left his mind, and without giving it much thought, he knew there was only one thing left to do.

He didn’t even feel every eye and camera in the stadium on him as he raced over to the dancers.

Taehyung was already waiting for him, beaming brightly, but not so much as to come off as overly friendly. And Jeongguk decided right then and there that he never wanted Taehyung to think he wasn’t proud of being with him again. “Gukkie, I’m so-”

Jeongguk swept him into his arms and twirled him in the air. He cared about what Taehyung had to say, but he cared about loving him more. So, before he let his anxiety get the better of him, he kissed Taehyung, trying to convey just how grateful he was to have him in his life. As his lover, his partner, his best friend. As everything they’d ever been to each other, and everything they would be. That kissing him in front of the entire nation was an honour. At first Taehyung stiffened, but Jeongguk could feel his smile as he relaxed into the kiss, looping his arms around his neck and tilting his head, feeling every chaste brush of their lips. This eager, innocent love that they’d built their lives around.

When they broke apart, Jeongguk rested his forehead against Taehyung’s, eyes and ears shut to the deafening roar around them. Once again returning to the safe little space they’d carved out for themselves in the world so many years ago.

“You really are the love of my life.”

Taehyung breathed in, slow and deep.

“And you’re mine. I love you. More than anything. And I’m so proud of you. Congratulations, golden boy. The nation’s champion.”

But even as his heart swelled with triumph, he murmured the honest words that came to mind.

“I don’t care about that. As long as I’m your champion, nothing else matters.”

Taehyung tucked a stray strand of hair behind his ear. “My champion. You always have been, you know.”

Jeongguk laughed. “When did you get so sentimental?”

“You must be rubbing off on me. It works both ways, I guess, although I seriously think you got the better end of the deal.”

He caressed Taehyung’s cheek, gently lowering him back to the ground. “I definitely got the better end of the deal.”

A sharp smack landed on his chest, and Jeongguk pretended to wheeze, doubling over. “Shut up, we both know I’m the lucky one,” Taehyung retorted.

As soon as they pulled away from each other, Jeongguk looked around, noticing the entire stadium had erupted into cheers. For them. Cameras angled in their direction, capturing every minute, but the stands just cheered.
Not the reaction he’d been expecting, to be completely honest. This...this was so much more than he ever could have asked for.

“I think they’re watching us,” Taehyung pointed out with a giggle. “Oh my god, we kissed on national television. Your dad’s gonna kill me.”

Jeongguk felt the familiar stab of anxiety but pushed it aside. “No, he won’t. He’ll come around. You’ll meet them outside with me, won’t you?”

Taehyung opened his mouth, but was effectively cut-off by the loud cry of, “Hyung!”

He turned, only to be knocked into by a little skinny body in a blue vest, tie, and dress pants.

Jeongguk grinned, happiness blossoming in his chest. “Junsoo-yah!” Ignoring his brother’s protests, he swept him into his arms as well, repeating the spins he did with Taehyung, only faster and higher just to see his brother laugh.

“Put me down, put me down!” Junsoo chanted even as a stream of giggles followed.

He spotted his stepmom as she ran to his side in black pumps, waving while she panted, “I’m so sorry! I tried to tell him no but he slipped down here when I wasn’t looking!”

She looked strangely out of place among all the university students and basketball players with her crisp navy pencil skirt, blazer, and white blouse, but Jeongguk wouldn’t have her any other way.

“It’s no problem,” he set Junsoo down and gave her a tight hug. “I’m really glad you guys came.”

Involuntarily, he craned his neck over her shoulder, searching the crowd. “Is he...?”

Taehyung nudged his elbow. “There.”

Jeongguk followed his slim finger to where it pointed out his father attempting to navigate the rushing crowd. He looked even more out of place than his stepmom, clearly having just come from the office.

As he approached, his father gave Jeongguk a short nod. “Good job out there...” he said, awkwardly rubbing his neck.

He returned the nod, tugging Junsoo and Taehyung closer. “Thanks. I, um, was just telling Sae-eomma...I’m glad you came. It...means a lot.”

His father just nodded again, gaze wandering to Taehyung briefly. It almost looked like he was going to say something, but quickly changed his mind.

To his surprise, however, his stepmom chimed in. “Your dance was lovely, Taehyung-ah. You’re very talented, and it’s clear you’ve trained your team well.”

Taehyung examined his shoes, a shy pink tinting his cheeks. “Well, um, thanks. If I’d had known Jeongguk’s family was attending, I would’ve, uh....chosen different music. Sorry about that. Gotta appeal to the university crowd, you know.”

But she waved him off and squeezed his shoulder before joining Jeongguk’s father.

“Come along, Junsoo, we’ll go out for dinner.”

His brother gave him one last hug. Then, flashing Taehyung a small smile, he mumbled, “Bye, hyungs!”
“Wait, Junsoo, can I keep your sign?” Jeongguk asked. “I kept looking at it during the game. I love it.”

Junsoo’s shyness vanished as he excitedly held out the glittering sign for him to take. “Yes! I’m so happy that you looked at it! Will you hang it up in your room?”

“Absolutely,” he promised, tucking the sign under his arm.

Once again, his father seemed on the verge of speaking, gaze flicking back and forth between him and Taehyung, mouth slightly parted. But, surprisingly, he held his tongue and simply extended a hand for Junsoo to take.

They waved his family out together, Jeongguk waiting until he knew they were fully gone before commenting, “That could’ve gone worse. And you know, I thought your dance was lovely, as well.”

Taehyung wrapped an arm around his waist. “I’d hope so. I choreographed it for you. It’s no grand romantic kiss on live television, but I thought you’d appreciate it nonetheless.”

Jeongguk nosed his cheek, leaving a soft kiss on the golden skin there before murmuring, “Oh, trust me. I appreciated it. And I think it would look extra good performed in your dorm room for an audience of one.”

“I think a special version could probably be arranged,” Taehyung hummed.

Their little bubble of peace was once again popped, this time by the arrival of Yugyeom, who slung an arm over Jeongguk’s shoulders. “Hate to break it to you, lovebirds, but there’s kind of a massive championship celebration going on.”

Jeongguk laughed, shaking him off. “Yeah, yeah, we’re coming.” And then he remembered that Taehyung didn’t really like parties. He glanced at him, “Or…”

“We’re coming,” Taehyung affirmed. “As long as Jeonggukie’s buying drinks.”

“I’m starting to think you only like me for my money,” he sniffed.

“Oh, come on, baby.” Laying his head on Jeongguk’s shoulder, Taehyung pouted up at him. “You know that’s not true. I like you for lots of things. And I’d list them here for you, but I don’t think Yugyeom wants to watch me wax poetry about your eyes.”

Yugyeom pretended to gag. “Yeah, I’ll pass on that one, thanks though. Let’s go, Jeongguk. We still have to shower and listen to Yun’s end-of-season speech.”

He nodded, placing a quick kiss on Taehyung’s forehead. “I’ll meet you at your dorm and then we can head over to wherever we decide to get drinks together, okay?”

“Sounds good. I’ll see you later.” Taehyung waved, then retreated back to where his team were packing up their bags. Jeongguk couldn’t help but stare, watching him go like an adoring puppy, taking another moment to appreciate just how good he looked in his jersey.

Fingers snapped in front of his nose, jolting him out of it.

“Stop staring, lover boy,” Yugyeom teased. “We’ve got places to be, things to do. Look, Coach is waiting for us.”
Jeongguk finally tore his gaze away from Taehyung, noticing where his coach stood impatiently by the locker room entrance.

“Shit, he’ll throw a tantrum if we’re any later. Let’s go.”

Yugyeom rolled his eyes, but followed as he jogged over to the far end of the court. He’d won a lot today. More than a championship. Although, he really was looking forward to getting his hands on that trophy for a second. Sue him.

... 

“Down, Gukkie! Stop! M’dizzy, put me down,” Taehyung mumbled, swaying slightly from where he clung onto his back. Jeongguk’s head spun, and he barely managed to figure out how the hell Taehyung’s key fit in the lock, but after some miraculous turn of events, he managed to figure it out. The door swung open, and even as he nearly tripped over a loose stiletto on his way in, he was laughing.

“I’m dizzier,” he protested, collapsing both of them onto the bed. “And you’re heavy.”

Taehyung’s dark eyes looked bleary as he blinked at him, cheeks rosy with alcohol. “Didn’t ask you to carry me from the Uber. That was a choice, mister.”

“You didn’t look heavy,” Jeongguk objected, poking his cheek.

He giggled as Taehyung poked him back. “I’m the same amount of heavy as always, dummy.”

“So really heavy, then.”

“Hey!” Taehyung rolled on top of him, pinning him to the mattress. “Take it back! M’not heavy!”

Jeongguk could feel the lack of tension in his grip; Taehyung was too drunk to restrain him properly, but he played along anyways.

“Sorry, sorry! I give up. You’re very light. Mm, very easy to carry. Pocket-sized.”

“Now you’re just saying stuff.” Taehyung glared at him before collapsing on his chest. “We’re the same size.” The words sounded muffled from where they were spoken into his clavicle, and that had Jeongguk laughing again.

“First you wanna be light, then you wanna be the same size. You gotta pick, baby.”

Teeth sunk into his skin through his black t-shirt.

“Hey!” Jeongguk tugged on his hair to get him to let up. “No biting, Taehyungie! We don’t bite just because we’re angry.”

Taehyung shot him another glare, but pressed an apologetic kiss to his chest. “You’ve been saying that for…” He blinked, then counted on his fingers. “How old am I?”

Jeongguk frowned and tried to count. “I’m twenty. No, wait, I’m twenty-one. You’re twenty. Remember? ‘Cause when you turned twenty, Jimin threw you that big sneaky party on the roof of the...what was it, the PAC building?”

For a moment, Taehyung just stared. “I didn’t know you knew about that.”
“I was there, dumbass. I got you your Switch.” Jeongguk pointed vaguely to the corner of the room where Taehyung’s television sat.

Taehyung’s brow furrowed, confusion filling his bleary brown eyes. “But you didn’t say hi. And I thought Jiminie got it for me.”

“Course I didn’t say hi. Probably would’ve punched me in the stomach or something. But I went with Yoongi-hyung, who went ‘cause of Jimin n’Hoseok. Told Jimin to say it was from him. I heard you whine about wanting one during practice for like the past four months, so I bought it to get you to shut up. And, um, I wanted to see you smile. You didn’t smile a lot then.” He knew he’d started rambling, but he couldn’t really help it. None of his inhibitors were currently functional enough to tell him no. “You didn’t smile for like, years. Ever. Just fake smiles you gave to people to make ‘em believe you were happy, but they don’t know you like I do. I could tell. You weren’t happy, so I wanted to give you something that might give you just a little happiness. I thought about other stuff, but it’s what you said you wanted, so I got it. Sorry if it’s weird. It sounds kinda weird now, but it made sense to me then.”

A beat of silence passed between them. And then Taehyung was clutching him tightly, nose buried in the crook of his neck. “I’m drunk, and stupid, and a dick, and the worst ever, but I love you so much. I wish...god, I wish we fixed things sooner. Always missed you, Gukkie. I should’ve said something. I should’ve been good like you. You’re so good. You’ve always been good, and I’m always the bad guy, but you’re always so good to me. Even when you don’t think I’m gonna say thank you.” He looked up, and Jeongguk could see tears clouding his eyes. Gentle fingers cupped his cheeks. “It’s late. It’s so late, but...thank you, Gukkie.”

He didn’t mean to make Taehyung cry. But he also knew that Taehyung was simply a crier. A happy crier, a sad crier, a frustrated crier, and an angry crier. If Taehyung felt an emotion strongly enough, tears would be shed. So he smiled, and kissed Taehyung as gently as he held him.

“No need to thank me, angel. Just wanted to make you happy. And now you’re happy.”

A watery smile blossomed on Taehyung’s flushed face. “Less to do with the Switch, and more to do with you, but yeah. Happy.” After a moment of staring into each other’s eyes, Taehyung yawned, and sat up on top of his thighs. “I think I’m gonna take a shower. Wash the vanilla vodka outta my system.”

“Good luck with that.” Jeongguk snorted. Taehyung just tossed him a wink, grabbed his hoodie from the desk chair, and wobbled into the bathroom.

As soon as he heard the shower running, Jeongguk rolled over and grabbed his phone. He hadn’t forgotten the conditions of today’s win. While steam and Taehyung’s muffled, honey baritone seeped under the door, Jeongguk spent the next twenty minutes browsing the internet, searching for the perfect jewel.

~*~*~

Piano, finger-plucked bass, and hi-hat cymbals filled the studio. The class was nearly over, and Taehyung had only one more basic move he wanted to touch on. So, he turned down the music to get the attention of his students, who were currently giggling as they practised chaine turns.

“Okay, those looked great!”

"
The kids beamed as he praised them, pausing to glance at him from where they were lined up, waiting their turn to spin across the studio. His current class was composed of seven and eight year-olds starting at the beginner jazz level. He didn’t find teaching the basics nearly as monotonous as he thought he would, enjoying the process of watching them blossom into little dancers right before his eyes. And he liked working with kids a lot. They were engaged in each lesson, and excited to learn pretty much every day, which was more than he could say for his own classmates.

“There’s only one more move I want to cover for today. And it’d be good if you pay attention. This one will come up in any other jazz or ballet class you take.”

All of their eyes were on him, watching eagerly for direction. Funny how similar the basketball team looked to a group of second graders.

Taehyung moved to be right in front of the mirror’s center, making sure they could see him. He faced them first before doing it in the mirror.

“This is called a kick ball change, and even if it sounds funny, the name tells us a lot. First, we kick.” He kicked out one leg, keeping it balanced as he explained, “Then, as you go up on your toes on the other foot, you rock back onto your heel, or the ball of your foot, and the foot you kicked comes back down.” He demonstrated, watching their eyes go wide as they took all the new information in. “I’ll do it a few times, and when you want, you can try.”

Soon enough, they were all analysing his movements and trying to master the elusive kick ball change. Although it was a basic dance step, it often took people more than a few attempts to do it right, as the timing could feel a little awkward if thought through too much. Luckily for his class, they all seemed to pick up on it pretty quick.

“You can move with it, too.” Taehyung demonstrated again, this time travelling on the extra step. He gave them time to practise that before adding, “The kick ball change leads into a lot of other moves, especially in jazz, and we’ll start with those next week. Sound good?”

“Yes, Taetae-nim!” they answered happily, and Taehyung had to keep his sigh to himself. He’d given up on trying to teach them to address him properly, seeing as one Jeon Jeongguk had absolutely ruined any chance of that by teasing him with Taetae-nim every time he showed up to the studio. The kids loved it, and unfortunately, it had stuck.

Speak of the devil…

“Yes, Taetae-nim!” a much louder and much more masculine voice filled his little studio, and it was pretty easy to spot its source by the door. Jeongguk leaned against the sleek wooden frame, arms crossed and a devilish smile on his face. Of course, the kids crowded him immediately since Jeongguk gave excellent piggyback rides, and by the time he was through galloping around the studio with all of them at least twice, the parents had shown up, and the kids were on their way home.

As soon as the door shut, Jeongguk turned to him, probably expecting a hug or some bullshit, but Taehyung shoved him against the wall.

“Ow, fuck, what did I do?” Innocent doe eyes blinked back at him, and Jeongguk looked oh-so-vulnerable, but Taehyung knew better.

Little shit knew exactly what he did.
“This is the third fucking week of Taetae-nim,” Taehyung hissed, jamming a finger at his chest. “Your stupid nickname stuck and I can’t fucking get rid of it and then you strut in here like a peacock and give them piggyback rides and help them fly and shit and you’re so goddamn good with kids it’s fucking endearing and adorable and I hate it.”

Jeongguk grinned. “Thank god, I thought you were actually mad for a second there. You’re so cute when you’re angry, even when you’re just faking it for my attention.”

Taehyung withdrew from caging Jeongguk in, stunned. “I am not faking it! Especially not for your attention. I’m very angry with you, Jeon Jeongguk. Can’t you tell?”

Infuriatingly, Jeongguk just arched an eyebrow and said, “If you want me to give you a piggyback ride and lift you up and zoom you around like a plane, you just have to ask.”

He did the only logical thing. He smacked him in the chest. Not hard. It was more for getting his point across than anything else.

Jeongguk winced, but accepted his punishment valiantly. “Did that make you feel better? Am I off the hook now? For...being cute, or something?”

Taehyung crossed his arms, but gave in. “For now.”

“Glad to hear it. So can I kiss you ‘hello’ or are you going to bite me?”

Idiot. He was so in love with Jeongguk at this point, it had stopped being funny a long time ago.

Taehyung rolled his eyes and clutched Jeongguk’s bicep “Kiss me.”

Apparently, that was all the invitation Jeongguk needed to bring their bodies closer together, tugging Taehyung against his chest and meeting their lips in a sweet ‘hello’ kiss. Except for Taehyung, at least, that ‘hello’ went to hello pretty quick, and his fingers found their way to Jeongguk’s long hair, threading through the strands and deepening their kiss. Jeongguk clutched his hips, but his hands didn’t take long to slide under his loose white t-shirt, feeling the heat of his skin and the race of his heartbeat. Taehyung had grown to live for this over the past few months; the short gasps of air they shared in between each kiss, the perfect fit of Jeongguk’s lips with his own, the way he melted simply from a brush of his fingertips on his skin. The fact that this was all real. That it wasn’t a terribly wonderful dream from which he would inevitably wake up, but real life. A supposed dream come true, if he were to get poetic about it. Perhaps he should leave the poetry to Jeongguk, and instead live in this moment.

He could spend the rest of his life here.

Jeongguk seemed to be thinking along the same lines, as he tightened his grip on Taehyung’s waist and flipped their positions. A sharp exhale escaped him as he was suddenly pushed up against the wall, and when Jeongguk’s mouth returned to his own, he forced his knee in between Taehyung’s parted thighs. This was barely controlled desperation. This was going days without any real physical contact because they’d been so busy with classes and work. This was making up for lost time.

Taehyung couldn’t even help himself as he rolled his hips, clutching Jeongguk’s shoulders. He held on tight as he practically rode his thigh, head falling back against the wall only for Jeongguk to attack his exposed neck with his tongue and teeth.

“Fuck,” Jeongguk panted against the hollow of his throat, pushing his leg harder against Taehyung’s crotch. “When was the last time I saw you?”
Fisting Jeongguk’s hoodie, he managed to reply, “Th-this morning,” even as he felt dizzy from the friction between his legs.

Jeongguk made another mark on his neck, sucking his skin between his teeth before lapping over it, kissing the spot harshly as if to make sure it stayed in place. “And when was the last time I fucked you?”

Taehyung couldn’t think. “L-last week? Week before? Sucked me off last weekend, but I don’t know if that counts.”

“It doesn’t.” Jeongguk hiked his shirt up again, this time sending shivers through Taehyung as he traced each line of his tattoo. Fingers wandering up, he toyed with a nipple until Taehyung cried out, the attention quickly becoming too much. In an attempt to move things along, he continued to grind down on Jeongguk’s thigh, kissing him messily.

And then Jeongguk’s phone went off. He felt him tense beneath him.

“Don’t you dare answer that,” Taehyung murmured, distracting him by kissing along his jaw. Jeongguk seemed to listen to the order, hooking his fingers in the waistband of Taehyung’s sweatpants. He didn’t care how they did it. He would let Jeongguk fuck him with spit as lube at this point.

But of course, just as the call ended, another one began. Insistent. Chiming. Entitled, if you asked Taehyung.

“Gukkie, don’t,” he pleaded as he felt Jeongguk pull away, looking torn and anxiously glancing back at his phone. He knotted his hand in Jeongguk’s shirt, keeping him on a tether so he couldn’t go. “Just...just wait, okay? Just a little longer?”

“Baby…” Jeongguk gently clutched his wrist, prying him off his shirt. “I think it’s important. Let me just check, okay?”

Taehyung mustered the best pout he’d given him in a long time, even managing to bring tears to his wide, hurt eyes. “Gukkie, please.” He reached up, playing with the silver hoops in his boyfriend’s ear. “A few more minutes.”

At least Jeongguk had the nerve to look pained as he took a couple of steps back and retrieved his phone.

“Asshole,” Taehyung muttered, now dealing with an erection and his wounded pride.

The moment Jeongguk glanced at the caller ID, he said, “I’m really sorry, Taehyungie, but I’ve gotta go run a last minute errand.”

Taehyung stared. “You’re kidding.”

Jeongguk shot him a desperate, apologetic look. “I’m sorry, I’m not. I promise it’s important. You know I wouldn’t skip out on you for nothing.”

They had dinner plans tonight. And anime plans. And snuggling plans.

Needless to say, he was thoroughly unimpressed. Taehyung crossed his arms, unable to help the way his foot tapped in irritation. “Well, what’s so goddamn important, then?”

Suddenly, Jeongguk looked rather sheepish. He scratched the back of his neck. “I...well, I can’t tell
“You can’t tell me,” Taehyung repeated, feeling more and more hurt by the second. “And why’s that?”

“Just…” Jeongguk shifted awkwardly on his feet. “Just trust me, okay?”

So, he was just supposed to trust Jeongguk as he chose a phone call over him in the middle of them making out? He was just supposed to trust that he cancelled their date night for something important? He was just supposed to trust that he didn’t have to know what that something important was?

He wanted to trust him. Rationally, he knew he should trust him. This was Jeongguk. But the circumstances looked more than suspicious, and he already had trust issues to begin with.

Making a decision, Taehyung bit his cheek and went to gather his things up from the studio. He did trust Jeongguk. Even if it hurt. “Fine. Cool. Have fun.”

Jeongguk took a step towards him, but seemed to think better of it and halted mid-step. “We can order food or something later?”

Taehyung slung the strap of his duffel bag over his shoulder. “I’m not hungry.”

“You might be hungry later.”

“I won’t be.”

“Taehyung.” Shock flashed through him as Jeongguk grabbed his arm, forcing him to look at him. “Please don’t be mad. I promise, it’s just a quick little run into Hongdae. I’ll be home before nine. This is a stupid thing to throw a tantrum over, no matter how cute I find your tantrums. It’s nothing bad. It’ll make sense in a couple weeks. Just...please? Trust me?”

He relaxed a little upon hearing Jeongguk’s words. He knew he was too quick to get angry. Too quick to think he was being abandoned again. But he couldn’t help it. Jeongguk had shut him out before. Cancelled plans. Ignored him for weeks. And he knew they were so far past that. But the memories resurfaced, even when he didn’t want them to.

Taehyung sighed, then allowed Jeongguk to pull him into a hug. “Sorry. Sorry. I’m too defensive. I know. I’m sorry. I trust you. Text me when you’re on your way back, okay? I’ll order something.”

“You’re the best.” Jeongguk kissed his cheek. “I love you.”

“I’m definitely not the best, but I love you, too.”

Jeongguk protested several times as they walked to their respective cars, and eventually they just agreed to disagree.

Needing to feel him one more time, Taehyung tugged him close for another kiss. “See you later.”


Taehyung nodded, and got in his car, waving to Jeongguk as he pulled out of the parking lot.

And as he sat in his own car and stared at the sun, disappearing behind Seoul’s skyline, he realised he did trust Jeongguk. More than anyone, maybe, aside from his dad.
And he was okay with that.

…

They were cuddled up in his dorm later that night, one and a half pizzas already gone between them (there had been a contest to see who could eat more, and ultimately, like most things, Jeongguk had won), and Taehyung was feeling rather sleepy as he burrowed farther into Jeongguk’s side. The light of his television reflected blue on their faces, switched to whatever baking show they could stream since they’d started to feel too tired to pay attention.

“Oh, by the way,” Jeongguk began. It took Taehyung a moment to realise he was speaking.

“Huh?”

Jeongguk rubbed his back from where his arm was wrapped around Taehyung’s frame. “I was just wondering, what are your plans for spring break?”

He yawned, head cottony from exhaustion. “Uh, I don’t know. Haven’t really thought about it. Think Jimin mentioned something about Jeju, but I think it’s supposed to be like…a romantic getaway thing for him, Yoongi, and Hoseok.”

Fingers toyed with his hair, combing through it gently. “Your birthday falls during that week, doesn’t it?”

“Um, I guess so, yeah. I hadn’t really thought about it.”

“Just…” Jeongguk nuzzled his hair. “Don’t make any plans, okay? No Jeju with Jimin.”

Taehyung laughed, snuggling closer to him. “I don’t think I was invited anyway. No plans for me.”

He felt Jeongguk smile against his hair. “Cool.”

“Should I even ask?”

“Nope. Go to sleep, baby.”

Taehyung rubbed his bleary eyes, muttering, “I’m not tired.”

Jeongguk nudged him and chuckled. “Clearly.”

But not long after, Taehyung felt the depths of sleep calling to him. Still, he managed to mumble out a sleepy, “G’night, Gukkie.”

A soft kiss landed on his head. “Night, Taehyungie.”

This had become nearly every night for him. The same routine. Falling asleep next to Jeongguk among the muffled sounds of the television after a long day of classes and work.

Yet he didn’t think he’d ever get tired of this.

…
Shit.

He was running late. For the third time this week. For the same class. Stupid Contemporary Dance History. Stupid Performing Arts Center third floor. Stupid alarm for not going off at nine when it was supposed to. And stupid Jeongguk for not waking him up before he left.

Actually, he couldn’t really blame him. Jeongguk had to leave for his Film Production class an hour before Taehyung even needed to wake up. Still, he reserved the right to be annoyed for no other reason besides the fact that he was annoyed.

Thankfully the room was still chattering, professor yet to show. It was only when he raced into the class, practically throwing himself into his seat, that he realised something was off.

His bag felt heavier than usual.

Confused, Taehyung dug inside for his lecture materials only to pull out pages of notes on movie analyses, camera angles, and the purpose of postmodernist film.

Shit.

His head hit the table as he groaned. Irritated, he yanked his phone out of his pocket, only to see a text already waiting for him.

**gukkie ❤️**

uh i think i accidentally took your bag this morning. will you be around after your class? sorry btw

**Me**

yeah i’ll be around. want me to meet you in your lecture hall? it’s not far from here. and dw about it, i know you’re probably tired

**gukkie ❤️**

sounds good. and yeah i am lmao.

see you in like two hours. love you 😘

Yeah, it still made him blush.
His professor hurried into the room shortly after that, apologising for her own lateness, which made him feel a teensy bit better. Although he didn’t have any of his notes, he learned a little about postmodernist film from Jeongguk’s notes. He wrote the notes for his own class in the margins, along with a little apology note. Then, to incite more sympathy from his boyfriend, he drew a little bubbly cloud around the apology, as well as tiny hearts with cute faces.

Finally, when his class ended, he packed up and booked it out of the room, waving off the people who called out to him with a promise to catch up later. Jeongguk’s film class took place on the floor below his, but at the opposite end of the building, so it took him a few minutes to get there. Students were streaming out of the room and through the halls, and he had to fight his way through the exiting crowd to slip inside, but what he saw stopped him dead in his tracks.

Jeongguk leaned against one of the tables, packing Taehyung’s laptop into the bag he’d mistakenly taken. However, he did this while a boy Taehyung didn’t know stood there chatting him up, a stupid charming smile on his stupid pretty face. He was leaning against the opposite table, cardigan slipping off his shoulders to show plenty of smooth, blemish-free skin while he tilted his head, showing off the slender curve of his throat. He had arched brows, and soft lips, and a gorgeous jawline and Taehyung hated him immediately.

He hated him even more when he heard him talk.

“Gonna miss basketball season,” pretty boy remarked. “My friends and I always made a point of going to as many games as possible.”

To his credit, Jeongguk seemed pretty engaged in trying to figure out how Taehyung’s laptop fit in his bag. “Yeah? Sports fan or something?”

The boy laughed, a gentle, chiming sound. It grated Taehyun’s ears. “More like a sports player fan. There’s something about ten hot guys running back and forth down a court, all sweaty and getting up close and personal that appeals to me. I was at the championship game, you know. You looked great out there.” The boy swept his hair back, giggling.

Jeongguk cocked an eyebrow, clearly thinking the same thing Taehyung was thinking, but he was too nice to say it.

Taehyung was not too nice to say it.

Unable to watch any longer, Taehyung marched in the room and snapped, “If you were at the game, then you would know he’s taken. So why don’t you pack up your pathetic seduction 101 kit and get the hell away from him?”

Jeongguk tried to suppress a laugh while the boy turned, clearly in shock.

“Didn’t know he was taken,” pretty boy replied with a shrug. “Everyone thought you were just making a statement. Besides, no offense, but everyone knows you don’t stick with one guy for long, Kim Taehyung.”
How the hell did this guy know his name?

Speaking through gritted teeth, he grabbed Jeongguk’s bicep, more for reassurance and to establish his claim than anything else. “I happen to like this one, so kindly fuck off.”

“Taehyung…” Jeongguk attempted to mediate, but he paid him no attention, too busy glaring at this guy who had the fucking nerve to flirt with his boyfriend.

Pretty boy just rolled his eyes and clutched his books to his chest. “Whatever.” His fingers trailed down Jeongguk’s arm as he passed. “Feel free to hit me up when you’re over this slut, handsome.”

Immediately, Jeongguk’s amusement shifted to anger. “Leave me the hell alone, Eunwoo, and apologise to Taehyung.”

Batting his lashes, he smiled at Taehyung. “Sorry.” Then he flipped him off as he strutted out the door.

“I’ll kill him,” Taehyung threatened as soon as he left, eyeing the door like it had personally insulted him.

“He’s usually nice,” Jeongguk said with a frown, arms crossed. “I wonder what set him off like that. I’m sorry, Taehyungie.”

“What set him off was the fact that you’re hot and dating me, and he thinks you could do better. And by better he means him,” Taehyung snorted, not bothering to keep the bitterness out of his tone. “This is the third time I’ve walked in on a guy flirting with you. This never used to happen. What the hell changed?”

“Uh, I’m out now, I guess?”

“So all the guys that thought you were hot are suddenly trying their luck,” Taehyung muttered in conclusion.

“Sorry.” Jeongguk sounded sincere as he said it, ruffling Taehyung’s hair.

He sighed. “It’s not your fault. I don’t care when they’re big and masculine. I can deal with that, they’re easy to scare off. It’s the pretty ones I hate.”

Jeongguk took his hand and kissed his knuckles. “You know you’re the prettiest. They’re just mean because they’re jealous”

Taehyung hummed, not quite over his anger but at least satisfied with Jeongguk’s attempts to console him. “You’re too attractive for your own good, Jeon Jeongguk.”

He grinned, crowding Taehyung up against the table. “Guess that makes two of us, Kim Taehyung.”

The gesture riled him up more than it should. At least he had the sense to protest. “Gukkie, not here, what if your professor comes back?”

Jeongguk kissed his ear, before dipping down to mouth at his throat. “He won’t. Next class isn’t until one-thirty.”

Taehyung kissed him once, then pushed him back at arm’s length in case he got too comfortable. “It’s Wednesday, remember? Neither of us have classes for two hours. Let’s just go home and do
this there. And get lunch while we’re at it.”

“You’re no fun.” Jeongguk pouted, innocent doe eyes infuriatingly effective. “What if I want to get caught making out with my hot boyfriend?

He curled a finger in Jeongguk’s shirt collar, tugging him closer. “You’re just looking for trouble these days, baby.”

Jeongguk leaned forward, sucking Taehyung’s bottom lip between his teeth before slipping his tongue into his mouth.

And far too bold lately, for fuck’s sake.

Like Taehyung was about to say no.

He looped his arms around Jeongguk’s neck, letting himself be pushed against the table until he was sitting on it, legs wrapped around Jeongguk’s thighs. The thing was, he could kiss Jeongguk for hours. Days, probably, just like this. Every part of their bodies pressed together, the layer of clothes between them the most offensive crime in the world. Jeongguk knew every part of him, how to make him whimper just by grinding his hips against his own. He cupped Taehyung’s jaw, manipulating the tilt of his head in whatever direction Jeongguk desired, and something about that pooled heat in his abdomen.

“You’re so sexy when you’re jealous,” Jeongguk murmured against him, tugging his hair to make him expose more of his throat. Taehyung shivered when his lips glided down the expanse of skin, sucking a pretty mark where he knew his shirt couldn’t cover it.

“I hate seeing other people touching you,” he admitted. “T-Talking to you like that. Flirting with you.” As he spoke, he found the hem of Jeongguk’s black pullover, sliding his hands under to feel his warm skin beneath. “You’re mine,” he breathed just as Jeongguk pulled away from his throat.

Something heavy and dark lingered in Jeongguk’s eyes as he gazed at him, drinking him in like a predator who had just caught their prey. “Fuck, baby, say that again.”

Taehyung dug his nails into Jeongguk’s sides, not a care in the world given for the shallow cuts he certainly left him with, yanking him closer until the space between their bodies disappeared. “I said, you’re mine.”

“That’s right,” Jeongguk agreed, mouthing along the column of his throat. “And you’re mine. Now you know how it feels, watching all those shitty guys hit on you constantly.” He rolled his hips against Taehyung, causing any other thought to leave his mind.

“Fuck, baby.” Taehyung clung to him, matching the movement of his hips. “You know it’s just you. It’s always just gonna be you.”

“Good.” Jeongguk finally stopped tormenting his skin in favour of reconnecting their lips, kissing him harshly, aggressively, determined to leave his mark. Taehyung was no better. He wanted everyone on campus, guys and girls, to understand that Jeongguk was taken. And he was taken for good. Off limits for a long time. Preferably forever.

But just as he was getting into it, Jeongguk pulled away abruptly.

Taehyung stared as he stood there. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Jeongguk glanced at the clock on the wall. “We should get lunch before our break ends.”
He had to be kidding.

“This is the second time you’ve cock-blocked me in five days,” he pointed out, frustration laced in every word. “Am I being punished?”

Jeongguk bit his lip before replying, although it was already swollen red and slick with spit. “No, you’re not being punished. It’s just bad timing. If we get takeout we can probably pick this up later.”

Taehyung let out an unflattering groan, dropping his head on Jeongguk’s shoulder. “Since when did we start planning our sex lives?”

“Since we got busy, baby,” Jeongguk answered, kissing him sweetly as an apology. “C’mon, let’s go.”

Taehyung rolled his eyes, but slung his own bag over his shoulder and took Jeongguk’s hand. “Cockblock,” he muttered.

“If you think about it, though, I’m cockblocking myself, too. If that makes you feel better.”

“It really doesn’t.”

Jeongguk laughed. “I tried.”

“Not hard enough.”

A discreet hand slipped into his back pocket. “I’ll try harder later,” Jeongguk promised, voice taking on a deeper, husky quality.

Yeah, fine. Still annoyed, but slightly mollified, Taehyung looped an arm around Jeongguk’s waist.

“You better.”

~*~*~

“So you finished?” Jeongguk asked, plopped down on the edge of Taehyung’s bed as he watched him sift through clothes upon clothes.

Admittedly, he did not expect to have a pair of pink silk stockings thrown at him. “No, I’m not finished!” Taehyung whined. “It would help if I knew where we were going. That way I could pack accordingly.”

Jeongguk smirked, but reclined on the bed, throwing the stockings back. “Where’s the fun in that, baby? Let me surprise you.” When Taehyung just huffed and didn’t say anything, he added, “Just pack whatever you want. You look good in everything, and the weather should be mild. And don’t devote a whole quarter of your bag to lingerie this time.”

Taehyung glanced up at him, brow furrowed. “What, you don’t want me to look pretty for you?”

Sometimes, he wondered if letting go of his job had been hard for Taehyung. He talked about it occasionally, how much he missed the stage, missed dancing in such a spotlight, and Jeongguk supposed that could only be expected. Taehyung had been used to being treated as a sort of celebrity for years. Mis treated, really, but he was adored all the same, and Jeongguk knew a part of
him thrived on the attention. But he also knew that Taehyung had begun to develop a little bit of a complex. Jeongguk hadn’t figured it out yet, but it had something to do with insecurity surrounding the way he looked and the way other people talked about him, and he just wanted Taehyung to know he was the most stunning person alive, inside and out.

So, he said what came to mind.

“I want you to look like you, Taehyung,” he sighed. “I don’t care about your silk, and your lace, and your pretty heels. You’re gorgeous as hell, it doesn’t matter what you’re wearing. I find you sexy when you’ve just eaten six slices of pizza and you’re cussing me out over Mario Kart. Sometimes I think you’re sexier like that because that’s real. That’s you. So if you want to pack your pretty things because you like them and they make you feel good, go ahead. But I don’t honestly care.”

Taehyung balled his fists in the pearlescent shorts clutched between his hands. And to Jeongguk’s astonishment, he tossed them aside. He watched as the silken garment fluttered to the floor, laying in a crumpled, dejected heap.

“Screw it,” Taehyung decided. “Let’s see if you’ll eat your words, Jeon Jeongguk.”

“You know I won’t.”

The look Taehyung gave him hurt a little. What hurt more was Taehyung’s hesitant question that followed.

“You mean it?”

One moment he was on the bed. The next he was kneeled beside Taehyung and his suitcase, pulling him into his arms. “Of course I mean it. I fell in love with you when I was thirteen. You really think I’m going to care about what you’re wearing? You used to wear hand-knitted sweaters and navy shorts. If I can love you in that, I can love you in anything.”

Taehyung laughed, but his smile didn’t reach his eyes, and the way he began to toy with his fingers didn’t make Jeongguk feel any better. “I just… I worry, I guess. I get scared, because...well, what if you stopped thinking I was pretty? I know it’s stupid. It’s vain. But that was my whole life for so long. And...when I wasn’t pretty enough...I got thrown away and forgotten, and I couldn’t stand if you did that to me. I don’t want you to get bored. Or think, you know, that I’m not trying anymore…”

Jeongguk coaxed Taehyung to rest on his shoulder. As he threaded his fingers through Taehyung’s soft brown hair, he murmured, “Trying to what? Trying to impress me? Baby, I’m impressed by your beautiful mind, and the way you philosophise the world, and how passionate you are about the things you love. You could wear a burlap sack and I’d sit here staring because you’re so perfect to me. So please don’t worry about that anymore. Okay?”

It took a moment, but Taehyung nodded. “Okay. You’re right.” He let out a shaky breath. “Stupid. I’m being stupid. Thank god you have some common sense.”

Jeongguk continued to stroke Taehyung’s hair, enjoying the way he curled into him like a kitten being pet. “I’m happy to carry the burden of logic for both of us. Now finish packing. We don’t want to be late.”

“Late for what?” Taehyung inquired quietly, innocently, as if Jeongguk wouldn’t notice and just answer.
“Nice try, angel.”

Twenty minutes later, both of their suitcases were in the back of Jeongguk’s car and they were driving through Seoul, headed west. Taehyung kept pestering him for answers, speculating trips to Busan, to Jeju, anywhere his brain could think of, but he didn’t even come close. Eventually, though, he gasped, “Jeongguk, why are we at the airport?”

“Because,” Jeongguk replied with a smile, navigating his way through the chaotic parking lot. “We have a flight to catch.”

“A flight?” Taehyung exclaimed. “Tell me where we’re going! How did you even get me a ticket without me knowing about it?”

“Got two tickets. Put your name on one. It’s not hard.”

“Jeongguk!”

“What?” He finally found a long-term parking spot on the fourth floor of the garage.

“You can’t just buy shit for me like that!” Taehyung sighed, gazing forlornly out the window. “How much do I owe you?”

“It’s your birthday present, so nothing.”

He could feel Taehyung glaring at him as he tried to think of a response. “I- it’s too much.”

No one was as stubborn, or as stubbornly cute, as Kim Taehyung.

“You don’t even know where we’re going yet, baby. Hold the complaints until we’re on the plane, maybe?” Jeongguk quickly jotted down the parking space number in his phone before turning the car off. “Come on, we don’t want to be late.”

He pulled their tickets up on his phone as they grabbed their suitcases and took the lift to ticketing. Jeongguk had already checked them in online, so they went straight through to security where he still managed to get Taehyung’s ticket scanned for him since he had both under his name and on his phone. He had both of their passports as well, and ignored the intense look of shock Taehyung sent his way, making sure to cover the little book with his body while the officer stamped their destination.

“I must note, your behaviour seems a little suspicious, sir,” the officer reflected to him, peeking up at Jeongguk skeptically through her bangs while she verified their passports. Then, she turned her attention to Taehyung. “Is this man taking you anywhere against your will?”

“No!” Jeongguk and Taehyung both rushed to say.

“I- he-” Taehyung placed his hand on Jeongguk’s back. “He’s trying to surprise me for my birthday. I’m not being kidnapped.”

“That’s right,” Jeongguk affirmed with a very convincing nod.

Thankfully, the security officer just laughed and waved them through. Taehyung spent five minutes just trying to wriggle his laptop out of his carry-on, and then Taehyung spent another five minutes making fun of him as he struggled to undo his “dick-stepping” boots, as Taehyung called them. Eventually, however, they made it through with an all clear, and Jeongguk led him by the hand to their designated terminal.
“Where are we going?”

“Not telling.”

“But, Gukkie…”

“You’re going to find out in a few minutes, just be patient.”

“You know you’re asking a lot of me.”

Jeongguk rubbed Taehyung’s shoulder, not falling for his pout. “I know, baby. You’re doing well.”

“Don’t baby me.”

In all honesty, Jeongguk couldn’t wait to just get on the plane and get out of the country. He wanted the opportunity to clear his head going into his final semester of the year, and he knew it would be ten times better with Taehyung by his side. Especially seeing as Taehyung grew significantly less prickly the longer they spent away from campus and in each other’s company. He had a feeling Taehyung might even be pleasant. Sometimes, he caught him off guard with his mood swings. One minute he’d be his expected, sarcastic self, and another he’d be sweet and doting, reviewing Jeongguk’s film work with him, doing his laundry, and rubbing his sore muscles after a workout. He still folded like a toddler, but Jeongguk found it endearing, so he didn’t mention it.

“Jeongguk…” Taehyung said slowly. “Why…are all of these gates to Europe?”

He just smiled, giddiness filling his heart. “Guess you’ll have to wait and find out.” Taehyung took one look at him and immediately started craning his neck around, reading every monitor to see where each flight headed.

“Berlin? Gukkie, are we going to Germany?” Instead of encouraging him, Jeongguk just shrugged, which sent Taehyung off on a search for a reaction. “What about Amsterdam? There’s a big line there and the flight is boarding soon.” Jeongguk stuffed his hands in his pocket and pretended not to hear. “Okay, okay, what about…” Taehyung scanned the monitors, wandering a meter or so in each direction. “London? You know how much I like English films.” When Jeongguk gave no response, he huffed and continued bombarding him with questions. “Oh, how about Paris? When we were joking around that night that’s what we talked about. Hm, romantic, too.” He glanced at him from the corner of his eye, but he simply raised his eyebrows. “Okay, at least tell me when I’m close.”

“You’re close. Here.” He extended his hand, warmth flooding through him when Taehyung took it and entwined their fingers. “This way, angel.” Nothing made him happier than seeing Taehyung’s entire face light up in joy when Jeongguk led him to a specific gate. And when he turned to look at him, his eyes were shining.

“Baby, are you taking me to Italy?” Taehyung whispered, cupping his cheek.

Jeongguk squeezed the hand he still held. “It’s what you said you wanted, right?”

“I thought…” His gaze flicked back and forth between Jeongguk’s, no doubt looking for the end of the joke he was certain would come. “I thought you were kidding.”

He sort of figured that’s the reaction he’d get, but Taehyung’s watery eyes and barely contained smile told him he’d made the right choice in keeping it a surprise. “I never kid about spoiling my baby. I thought you figured that out by now.”
Taehyung laughed, elbowing him in the side. “Well, c’mon then, mister sugar daddy, I think we’re boarding soon.” Other passengers eyed Taehyung in amusement as he bounced around excitedly, and Jeongguk was strongly reminded of their venture to the ballet. Except Taehyung might have been just a smidge more excited about that.

Then again, he hadn’t exactly been expecting their seating arrangements either, and a wide grin broke out on his face as they walked right past the economy section and Taehyung gasped. “No.”

Jeongguk laughed, and gestured to his seat. “Yes. It’s your birthday, which means you get only the best.”

Taehyung took a hesitant step towards his arm-chair style seat, as if he couldn’t believe it was for him. “Jeongguk, I really appreciate—”

He thought this might be coming. “Too late to make any changes now,” he reminded Taehyung cheerfully, cutting off whatever protest was building in his throat. “Now sit down, you’re blocking the aisle, angel.”

It took a couple more reassurances, but Taehyung finally caved, and eventually sank into the luxury of first class. Their flight was uneventful, thank goodness. Only two layovers in China and Germany, and Jeongguk convinced Taehyung to sleep for most of it, reminding him that it would be nine in the morning when they arrived in Florence. He also might have made an ambiguous promise to join the mile high club on the flight back.

He loved the way Taehyung looked when he slept. Innocent, beautiful, with his lingering smile just ever so gently painted on his lips. No burden of the world weighing on his shoulders. Just dreams of Italy, and the feeling of flying through the sky.

Yeah. He would give him the world just to see that rare smile on his face.

…

“Come on, Gukkie, just one more hall! Please!” Taehyung pleaded, fingers linked together as he tried to tug Jeongguk down yet another art-strewn passage of the Galleria dell'Accademia.

“Okay, okay,” he caved, as he obviously would, and let Taehyung lead them down the hall, earning more than a few chuckles from the other tourists who were absolutely enamoured with them for some reason. All of the Americans and Europeans watched them closely, like a particularly entertaining show, and he didn’t really understand but he thought it might have something to do with the way Taehyung was clinging to him while he chased after art pieces like an over-eager puppy. “I didn’t know you had such a strong interest in Italian Renaissance art.”

Taehyung’s attention was barely on him, instead zeroed in on a Gothic painting as he replied, “Why else would I want to go so badly? Look at the use of colour,” he murmured in awe. “The restoration they did on these pieces…”

Jeongguk loved art, too, but apparently not as much as Taehyung, who knew more about each piece than he’d ever expected. “When did you get so into it?”

“Hmm, I took an Art History class freshman year and I thought it was really interesting, so I sort of just kept doing research. It’s more about the psychology of it for me. I like to imagine what the
artist must have been thinking about to create their pieces, what their motivations were, and what inspired them to use which colours and mediums. I think it’s fascinating.”

The shine in Taehyung’s eyes said it all. Jeongguk ruffled his hair before letting his arm rest around his waist. “I think I still have a lot to learn about you, Kim Taehyung.”

Taehyung rolled his eyes, but the quirk of his lips betrayed him. “Whatever. What about you, huh? You’re so knowledgeable on all of this. I haven’t looked at the pamphlet once.”

Jeongguk just gave him a wink, replying, “Some secrets are better kept than told, darling.”

“Bullshit,” he scoffed, even as he laughed at Jeongguk’s antics.

“Yeah, okay, I read the info on the website during our flight. Sue me.”

Taehyung grinned and bumped him with his shoulder. “Knew it. You’re so cute.” He took one more long look around the exhibit before finally declaring, “Okay, I think I can leave without crying now. Where to next, my lovely tour guide?”

He simply held out his hand. “If you’ll follow me…” Taehyung arched an eyebrow but took it nonetheless, and allowed Jeongguk to lead him down the hall and out of the museum.

Today marked their fourth day in Florence, Italy. The sightseeing had been spectacular, both around the must-see tourist destinations and the little treasures they discovered all on their own. Riverfront shops and cafes glowing under golden streetlamps, beautiful flower-strewn verandas overlooking the city, chapels and churches with architecture beyond either of their imaginations...Florence truly felt like a different world. But today was Taehyung’s birthday, so today, Jeongguk was determined to make it his world.

He’d woken him up with breakfast in bed from what had become their favourite bakery, right down the street from their hotel. After being peppered with kisses -and perhaps a little something more- Taehyung cheerfully munched on his blueberry scone and sipped his hot cocoa while Jeongguk planned the day’s events. He knew Taehyung didn’t like feeling overwhelmed, so they talked it through and decided to take it easy. A morning stroll to duck into whatever shops caught their eye, a visit to the Galleria dell’Accademia, a nice romantic dinner at the place Jeongguk had to reserve a month in advance, and then something special he had yet to tell Taehyung about. His surprise.

As the hour grew later, he felt thankful they kept the day’s schedule light. Their museum tour had consumed three hours alone, and it was already time to head over to the hotel and change before their dinner reservations.

Something giddy stirred in his chest. He wanted tonight to go perfect. Everything should go just the right way for Taehyung, because that’s what he deserved. And they never did things like this. They never got dressed up, they never left campus, really, so he felt like he needed to prove that he was boyfriend material. Long term boyfriend material. He knew he shouldn’t worry. What was there to worry about? They’d been together for months now, and had yet to tire of each other’s company.

It just...scared him sometimes. The thought that he wasn’t enough. Because even after all the months that had passed, Taehyung was still his little wildcard. Unpredictable, down for anything and everything. Spontaneous, and sometimes, just as difficult to read as he’d always been. Thankfully, he’d started to open up more, slowly taking down the seemingly impenetrable wall he’d built between them over the past five years. He let Jeongguk in. He let him know more. About his thoughts and dreams. His ambitions. His fears. And, most closely locked away, only coming to
light now, was his grief. Unsurprisingly, he grieved the loss of his mom to this day. Jeongguk
didn’t think that would ever fade. But he also came to see, through soft words spoken in the darkest
hours of morning and the glimmer of wistfulness that occasionally graced Taehyung’s gaze, that he
grieved the loss of his innocence. He missed the carefree boy he used to be, who basked in the
sunshine and threw himself recklessly into whatever adventure the day had planned for him. He
missed the way he used to chase butterflies and wait for summer afternoons to paint the sidewalk
rainbow in chalk.

And Taehyung’s wistfulness, his yearning for that childlike part of himself, resonated in Jeongguk.
He missed it, too. Picking flowers in the field surrounding Taehyung’s house. The pastries his mom
baked every Friday afternoon. Remembering what it felt like to belong in his happy little family. In
both of theirs.

So yes, it scared him. The idea that Taehyung, his link to those wondrous bittersweet memories,
the one he’d shared his childhood with, would decide that Jeongguk wasn’t enough, and he would
find someone else. Someone more interesting. Someone spontaneous like him. Someone who
didn’t worry about perfection so much, someone who wasn’t only just now getting used to holding
his hand in public.

He still worried, even standing in their hotel room in Florence, Italy, getting ready for a beautiful
night out to celebrate the love of his life’s birth. And he knew it was stupid. He was just being
paranoid. He’d just never loved someone like he loved Taehyung, and right now it all felt too good
to be true. He’d never loved someone for their virtues and their faults, and he’d never had someone
who loved him for all the same things. They both had their fair share of each. Yet Taehyung took
him as he was, in all his over-eager, nervous-energy ridden, lackluster glory. Why, Jeongguk
wasn’t sure. He just hoped it was enough- no, he was enough to be kept and cherished by
Taehyung for a long time.

With one more glance in the mirror, he deemed himself as good as he would get. He’d told
Taehyung to pack one formal outfit, but he wasn’t expecting a stuffy suit-and-tie ordeal, which was
why he’d veered in a more modern direction as well with his soft black v-neck and a tight suit
jacket and jeans to go with it. Nothing over the top. His long hair wouldn’t be behaving any time
soon. With a resigned sigh, he put silver studs in two of his three ear piercings on each ear before
slipping delicate silver chains into the third.

He actually looked...okay. In his opinion. Better than usual, that’s for sure. All he really cared
about was Taehyung liking it, though.

But all of that pretty much slipped his mind once he exited the en suite because in his anxious
frenzy to look decent for his boyfriend, he’d forgotten that his boyfriend was out here trying to
look decent for him and holy fuck, he couldn’t handle the result.

Because Taehyung stood there. Just stood there adjusting the floral scarf around his neck like he
had absolutely any right to walk around looking that good in a subtle white floral print shirt under a
black blazer and sinfully tight slacks. His favourite ruby pendant dangled from his neck, and he’d
tamed his unruly hair into a messy shroud of straight, gorgeous dark locks. Silver dragonflies
dangled from his ears. And fuck, if seeing a tight leather belt wrapped around his waist didn’t
make Jeongguk want to tear it off him then and there-

He was getting ahead of himself. He opened his mouth to speak, to stop his blatant gaping, but
Taehyung beat him to it.

“You look... beautiful, Gukkie,” he marvelled softly, taking a step towards him. And Jeongguk
could only stare, because did Taehyung see himself? And suddenly Taehyung’s fingers were
carding through his hair, caressing him gently only to fiddle with his earrings, then trace down the slope of his shoulder to his bicep. “You’re so beautiful,” he said again, and even though they’d been together for months, Jeongguk’s heart never failed to skip a beat when Taehyung touched him like that. Like he was special. Like he was the only one. “Why don’t you see it?”

Jeongguk blinked, the question catching him off guard. “See what?” It was hard to think with Taehyung so close, smelling like lavender and rose and all of Jeongguk’s favourite things.

“See what I see,” Taehyung murmured, meeting his gaze. “I wish you did.”

He caught Taehyung’s hand, lacing their fingers together. “I’ll just have to trust you to see enough for both of us.” His reply was only half-teasing. “But that’s not important. I should be the one telling you, birthday boy, how absolutely stunning you are.”

Taehyung smiled, lips a soft red with his favourite tinted lip balm. Jeongguk preferred the lighter pink one. “It’s my birthday, and therefore I get to call you beautiful all I want. But also…” He freed his hand to hook a finger in the neckline of Jeongguk’s silk shirt. “This is too much,” he tutted disapprovingly.

“Too much what?”

“Too much skin. Your entire chest is out, Gukkie!” Taehyung practically flounced away from him, searching his suitcase for something. “And I didn’t bring any extra scarves, and people are going to be drooling all over your sexy collarbones, and-”

“My entire chest is not out, Taehyung.”

“It’s too much!” he insisted.

Jeongguk laughed, thinking of every time he had to watch Taehyung dance for other people clad in nothing but lingerie and stilettos. “You’re seriously the worst hypocrite.”

“I just-” Taehyung’s gaze fell from his face to his chest. “I want to bite it.”

He felt his face flush. Taehyung seriously needed to reign in his biting kink. “You’re not biting my chest.” Taehyung arched an eyebrow and started approaching him with clearly malicious intent, so he hastily amended, “Right now. You can bite me all you want later. But at least wait until after the fancy restaurant. I don’t want to be looked at funny because I have a giant hickey on my chest.”

Taehyung looked put off by the idea, but reluctantly agreed. “Fine. Let’s go then. I want to get to the ‘biting you’ part of the night.”

Jeongguk nodded. “Give me one sec. I need to grab something and call Namjoon back.”

Taehyung didn’t even think twice about his excuse. “You want me to wait downstairs?”

“Yeah, that’d be great.”

“Cool.” Taehyung headed for the door, slipping a coat on. “Meet you down there.”

“Yup.” He waited a moment, and then as soon as he could no longer hear his footsteps, he hurried to fetch the small box he’d tucked into his suitcase. He could only pray Taehyung would like it. Next, he made a quick call down to the front desk, then once that was done, he met Taehyung and strolled the few blocks to their restaurant hand-in-hand.
“Oh, wow,” Taehyung breathed, admiring the worn brick exterior and the flowering ivy upon which it climbed. “I swear, everything in Italy is gorgeous.”

“I think you’re just a romantic,” Jeongguk teased, holding the door open for him.

“Only in foreign countries.”

The hostess greeted them at the door and led them to the private balcony table Jeongguk had reserved. Menus were dished out and candles were lit, but Taehyung’s eyes were on the Arno river snaking along below, amber street lights glittering in the dark water reflected in his pupils.

“It’s so gorgeous,” Taehyung eventually sighed, shedding his jacket. “Jeongguk, I...I don’t even know how to thank you. For this entire trip, I mean. For everything. For, well...” He ducked his head, tracing patterns in the table. “For not giving up on me, I guess. For loving me. I just...thank you.”

As he looked at Taehyung, who glowed in the evening’s gentle light, he knew what he meant. None of it felt real, but at the same time, he couldn’t live if it were any other way.

“You never have to thank me for loving you,” he said softly. “I do love you. And I wanted your birthday to be special. I haven’t been able to celebrate it in five years, so really, this is for me, too.”

Taehyung chuckled, but there was that familiar wistfulness in his eyes as he turned his gaze from the river to him. “I’m never going to deserve you. You know that, right? You’re-”

“Not too good for you. Stop saying that.” Jeongguk used to let it slide, his little self-deprecating jokes. But he couldn’t take it anymore. He couldn’t understand how Taehyung didn’t see how wonderful he was. “You’re more than I could ever ask for. And I wish you’d stop thinking of yourself as anything less.”

It took a minute, but, “Okay,” Taehyung agreed quietly. He wasn’t sure if he meant it.

Still, Jeongguk used his fairly well-developed English to order a bottle of pinot noir along with a spinach gnocchi appetizer (thank goodness the staff spoke English as well as Italian), and Taehyung’s gloominess seemed to fade significantly.

“I never knew walking around Italy could be so exhausting,” Jeongguk admitted, stretching his sore legs and accidentally bumping Taehyung in the process.

Taehyung bumped him back. “That’s because we’ve been walking around nonstop for four days, silly. Of course you’re tired.”

“And you’re not?” he asked in disbelief.

With a shrug, Taehyung answered, “Not really. I’m used to it. Walking around, constantly moving. Although I will admit, I can’t walk as long in heels as I could when I was working at the club.”

“There are worse abilities to lose,” Jeongguk replied with a laugh, which appeared to ease Taehyung’s tension around the subject. “I like not having to rub your feet anymore.”

“Rude!” Taehyung exclaimed, and Jeongguk felt a heavy weight drop on his thigh, only to see Taehyung’s foot resting there. “It was a loving gesture, one of which I’m still very grateful for. But if you’re not careful, I might make you do it again.”

Rolling his eyes, he shoved Taehyung’s foot off his leg. “I’ll do it if I’m feeling extra nice.”
“You’re always extra nice.”

“Well, someone has to make up for your attitude.”

“You like my attitude. It gives you something to do.”

Jeongguk raised an eyebrow. “I think you give me plenty to do, angel.” He didn’t miss the way Taehyung’s lips curled in a playful smile, the tip of his tongue darting out for just a second to lick them.

“I’d gladly give you something to do when we get back,” he hummed, a seductive note in his honey baritone. “That is, if you’re done cockblocking me.”

“I’m not cockblocking you,” Jeongguk argued. “We just have bad timing.”

Taehyung sniffed and took a haughty sip of wine. “Feels like cockblocking.”

“Maybe I’ve decided to be celibate.”

That got him a loud scoff. “Sure. So if I decided to bend over the table with my pants down, you’d just be chill?”

Well that was certainly a sentence for the waitress to hear as she approached to ask about their entrees and show them their wine options for the next course. After that, they made sure to stick to relatively wholesome topics.

“You remember that time sophomore year when we had a shouting match in the Physics wing?”

Taehyung leaned back in his white wicker seat, a fond smile on his face. “Ah yes, some of our best insults that day. What were you even so pissed about? All I remember is I came out of my Movement Analysis class and you suddenly started yelling at me.”

Jeongguk thought back, trying to recall what had made him so angry. “Oh yeah. That was the day after we got drunk at the same party and you threw up on my shoes.”

Taehyung gave him a less than sympathetic eye roll. “Like you couldn’t afford twenty other pairs.”

“Pretty sure that’s what you said that day, too.”

But suddenly Taehyung was squinting at him, as if trying to recall something. “But...wait, didn’t you...Was it you who took me to the bathroom and cleaned me up?”

The memory flashed through him, nothing more than pulsing lights and music, the fuzzy dead weight of alcohol, and...maybe a hazy bathroom. And Taehyung, wasted as hell, blinking up at him from the bathroom floor as he tried to clean the vomit off his shoes and rinse Taehyung’s mouth.

“Yeah, actually, I think so. Damn, I must’ve been really drunk to help you out even after you puked on me.”

Taehyung smiled sheepishly. “Sorry. You know I can’t hold my liquor.”

“Yeah, I’ve noticed,” Jeongguk snorted. But then another memory came to him. “I think you called a cab back to the dorms, though. You made the driver drop me off first, and texted my friends to let them know that I was okay. And...I remember I was pissed because you were sitting so far away from me and I couldn’t understand why. But you weren’t glaring at me or anything. Not like usual. It was weird. So the next day...I wasn’t actually mad about the shoes. I was mad because I didn’t
care that you threw up on me and I was mad because you took the time to get me home safely even when we’d barely said two words to each other all year.”

He noticed as Taehyung’s smile softened. “I didn’t trust myself to sit any closer to you, Gukkie. But I wasn’t going to just leave you drunk off your ass after you’d basically taken care of me.”

“I wasn’t going to not take care of you,” he grumbled in response. A newer memory resurfaced, one that made him think of all the ways city lights reflected so beautifully in Taehyung’s eyes. The fear that had burnt in his chest as he saw his dilated pupils, could see the way Taehyung was burning up with a fever from the driver’s seat. The innocent fascination in Taehyung’s every move as he became enamoured with the window and his own two hands. “That’s what I meant. That night I picked you up outside your club the first time. I said I was always going to be there. Every time you need me. I meant it. But...you’re the same way, you know? Every time I need you, you’re there. And I don’t think you realise it. But I wouldn’t be the person I am today without you.”

“Jeonggukkie…” The stars swam in Taehyung’s watering irises. “You...you’re so good. Both to me and for me. You kept me together this year, I hope you know. Without you...I don’t…” He inhaled sharply and glanced up at the sky, seeming to collect himself. “I don’t know if I ‘d be here without you.” His voice broke, and it broke something in Jeongguk a little. “I’m sure you’ve figured this out already, but there was a time that I was really...I was really thinking, you know, maybe…” Taehyung carded a hand through his hair before rubbing his neck, and Jeongguk could see the tears he blinked away from his eyes. “...maybe it was time to...to go.” And when he glanced back at him, he looked scared. Skittish. Admitting one of his darkest secrets, and Jeongguk felt a lump form in his throat because he knew exactly what Taehyung was talking about. The words You’d be so happy without me, right? echoed in his mind every now and again, reminding him of just how close Taehyung had got to the edge. He’d never felt as afraid as he had that night, the realisation that things were so much worse in Taehyung’s head than he’d ever let on consuming him.

“Tae…” He grasped his hand, needing something to hold on to. To remind him that Taehyung was here.

“What I’m trying to say is thank you.” Taehyung held his hand in both of his, squeezing tight. “You reminded me that I still had a lot left to live for. I’m really grateful for what you did for me that night. It was...more meaningful than I could probably explain. I love you, you know? So much.”

They exchanged a lot of I love you’s but this one felt different. Less like the teasing couple who had been together for a few months and more like the star-crossed best friends turned enemies turned lovers who had to endure so many years of joy and heartbreak just to finally be together like this. Where they could say I love you freely and mean it with their entire being.

So Jeongguk nodded and swallowed, trying to lessen the knot in his throat. He didn’t want to cry. Not now. “I love you, too. I’m never going to love someone the way I love you. It’s...It’s always going to be you, Taehyung.”

“Shut up, I’m gonna cry.”

Jeongguk laughed, and let the tension of the moment dissipate. “It’s okay to cry.”

“Yeah, but I cry all the time. It’s your turn.”

“You almost got me,” he admitted. “But you’re going to have to try a little harder than that.”

Taehyung sipped his wine, then commented, “Infinity War.”
Jeongguk choked, emotion immediately welling up inside him. “Okay, oh my god, point taken, did you seriously have to bring that up right now?”

They laughed together, and as their entrees came out, they moved to lighter topics. The kids at Taehyung’s studio, who he absolutely adored. The way he was finally able to engage in some of his other hobbies now that basketball season had come to an end. The fact that his Experimental Cinema professor was a dick, which Taehyung related to wholeheartedly. They talked about the past, like they always did, and for a moment, the future.

“I miss Tannie,” Taehyung whined, although he was thoroughly enjoying his lobster scampi.

“We can make a trip to see him soon.” Jeongguk chuckled and took another bite of his puttanesca.

“I want to see him all the time.”

“Well, maybe when we get an apartment, we can-” He froze, realising what he had just said, and when he glanced up, Taehyung was staring at him. “I mean, when you get an apartment, you know, if you do. That’s...that’s entirely up to you, and um, I-”

“Is...is that something you want us to do?” Taehyung asked gently. “In the future?”

Of course he wanted that, but he wasn’t sure if he was allowed to just say it so blatantly. He didn’t want to come off as too eager. That was predictable, and boring, and everything he felt sure Taehyung didn’t like.

So, he shrugged. “Maybe. I don’t know.”

“Jeongguk, don’t bullshit me. Just...I don’t know, be honest.”

Taehyung didn’t look judgemental as he watched him, even showing the faintest smile when Jeongguk let out the breath he’d been holding.

“Maybe,” he admitted again. “I was just thinking. We already basically live together, and so that’s obviously where my mind went. But I also understand if you want your space. I don’t want to rush into anything, but I like living with you. Neither of us are really messy, and it’s nice to have someone to come home to. But I also...I’m not really sure where I’m going in life yet, so I don’t want to weigh you down with that.”

“You wouldn’t be weighing me down,” Taehyung reassured him. “I like living with you too. And maybe at the end of this semester, we can reevaluate things. It doesn’t make sense for you to keep that dorm either way. Yoongi isn’t living in it most of the time, and neither are you. So let’s see what happens.”

“Okay.” Relief flooded his system. “We’ll see what happens.”

“Regardless, Tannie is a must.”

He laughed, glad that discussion wasn’t nearly as painful as he thought it would be. “Definitely. You need your little fur baby.”

Taehyung nudged him playfully with his foot. “We need our little fur baby. I can’t be a single dad. Not right now, are you kidding? First he’s a stripper, then he’s a single dad, what next, homelessness?”

“I promise to support you and your baby for as long as you’ll let me,” he vowed.
“You’d better, mister sugar daddy.”

After that, they joked around and shared a platter of tiramasu, which had both of them making borderline pornographic moans, but it didn’t matter because the dessert was *that* good. Besides, it went well with the sweet coffee offered with it, which was so good, even Taehyung didn’t shy away from a second sip. He received more than a few pointed noises when he paid their bill, but telling Taehyung how big of a whiny baby he was usually shut him up quickly.

“You mind if we take a detour on our walk back?” Jeongguk asked as he offered his arm for Taehyung to take once they were outside the restaurant.

“Depends,” Taehyung linked their arms together. “Where are we going?”

“Not far. It’s just so beautiful out, I don’t want to waste the evening.”

Taehyung hummed and cuddled close, clinging to his bicep as they strolled down the cobbled street. The moon shone bright and they could see the river glittering along to their right. They got noticeably more strange looks here than they did in Korea, which Jeongguk assumed simply had something to do with the culture. He couldn’t really be bothered with it, more than content to just have Taehyung on his arm and the warm evening breeze toying with their hair.

They walked along the edge of the river until Jeongguk’s destination came in sight, and he heard Taehyung inhale sharply. “Which bridge is that? It looks beautiful.”

“That’s the Ponte Santa Trinita.”

“Oh, I love it when you speak Italian to me, baby,” Taehyung purred, nosing his neck.

“Sorry, angel, that’s all I’ve got,” Jeongguk said with a laugh, shoving him away only to loop his arm around his waist and bring him back in, leading him over to the bridge. It was a beautiful elliptical arch bridge, constructed during the Renaissance, and the oldest of its kind in the world. Not only that, but in Jeongguk’s opinion, it was one of the most romantic places in Italy at night, with golden streetlamps shining amber on aging stone while the Arno rolled quietly by beneath. Statues of the four seasons decorated the bridge, and the elegant city of Florence rose up on both sides of the river, placing the arch in the center of everything. He could hear the soft ebb and flow of water beneath him, coupled with the wind rustling through the streets.

They walked along the bridge in silence, simply taking in the sounds of the city around them, until Jeongguk came to a stop under a pool of lamplight overlooking the water.

“It really is beautiful,” he said, gazing out over the river. Taehyung came to his side, resting his arms on the ledge. “I’m glad you wanted to come here. I’ve always wanted to go too.”

Taehyung rested his chin on his arms, glancing up at Jeongguk. “Why didn’t you? You could travel wherever you want. No one to stop you, nothing to hold you back. You could see the world, Gukkie.”

“It’s not the same, travelling alone. I did a little bit of it the summer between high school and uni. I like this better. I like experiencing the world with another person.”

Taehyung smiled, bright and genuine. The smile that Jeongguk knew no one else really ever saw. “I’m always happy to be your plus one. I mean, it makes sense. You’ve never liked being alone. Not...not like that. You like your space. You’re an introvert at heart. But you don’t like *feeling* alone. I don’t think anyone does.”
“No,” he agreed. “I don’t think anyone likes feeling alone. I did feel alone though, for a long time.”

“You had friends, even when you didn’t have me.”

He shook his head. “It’s not the same, Tae.” He used the most familiar nickname he could, trying to convey how different it was. “That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. This...I know you don’t like when I tell you stuff like this, but I feel whole when I’m with you. I don’t feel that way about anyone else. I never have.”

Taehyung reached up, and Jeongguk felt warmth cascade through him as his long fingers brushed the hair away from his face. “What makes you think I don’t like it when you tell me stuff like that?”

“I don’t want to scare you away,” he admitted quietly. “I’m so scared that I’m gonna mess up and say something too serious. Too heavy. And you’ll see how hopelessly in love with you I am, and it’s going to be too much.”

It was Taehyung’s turn to shake his head, and as he watched the stars, his laugh was bittersweet. “Everyone thinks they know me. You think you know me. And you do, better than anyone else. But you don’t know everything about me. And clearly you don’t know how fast you make my heart beat every time you tell me you love me. It’s never going to be too much, Jeongguk. You think you’re hopelessly in love? I guess that makes two of us. You’re the best thing that ever happened to me, and I’m scared, too. I’m scared that you’re going to get annoyed and bored with me. That one day I’ll take a joke too far, and really hurt you, and you won’t look back. We both know it’s possible. I’m still trying to work on that. I’m scared because I’m trying to reinvent myself into a better person, but I worry that I’ve done that too much, and you won’t know who I am anymore. I’m not sure if I know who I am right now.”

It took him a minute to absorb what Taehyung meant. They were both scared. Of course they were both scared. Of course they were both scared. They were twenty-one, and broken, and in love. They were starting to heal, but that didn’t make the future any less daunting.

“But then I start thinking…” Taehyung went on, and Jeongguk swore he could see the stars shining in his eyes. “And I realise...maybe we don’t have to know. Not yet. Maybe we should just be happy, and worry when we need to worry, and talk things through when we need to talk. If there’s anyone I can do this with, seriously do this with, long-term, hopelessly in love, all of that, it’s you. There’s no one I trust and love more. It’s good to go day-by-day. But it’s also okay to imagine the future every now and again. Because eventually the future becomes tomorrow, and then tomorrow becomes today, and then everyone expects you to have it all figured out. And there’s no one I’d rather try to figure out this messy, unpredictable world with than you.”

A tightness began to form in his chest, so he tried to push it down by clinging to Taehyung’s coat. He pressed a kiss to his forehead. “You’ve always been my first choice, Kim Taehyung.”

Taehyung’s small smile reached his eyes as he cupped Jeongguk’s cheeks, trailing his thumb down his lips before kissing him slow and sweet. He could taste the chocolate and coffee on his tongue, and he never wanted to taste anything else. He just wanted to drown in this, the pressure of Taehyung’s lips against his, so irresistibly soft since he stopped slathering them in gloss every night.

“It’s gonna be scary,” Taehyung whispered, their foreheads pressed together.

“It’s gonna be scary," Jeongguk agreed, heart racing a million miles a minute just from breathing the same air as him. “But I trust us.”
“Me too.” The words were shaky, but he knew Taehyung meant them, sealing the promise with another kiss. And even if they hadn’t decided anything, hadn’t figured out their future, this was important. They acknowledged their fears and insecurities, and that brought them closer than anything else. And he knew Taehyung was open to thinking about everything the future held. And he wanted Jeongguk by his side when he did that.

That idea alone was worth more than a thousand hollow promises.

It took them longer to break apart this time. Every time he pulled back from the kiss, he couldn’t help but sink right back into Taehyung’s embrace, and they stood like that, pressed together under the amber light bathing the Ponte Santa Trinita, far longer than he ever meant to.

Finally, through several gentle kisses and hushed words, they managed to part. And after a moment of simply gazing at each other, Jeongguk reached into his coat pocket and brought out the little box he’d been carrying around for the entire night.

Taehyung watched with curiosity, which quickly turned to alarm. “If you get on your knee, I’m slapping you.”

Jeongguk laughed, and held out the box for him to take. “Please, your dad would kill me. No, this isn’t something quite that big.”

Skeptical, Taehyung took the little red velvet box from him, and when he opened it, he blinked for a second before looking back up at him. “Jeonggukkie, this is...this is absolutely gorgeous, but I don’t have my belly button pierced.”

Jeongguk beamed, thrilled that he liked the piercing he’d picked out. “Not yet. You will in about half an hour, though.”

“I- what?” Taehyung spluttered, closing the box.

“You made a promise, remember? If we won the game, I got to pierce you wherever I wanted. Well, we won. So I get to pierce you wherever I want.”

“I…” Taehyung burst out laughing, his head falling on Jeongguk’s shoulder. “Yeah, alright. You’re right. I completely forgot about that.”

He let out a sigh of relief. He’d been secretly afraid Taehyung would be against the idea. “Let’s go, then.”

“Now?” Taehyung exclaimed.

“Yes, now. You have an appointment in…” he checked his phone. “Ten minutes.”

Taehyung hurried to catch up with him, linking their arms together again. “When did you make me a piercing appointment?”

“Last week before we left. I made sure to check the reviews, and eventually I found what was apparently a really good 24-hour parlour. If you...you know, if you want to get it done.”

He anxiously tugged at his hair, grateful when Taehyung just rolled his eyes and said, “Of course I want to. Are you kidding? It’ll be hot. Especially with this stunning piece right here.” He held up the box, then carefully tucked it into his pocket. “Lead the way, Jeon.”

Luckily, the shop was just across the bridge. The piercing itself didn’t take long. The guy they met
at the counter was super friendly and spoke English, so at least Jeongguk could communicate with him somewhat effectively. Taehyung, of course, grew very annoyed with the fact that Jeongguk could understand most of what the piercer was saying and he could not. But Jeongguk found it cute, the way Taehyung whispered in his ear every five seconds, “What’s he saying?” and once “I heard the word sex. What about sex? Why are you talking about sex? Jeongguk, what the hell?”

“Relax,” he eventually whispered back when the piercer disappeared to set up everything he would need. “I was just wondering if we needed to wait to have sex until after the piercing healed, but he said as long as we’re careful, it should be fine.”

This apparently put Taehyung at ease, whose jealous streak didn’t act up around the piercer, thank goodness. Jeongguk thought it had something to do with the guy’s biceps and facial hair, which clearly didn’t threaten him as much as rosy cheeks and soft eyes.

Getting the piercing didn’t pose much of an issue either. Taehyung’s pain tolerance was astonishing, even as he laid out on the padded table with his shirt hiked up to his chest. He barely blinked when the needle went in, then cocked his head in confusion when the piercer said it was done.

“It’s done,” Jeongguk repeated, more than eager for him to get his shirt back down. “He just has to insert the jewelry and clean it. Then you’re good to go.”

“The needle already went in?” Taehyung asked, trying to glance down at his stomach. He looked cute, going cross-eyed as he attempted to get a look at the hole in his navel.

“Yep.”

“Huh.” Taehyung released his hand, which he hadn’t even squeezed. “Weird. I didn’t feel it.”

“You said you brought your own piece, right?” the piercer inquired.

“Oh, yeah.” Jeongguk dug around in Taehyung’s coat pocket and removed the jewelry from the box. “This is the one.”

“Wow.” As he handed it over, the piercer admired the jewelry, taking in the upper diamond stud and the lower diamond, which resembled a flower with delicate glistening petals. “Is this real diamond?”

“Uh, yeah.” Jeongguk rubbed his neck sheepishly. “3-carat. Both of them.”

The guy stared at him wide-eyed before dropping back to the jewelry. “That’s...damn, you must really love your boyfriend.”

“Trust me, I do.”

“What’s he saying?” Taehyung asked. But Jeongguk just waved him off. He didn’t need this part of the conversation.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” the piercer marvelled, sanitising the piece.

“That’s um, because it’s custom made.”

The piercer let out a low whistle. “Very lucky boyfriend indeed. You ready?” he asked Taehyung. Thankfully, he got that much and nodded. The piercing slid in without a hitch, silver stud poking out the top while both diamonds dangled over his navel. Jeongguk’s breath hitched as he took it in.
The white, silver, and blue jewels glittered gorgeously, contrasting with his already beautiful golden skin like a dream. And then his head was somewhere else entirely, envisioning Taehyung dancing for him, so slow and sultry, seductive in his lace and chains, and he remembered the way the club’s lights would reflect off his earrings, chokers, and bracelets, and he could see it now, how it would gleam off his alluring new piercing. All for him. He didn’t have to share this with anyone else. This was for him. Jeongguk’s own dream come true, finally no other men to get in the way.

“You look stunning,” Jeongguk murmured, holding out a hand to help him sit up. The piercer was swabbing over it with antiseptic but neither of them were paying attention.

“Really?” Taehyung glanced down. “It feels...nice, actually. I like the weight. And it’s sexy.”

“Very sexy,” he breathed, trying to shake his vision from his head. “In fact, I’m struggling to not just haul you out of here over my shoulder and get you back to the hotel.”

“That was your master plan all along, wasn’t it?” Taehyung teased, getting to his feet when the piercer informed them that they were good to go.

Jeongguk couldn’t help the quirk of his lips. “Maybe.” He subtly patted Taehyung’s ass as he walked past, earning him a well-deserved glare. If only he would tie his shirt up and leave his pretty tummy exposed all the time now.

Taehyung thanked him profusely as he paid, hanging over his shoulders, promising him something extra special for his own birthday, and overall being the cutest human alive. The piercer wished them a good night and threw Jeongguk one last wink, letting him know he’d made a good choice with his jewelry. He made sure to tip well.

“That’s where I went, you know,” he said on their way back, hand tucked in Taehyung’s back pocket. “That night you got mad at me for having to delay our plans. The shop called me and told me the jewelry was ready for pickup, and I didn’t want to risk leaving it another day.”

Taehyung groaned. “God, I’m really the worst, aren’t I? You’re literally out there doing sweet things left and right and I have the audacity to get mad at you for it.”

That wasn’t what he’d been trying to get at. “In your defense, I took a phone call over making out with you and I wouldn’t tell you where I was going, so no, you’re definitely not the worst. If you’d done that to me, I probably wouldn’t have spoken to you for three days.”

“You couldn’t go three days without speaking to me,” Taehyung scoffed. “You like the sound of my voice too much.”

“I like lots of things about you a little too much.” Jeongguk squeezed his ass as he spoke, a little more than eager to set the mood. He could only pray that the hotel staff had done their job.

“Someone’s looking to get something,” Taehyung noted, looping an arm around his waist.

“Just appreciating what’s in front of me.”

“I’m standing to your left, actually.”

“Could you let me have one moment? I’m trying to be smooth here.”

Taehyung laughed, and started to sway his hips far more than necessary. “Go on, then. Be smooth. Woo me.” That was one of the dangerous things about dating an ex-stripper. He knew exactly what
to do to make men, Jeongguk definitely included, very interested in how he moved his body. And right now all he could focus on was the hypnotic side to side of his hips in those tight black slacks and the realization that he wanted to rip that damn scarf off of his neck with his teeth. “Baby, that’s not wooing, that’s drooling.”

Jeongguk snapped out of it, attempting to refocus on the street in front of them. “I’m better at wooing through actions than words.”

“Oh, but you always go on and on about what a smooth talker you are. C’mon.” Taehyung’s hand slid dangerously low, and Jeongguk hissed when he pinched his ass. “I wanna see it in action.”

“You’re gonna see some action, alright,” Jeongguk growled, swatting his hand. “Notably the palm of my hand, you little brat.”

“You gonna spank me, hyung?” Taehyung pinched him again, and that was it. They reached the line. Without another word, Jeongguk scooped him up and threw him over his shoulder, mindful of his piercing, and landed a sharp smack on his ass. “Hey! Jeonggukkie, people are watching!” Fists pounded on his back, but there wasn’t much fight behind them.

He shrugged, not really giving a shit about the foreigners. “You shouldn’t ask for punishments you can’t handle. Besides, we’re a block away from the hotel. You got lucky. Only a couple minutes of shame. Next time, I’m parading you around campus like this. Class to class.”

“Stop trying to discipline me, you know it’s never going to work.” Taehyung seemed to settle into his new position, no longer struggling in his grip. But he went as limp as possible just to make Jeongguk’s job harder.

“It may not work, but it’s fun to try. And I do have hope that someday, even in the very distant future, one lesson might actually sink in. Wishful thinking, I know, but I’m an optimist.”

“At least one of us is an optimist,” Taehyung grumbled. When Jeongguk felt another pinch on his ass, he promptly spanked Taehyung again. “Ow! That’s not fair! A spank hurts way more than a pinch!”

“It’s supposed to hurt more. That’s what we refer to as negative reinforcement.”

“**Negative reinforcement,**” Taehyung mocked under his breath. “Okay, Dr. Phil. Thanks for the therapy session.”

“It’s like you get brattier when you know we’re going back to a room with a bed in it.”

“That would be absurd,” Taehyung said, but Jeongguk could hear the smirk in his voice. His suspicions were confirmed when he set Taehyung down outside the hotel, only to see the playful expression on his face. “Let’s get inside, Gukkie. Wanna warm up. It’s chilly.”

It was definitely not chilly, but he let Taehyung tug him through the elegant lobby and into the nearest available elevator. The person working the front desk flashed him a quick thumbs-up, so he knew everything was good to go. Which was why, rather than their usual five, he pressed the button for floor twelve.

“Gukkie, that’s not our floor.” Taehyung went to press five, but Jeongguk hurried in front of the panel. “Jeongguk. What are you doing?”

“Going to our room,” he answered, being as nonchalant as possible.
“We’re on floor five. We’ve been on floor five all week.”

Taehyung looked less than impressed when Jeongguk refused to move. “Trust me, angel, we’re on the twelfth floor.”

“We have not been on the twelfth floor once,” he argued. “Seriously, what are you doing?”

Jeongguk grabbed his hand when the elevator chimed, announcing their arrival. “Taking you to our room.” And Taehyung continued to stare at him like he’d grown a second head, but he let Jeongguk lead him down to the end of the hallway to room #22, where he found a card key already waiting in its slot.

“Jeongguk, that’s not our room,” Taehyung insisted furiously. But Jeongguk ignored him in favour of pushing the card down and unlocking the door, then pushed it open.

“Oh, thank god,” he sighed audibly, even as Taehyung let out a loud gasp.

“Jeongguk, this definitely isn’t our room.”

“Yeah, it is.” Jeongguk ushered him inside, pointing at the far end of the suite. “See? Those are our bags.”

“But…” Taehyung took another tentative step inside, face illuminated by the silk-swathed amber lamps and flickering candlelight. “This…” Jeongguk watched as his gaze fell on the elevated round bed and its delicate golden duvet littered with red rose petals. The air was filled with the scent of them; rose, lavender, and vanilla soothed his nose. He’d made sure to request Taehyung’s favourite scents for the candles. He could hear the soft sputters of the candle wicks as well as the quiet bubbling of the full black marble jacuzzi tucked in an alcove away from the rest of the room. Candles lined the edges of that as well, and rose petals floated on the water. “Jeongguk, did you...did you have us moved to the honeymoon suite?”

He lingered by the door, suddenly afraid that Taehyung didn’t like it. “I...maybe? It’s almost our five month anniversary. And, you know, it’s your birthday. But if it’s too much, then-”

“Idiot,” Taehyung said, enveloping him in a massive tight hug. “It’s always too much, but I love it anyways. I love you. And this...you...god, I can’t even say it.” He buried his face in Jeongguk’s shoulder. His hair smelled sweet like strawberries, and Jeongguk couldn’t help but nuzzle it. “Thank you,” Taehyung mumbled. He felt a strange vibration.

“Are you...” He cupped Taehyung’s cheeks, coaxing him off his shoulder. “Are you crying?”

Taehyung angrily wiped under his eyes. “No.”

“You are!” Jeongguk swiped the tears away with his thumbs. “I’m sorry, baby, I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

“Happy tears, Gukkie,” Taehyung whispered, leaning in to kiss him. His tears faded as they kissed. Jeongguk gently pushed him to the edge of the bed, removing their shoes and sliding Taehyung’s suit jacket off his shoulders as they went. And when Taehyung fell back, it was with a soft thud that stirred the petals beneath. He looked so beautiful, so ethereal beneath him. All of his facades crumbled, his personas finally put away, gazing back at Jeongguk with nothing but love and trust. And he knew, without a doubt, that he was the luckiest man in the world.

“Do you want to decide how this night is going to go?” Jeongguk murmured, ducking down to undo his scarf with his teeth. It only took two tugs, and the small scrap of fabric fluttered to the
Taehyung shook his head, running a hand through Jeongguk’s hair. “I want you to tell me.”

“Oh, baby.” He kissed a lazy trail up the column of Taehyung’s throat. “First, we’re going to get this stuffy suit off of you. And then I’m going to massage your back, the way you like me to do after dance practice. And then we’re going to rinse off in that jacuzzi over there and have a glass of champagne. After that, I’m going to carry you over to this bed and make love to you like you deserve. Does that sound okay?”

Taehyung nodded eagerly, legs wrapped around Jeongguk’s waist. “Yes, god yes, please.”

“A little early to start begging for me,” Jeongguk teased. But Taehyung just blinked back up at him, a pout tugging on his lips. “Fuck, you’re so cute,” he sighed, leaning down to kiss him again. “I love it when you’re not yelling at me.”

Taehyung glared at him but grabbed his hands. “I’ll yell at you less if you help me get my clothes off.”

“My two favourite things. Less yelling and more of your naked body.” That got him another pointed look, but Jeongguk didn’t really notice, occupied with Taehyung’s shirt buttons. They came apart in a matter of seconds, and he swallowed as he watched Taehyung slide the fabric from his shoulders, revealing miles of golden skin beneath, broken only by the sultry glimmer of two diamonds in his navel. He placed another kiss right above Taehyung’s piercing, undoing the top button and zipper of his slacks. “Hips,” he coaxed, and had to suppress his amazement as Taehyung rolled almost all of his body weight onto his shoulders, lower body completely in the air. Dancers had special gifts, he decided. And special gifts that helped Taehyung get naked faster were Jeongguk’s favourite kind. Carefully, he tugged Taehyung’s slacks off and discarded them to the side. All that remained on Taehyung’s body were his simple black lace panties. Nothing extravagant. Nothing showy. Sure, it was still lingerie, but Jeongguk had begun to suspect that Taehyung just liked the feel of them. “Now lay on your stomach, baby. Be careful of your piercing.”

For once, Taehyung didn’t make a snarky remark. He simply rolled over, placing a pillow under his stomach to lessen the weight on the sensitive area.

He located the rose-scented lotion tucked in the top drawer of the suite’s dark oak nightstand, thankful the hotel staff really thought of everything. He also spotted more than one bottle of lube in there, but those could be perused later.

After a moment of positioning, he settled on the bed between Taehyung’s long, slender legs. The motions were routine to him at this point, lathering his hands in lotion as well as leaving dollops of the sweet moisturiser on Taehyung’s back, only to be soothed and rubbed in through gentle movements. He liked doing this for Taehyung. The first time was a few months ago, while Taehyung trained relentlessly for his winter competition. He came home complaining every day of his sore back and thighs, so Jeongguk offered to give him a massage, seeing as Taehyung often massaged him after his workouts. And the experience turned out to be pretty good for both of them. Taehyung got to rest his aching muscles and Jeongguk got to touch and admire every part of his body.

Really, though, it was the nurturing aspect of it that Jeongguk enjoyed. He liked taking care of Taehyung, who bit back at any hand that tried to feed him. Nurturance just wasn’t in his dictionary. At least not when it applied to him. He could nurture other people. He practically parented his own dad for two years. But to Taehyung, nurturing meant sacrifice. He showed people how much he
loved them by giving things up for them. And that’s not how Jeongguk was raised to understand nurturance. It was the act of giving, not of giving up, that best demonstrated love, in his opinion. And it took a long time for Taehyung to understand that because Taehyung didn’t like to be given anything. But he let Jeongguk give him this. A snapshot of tranquility in which it was just the two of them connected by a single act of love, devotion, and trust. Taehyung laid himself out openly and Jeongguk took care of every piece he gave him. So yes, it may look simple to an outsider. But to them it meant understanding.

“You feel okay?” he murmured, pressing down on his lower back.

“So good, Gukkie,” Taehyung moaned, face hidden in his pillow. “Wanna feel your hands on me always.”

“You want me to get your legs, too?” He received a muffled please in response, and gladly brought more lotion into his palm, distributing it in his hands before rubbing it across and down Taehyung’s thigh to his calf. His skin glowed under the treatment and the romantic lighting, and Jeongguk took extra care to massage each muscle, earning little whines and pleas as encouragement. He did the same for his other leg. Taehyung’s skin felt plush and silky, soft from years of being relentlessly waxed. Jeongguk both loved it and hated it. Loved it because he felt so smooth and delicate. Hated it because he wondered who Taehyung would be if he hadn’t had to resort to using his body as a commodity. As a distraction, he leaned down and kissed Taehyung’s thigh, teasing him with his tongue and teeth.

“Gukkie, no,” Taehyung whined, involuntarily pushing his ass back. “Later.”

“But you look so pretty covered in all of my lovebites.”

“Speaking of…” Taehyung rolled onto his back and yanked Jeongguk forward. He reflexively tangled a hand in Taehyung’s hair when he felt teeth sink into the skin exposed by his shirt’s neckline. Supposing it was only fair, he relaxed and let Taehyung do his thing. And maybe he secretly enjoyed the fact that his boyfriend wanted to mark him in a spot where anyone could see. “Mine,” Taehyung reminded him, giving his chest one last kiss.

“Yours.” He got to his feet and extended a hand. “May I lead you to the bath, darling?”

Taehyung accepted his outstretched hand. “I suppose.”

He helped Taehyung tug his panties off and climb the two steps into the jacuzzi before beginning to discard his own suit. Taehyung’s hungry gaze didn’t escape his notice.

“Are you waiting for me to do a striptease for you?”

Taehyung bit his lip, roaming his body. “Just admiring the view.” Petals swirled around him as he sank back into the water. He didn’t look away until Jeongguk was fully naked, and only then did he do it regretfully to pour them two glasses of champagne. “Here.” He passed Jeongguk his glass as he stepped into the bath. The water lapped at his thighs, pleasantly warm and misted with rose and the haze of scented candles. It didn’t take long for him to settle in the water and get comfortable.

They tipped their glasses together, a soft smile gracing Taehyung’s lips.

“Happy birthday,” Jeongguk murmured, pulling him close for another kiss. This one still tasted sweet, but it was now the sweet of bubbly wine rather than that of chocolate. “Stay,” he whispered against Taehyung’s ear, nibbling delicately on the shell while he coaxed him into a comfortable position on his lap. Taehyung wrapped himself around his body, arm looped over his shoulders,
legs laid over his own, sharing body heat. He felt weightless in the water.

Everything about this felt different. Stronger. They had been intimate before, but romance was never at the forefront of their love story. Mostly it was innocence, and anger, and reconciliation. Nothing like this. And for a moment, it hit him. This was Taehyung. His childhood best friend. And here they bathed naked together, bodies intertwined, sharing champagne and heated kisses.

It almost felt wrong.

Biting his lip, he swept Taehyung’s hair out of his eyes.

“What’s wrong, Gukkie?” Taehyung was looking at him with concern. But Jeongguk just continued to stroke his hair before caressing down his cheeks, which used to be round and full with youth, but were beginning to sharpen and slim. His nose was more defined, elegant and straight. His eyebrows were dark, but still gentle. Even his eyes had aged, still beautiful and unique, but now sparkling with the experience of life rather than childhood.

They weren’t the same people they used to be. And that was okay. They were allowed to grow and change, and Jeongguk wanted to let their relationship grow and change with them.

“Nothing’s wrong, angel,” he finally said, still caressing his cheek. “You’re just beautiful.”

Taehyung set his glass down on the ledge, barely disrupting the water as he seated himself fully on Jeongguk’s thighs. “I swear, it’s like you don’t see yourself.” He drew his fingers lightly down Jeongguk’s chest, and he couldn’t help the shiver that consumed him upon the light scratch of Taehyung’s nails.

“I prefer seeing you,” he admitted, albeit a bit breathlessly. And when Taehyung leaned in to capture his lips, dark, full lashes fluttering shut, the last bit of air taking residence in his lungs quickly vanished. The water shifted as Jeongguk hurried to bring his hands to Taehyung’s waist, skin soft and smooth beneath his tight grip. Droplets drew rivulets down Taehyung’s back when he slid a hand up to knot in his hair, just as he gently pried Taehyung’s lips open with his tongue. He loved the way Taehyung opened up for him, solely for him, in every sense. His walls fell, his words broke the surface, and he blossomed, but only for him. The water moved once more when Taehyung pressed closer, dragging his hips slowly against Jeongguk, and he felt blood rush to fill out his cock.

“You feel so good, Gukkie,” Taehyung panted, rutting against his abs. He kissed him again, sinking his teeth into his bottom lip, desperate enough to draw blood. “I want you now. Please.”

“Oh, let’s- fuck.” He’d meant to finish his sentence, but he couldn’t. Not with Taehyung grinding into him, every press of his lips hot and insistent, barely meeting their mark.

“Yes, yes, please, let’s fuck.” Tight fingers coiled in Jeongguk’s hair as Taehyung readjusted his position. When Jeongguk half-opened his eyes, a thrill of heat flashed through him when he saw Taehyung already a knuckle deep in himself, back arched beautifully. But this wasn’t right. This wasn’t what he knew Taehyung wanted.

“No, baby, hold on. That can’t feel good.” He willed himself to calm down a little, to regain his breath and his composure.

But Taehyung shook his head. “Don’t care. I don’t wanna wait.”

He kissed Taehyung’s lips and delicately tugged his hand away. “We have all the time in the world. It’s okay to go slow. It’s okay to make sure it’s perfect. Let’s dry off, okay?”
Taehyung glared at him with something akin to betrayal before he seemed to change his mind, nodding. “I- okay. I trust you.”

*Taehyung trusted him.* It shouldn’t glow like a badge of honour in his chest the way it did. “Thank you.” He rose, letting the water trickle from his body before stepping out of the jacuzzi. Then he offered his hand for Taehyung, who took it with another of his rare genuine smiles, which only grew in radiance as Jeongguk pressed a kiss to his knuckles. He located a few towels, using the first to dry every inch of Taehyung’s body. Taehyung did the same for him, kissing him while reaching every part of him with the towel. It was oddly sensual, yet comforting at the same time, this even give and take.

When they were both dry, he earned a small yelp by gathering Taehyung in his arms, carrying him over to the massive round bed and dropping him gently in the middle of the golden duvet. Rose petals scattered around him. He looked heavenly like this, spread out on a cushioned dais of scarlet, gold and cream, hair a soft brunette halo, eyes wide and dark with lust, body glowing from the bath. His diamond piercing winked at Jeongguk from his soft stomach. A need to be close to him, closer than ever bloomed in his chest, reminding him to cherish, protect, and love Taehyung with everything he had.

“Tell me what you want. Anything you want,” he murmured, climbing on top of him, caging him in between his arms. Taehyung’s gaze slid from his biceps to his face, before his hands followed.

Jeongguk smiled when Taehyung cupped his face, carefully brushing along his cheekbones with his thumbs. “Just...take care of me,” Taehyung whispered, vulnerability shining in his eyes, flooded with the trust he felt for him. “Please.”

“Always,” he promised, nosing along his jaw before his nuzzles turned to open-mouthed kisses. These he trailed down his neck, across his shoulder, to his chest where he toyed lightly with one of Taehyung’s dusky nipples. He loved the way Taehyung arched into him when he rolled the bud between his teeth, arms curling around his back. Another path of wet kisses led him to Taehyung’s other nipple, where he took his time making it nice and pert, basking in every small whimper the attention gave him.

“Jeongguk...” Taehyung’s voice shook, fingers falling from Jeongguk’s spine to his hair as he moved farther down his body, letting his lips and tongue indicate where he was going. “Oh, fuck,” he moaned when Jeongguk kissed the head of his flushed cock, hard and leaking against his stomach. He liked sucking Taehyung off for exactly that reason- he was vocal. So very vocal. Almost as loud as when he ate him out. So he made sure to use every moment for each noise he gave, flattening his tongue to lick broad stripes up Taehyung’s length, digging his tongue into his sensitive leaking slit, until he dipped his head and took him into his mouth.

Even if Taehyung preferred to receive rather than give most of the time, he was still very well-endowed, and it took Jeongguk a few moments to work up to taking him all the way down. Taehyung kept his fingers tangled in his hair, tugging gently and keeping it out of his face for him, eyes shut as Jeongguk bobbed his head. A loud, low moan escaped his lips when his cock hit the back of his throat. There it was. The noise Jeongguk wanted to hear most. He repeated his movements, lightly stroking the base of his cock and letting his hand trail lower. He used his own spit, tracing a wet line from Taehyung’s cock down through the cleft of his pretty, round ass to his rim. Of course he wouldn’t stretch him with his spit, but he liked the way Taehyung shuddered from the sudden chill, writhing as Jeongguk prodded ever so teasingly at his entrance while surrounding his cock in the wet heat of his mouth.

Taehyung tugged on his hair again, firmer this time. “D-Don’t wanna come like this,” he gasped, a
beautiful blush on his cheeks when Jeongguk met his gaze. Spit connected his lips to Taehyung’s cock, and he held his gaze when he licked them clean, tasting the slight musk of his precome. Taehyung’s own lips parted as he watched him, tongue darting out. “I want you inside of me.”

“Patience, baby.” He placed one last kiss on the tip of his cock before moving up his body once more. “Let me open you up right.”

Confusion filled his midnight pupils. “H-How?”

Instead of speaking, Jeongguk wrapped his arms around Taehyung’s body abdomen and rolled, reversing their positions to put Taehyung on top of him. “Let me use my tongue.”

It caught him off guard when Taehyung’s blush deepened. “Just...just like this?”

Only then did he realise they’d never done this before. Yes, he’d eaten him out, but not in this position. He just didn’t expect Taehyung to be shy about it. He rarely got shy. “Just like this,” he confirmed. Then, trying to ease his nerves, he teased, “Back that ass up and park it right here, baby.”

“Oh my god, I can’t take you seriously when you say shit like that,” Taehyung said, collapsing against him with a laugh.

“C’mon, think of my tongue like the docking device, and you just have to-”

“Oh, okay, I’m going, god, if only to shut you up.” Apparently his jokes did the trick, because Taehyung turned and shimmied down his body, littering little bites down Jeongguk’s torso as he went.

As nothing about this felt weird for him, seeing as Taehyung’s ass had recently become perhaps his favourite delicacy, he reclined back on the pillows to enjoy the view. Full, soft, and perky, he couldn’t help but sink his teeth into the plush skin once it was in reach.

“So pretty, baby,” he murmured, admiring the slick trail he’d drawn earlier.

“Is...is this okay?” Taehyung glanced back at him to ask, cheeks still a flattering pink.

“Perfect.” He slid his hands from Taehyung’s waist, over the dip of his hips before coming to rest over each golden cheek, squeezing lightly.

“Oh,” Taehyung gasped, pushing back against his touch. “Fuck, stop teasing then.”

Jeongguk lapped over the bite he’d made earlier, then licked over his perineum, finally pressing his tongue against Taehyung’s pink entrance. After that, however, it grew harder to take his time. Impossible, really, because Taehyung’s low moans escalated into high-pitched whines every time Jeongguk thrust his tongue into him. He didn’t even seem to hear when Jeongguk grabbed the nearest bottle of lube out of the nightstand, nipping and sucking at his rim while he flicked the cap open and coated his fingers generously. The scent of vanilla filled the air, but it simply intermingled with the candles. He slid a single finger into Taehyung, stretching him open alongside his tongue. The lubricant tasted sweet and sugary, and he barely had any inclination to come up for air. Jeongguk couldn’t suppress the moan that escaped him when he felt Taehyung wrap a hand around his cock, stroking him quickly before he began teasing him with kittenish licks.

“Tae...fuck, that’s nice,” he gasped. “Come on, baby, suck me like you mean it, get me nice and wet for you,” he encouraged as he poured lube on his middle and ring fingers. The praise seemed to strike something in Taehyung when Jeongguk felt an almost overwhelming heat envelop him. He
had to fight to keep his hips still while Taehyung deepthroated him, and instead focused on slowly easing another finger past his rim, watching in rapture as the pretty pink muscle clenched then loosened around the digit. He continued to stretch and scissor him open with both fingers, pushing his tongue in alongside for another taste. Spit streaked across his lips and down his chin. Taehyung cried out around his cock when Jeongguk pressed his ring finger in, and he pushed his hips back against his face eagerly. He got the hint, and thrust his fingers back in against the same spot, more cries falling from Taehyung’s lips.

Suddenly, Taehyung came off his length with an audible *pop*, and rushed to turn, kissing Jeongguk frantically. “Now, now,” he pleaded between heated kisses. “Need you in me now, please, Gukkie.”

He didn’t want to give into Taehyung’s urgency, but he wanted to take part in his passion, so he held him close, switching their positions once more. Taehyung looked utterly debauched, lips a swollen cherry red, soft brown locks sticking to the sheen of sweat decorating his forehead. The sight only made Jeongguk want to take him apart further. He pressed his lips to his body once more, this time leaving littles bites in his wake, thinking of all the beautiful bruises Taehyung would wake up with, how he would think of the way Jeongguk touched him, kissed him, and made love to him as he touched each one. That thought alone increased his heart rate, arousal flooding his senses, and he reached for the nightstand again, extracting a condom from the plethora in store.

Slender fingers closed around his wrist. “What is it?” he asked, going still where Taehyung held him.

“Don’t,” he whispered, tightening his grip on his wrist.

His heart stuttered. Did Taehyung suddenly not want this? Why would he change his mind?

“Don’t?”

“Don’t use it.” His heart skipped another beat. “I want to feel you. If you...if you trust me.” Taehyung looked nearly on the verge of tears as he said it, so sure that Jeongguk would reject his wish.

“Oh my god, angel.” Jeongguk dropped the condom and kissed his cheeks, feeling Taehyung’s grip on him go slack. “Of course I trust you. Why would you even...Do you trust *me*?”

Taehyung blinked up at him, arms falling back above his head. “I wouldn’t ask you to if I didn’t.”

“O-Okay.” His voice shook a little, but he couldn’t help it. Of course he’d thought about this, the day they would finally acknowledge that they were in this together, just the two of them, for...well, for as long as it lasted. Jeongguk felt as though he could live with this as his forever, but he knew it was best to keep that fantasy to himself for now. What mattered was the fact that Taehyung had finally given him the green light. After months of having sex, they could do it now with nothing between them. It was miniscule, a minute change. But the trust behind the intimacy meant more than words could convey.

Suddenly nervous, Taehyung clutched his biceps. “Gukkie, if you don’t want to, we can-”

“No, please. I want this. I want this so bad. I want you. I want you in every way.”

“Then take me,” Taehyung whispered. “Please.” As he spoke, he parted his legs for Jeongguk to settle between, wrists intertwined above his head.

He extended the invitation so delicately, like it was fragile, passed to Jeongguk as a gift, and he
could do nothing else but accept, gracious in his worship of Taehyung’s slender legs and honey silk thighs, adorning them with declarations of his love just like the rest of his body. When he coated his own length with lube and lined himself up, he took care to ask, “Are you ready?”

Taehyung nodded, his heady, lust-filled gaze never leaving him. “Please.”

Jeongguk leaned down to kiss him in response, balancing his weight on the soft mattress before slowly pushing in.

He didn’t think it would feel so different without the condom. Taehyung always felt warm, impossibly tight, but this was raw and beautiful. He could feel every inch of his tight walls, slick with his spit and vanilla lube. This felt wet, and messy, and right. Connected to the very core, in the most intimate way humans can be. Taehyung sighed deeply when he finally bottomed out, and after Jeongguk gave him a moment to adjust, he murmured, “Move.”

And he would never deny Taehyung a thing. So he gently pulled nearly all the way out, just the tip of his cockhead resting within Taehyung before thrusting back in. Taehyung moaned, urging him to do it again. He tried to sustain this slow pace, rolling his hips languidly, reaching the most sensitive part of Taehyung with long, deep thrusts.

“F-Faster,” Taehyung stuttered, pushing back against each roll of his hips. Jeongguk moved more of his weight over Taehyung’s body to reach a better angle, kissing him once as he drew his cock out and swallowing Taehyung’s sharp gasp when he thrust back in, increasing his pace until he could no longer meet his lips accurately. Both of their composure quickly unravelled. Jeongguk’s eyes fell shut, getting lost in the way Taehyung felt around him, hot and wet, every drag of his cock like heaven. And when he found Taehyung’s prostate, blunt nails scratched at his back and he arched into him beautifully. “There, fuck, right there,” Taehyung whimpered. “Harder, f-fuck me.”

“Like this?” Jeongguk panted, thrusting his cock in at the same angle repeatedly only to hear Taehyung moan desperately beneath him.

“Fuck, fuck yeah, like that.” The sharp sting of his nails grew, raking mindless red lines against his skin, but he didn’t care. He wanted Taehyung to mark him up just the same way Jeongguk did, claiming him in the heavy rose and vanilla scented haze of sex, making sure the world knew that only Taehyung had him this way. And the world should know, because he only wanted Taehyung, and he’d only ever wanted Taehyung for most of his life. And now that he had him, he never wanted to let go.

A sort of rhythm danced between them this time, something he’d never experienced with sex. A give and take, push and pull force that left him sweating and shaking but in the best way. The wicks of candles crackled in the air and the jacuzzi bubbled in the distance, but all he could hear were the beautiful sounds spilling from Taehyung’s lips, an erotic melody created from the friction of their bodies. They almost always talked, rarely able to shut up, really, when they had sex, but right now, he couldn’t even imagine needing to speak. He simply wanted to feel. The soft mattress under his knees, Taehyung’s nails digging into him like a lifeline, the sweat of where their foreheads pressed together, and the burning connection between them.

Taehyung wrapped his legs around Jeongguk’s waist, bringing him in even deeper, and he groaned at how tight he felt, taking his cock like he needed it, desperately rolling his hips every time Jeongguk pulled out. Slow had served its purpose. If Taehyung needed speed and roughness to satisfy him, then Jeongguk would gladly give it. He pried Taehyung’s hands from his back, forcing his wrists against the pillows and pinning them there as he fucked into him, holding him down to support the fast, relentless driving of his hips. Taehyung writhed beneath him, clinging to Jeongguk tighter, but he let himself be pinned and taken. His only protests came when Jeongguk slowed once
more, delivering longer, deeper thrusts again.

“Want you to come first,” he explained breathlessly in response to Taehyung’s whines, which quickly turned to shattered whimpers when he adjusted to the slower but more accurate pace. Jeongguk aimed to hit his sweet spot every time, rewarded with his addictive moans. Taehyung’s eyes were half-lidded, lost in his own pleasure, and Jeongguk felt a rush of pride even as his arousal simmered. Only he could do this to Taehyung, bring him to the brink with nothing but his cock and careful attention, beautiful as he came undone.

With one last deep thrust of his cock, Taehyung cried out, back arching as he came all over both of their stomachs. He fell back, body going limp as his orgasm tore through him, and Jeongguk quickly increased his pace, thrusting into him without abandon. Taehyung clenched tight around him when he came, and the stimulation nearly tipped him over the edge. He gripped Taehyung’s wrists hard enough to leave purple bruises on his golden skin, and he came abruptly, spilling inside of him, filling him with his come for the first time, and it felt incredible.

“O-Oh,” Taehyung breathed, eyes fluttering shut. He rocked his hips with all the energy he had left, milking Jeongguk’s cock through his orgasm, encouraging him to thrust his come into him until it tapered off. Jeongguk resisted the urge to collapse, but he did stay inside him for a moment, just revelling in the warmth and the pleasant silence as they both caught their breath.

A few minutes passed in which Jeongguk mindlessly kissed every bit of Taehyung’s chest he could reach and Taehyung freed his wrists, carding a hand through Jeongguk’s hair. Cherishing the moment in time they’d created, both knowing it would end when they spoke.

“Thank you.” Taehyung broke the silence, stroking his hair lovingly.

“Why are you thanking me?” he asked, genuinely confused as he lifted his head to look at him.

“Because that…” Taehyung glanced up at the ceiling before meeting his gaze, warmth and happiness in his eyes. “That was everything I wanted. More. So much more. So, thank you.”

“Of course, Taehyungie.” He pressed another kiss to his shoulder. “You don’t have to thank me. I wanted it to be perfect, and special, and everything you deserve. You deserve the world, angel.” And this time, Taehyung leaned down to meet him in a chaste, sweet kiss, so different from the passion that had consumed them before. “Happy birthday,” he murmured. “I love you.”

“Fuck, I love you, too. Best birthday ever,” Taehyung said, kissing his nose. They exchanged kisses and sweet nothings for a few more minutes before Taehyung said, “You wanna get back in the jacuzzi? I’ve never had water sex before.”

Jeongguk laughed, and gently began to ease out of him. “Sure, baby. But if we make a mess, I’m telling housekeeping that it was your fault.”

“What’s life without a little risk?” Taehyung teased. He stayed laying down though, brow furrowed as if trying to puzzle something out.

“What are you doing?”

“Trying to figure out the best way to make your come stay in me.”

Jeongguk blushed from the sheer shamelessness of the statement. “Let me clean you up.”

“But I like it,” Taehyung whined. “I’ve never had someone come in me before.”
For some reason, that surprised him. “Really?”

“Gukkie, the first time I had sex was a quickie in the back of a guy’s car. I haven’t exactly been with anyone who I’d trust to fuck me raw.”

While Taehyung put it quite vulgarly, the confirmation still warmed something possessive inside of him. He was the first person Taehyung trusted to be intimate with in such a way.

Still, “I’m going to clean you up before we get in the jacuzzi,” he said with a roll of his eyes. “Kinky little thing.” Thankfully, Taehyung conceded with the promise of a few more rounds, and let Jeongguk clean the wetness from between his legs and both their stomachs with a damp towel before leading him over to the jacuzzi.

Over the course of their evening, they finished two bottles of champagne and a box of assorted chocolates that Taehyung found by the television.

They also made use of nearly every surface in the room.

... 

After their trip, things grew...simple. They returned home with a newfound tenderness between them. Taehyung continued his work at the studio and Jeongguk applied for an on-set film internship that would hopefully take place during his autumn semester if he got accepted. They went on plenty of hepta-dates, seeing as their friend groups actually melded quite well together. Jeongguk grew closer with Jumin and Hoseok, and even Bogum, while Taehyung got to know Namjoon, Yoongi, and Yugyeom. He was already on familiar terms with Seokjin, after all.

Midterms passed in a blur of all-nighters, twelve-hour library sessions, and more cans of energy drinks than he could count. Still, he made sure to go home nearly every weekend and give Junsoo guitar lessons. His little musician was coming along nicely, and soon he’d be more skilled than Jeongguk. Since the spring soccer season had begun, they made sure to attend every single one of Junsoo’s games. Taehyung cheered louder than anyone in the stands, and often brought along a group of dancers just to bolster the crowd. This earned him a permanent place in Junsoo’s heart, and Jeongguk hoped the effort would some day soften his father’s.

As the spring semester drew to a close, Jeongguk got an email confirming his internship. He bolted upright when he read it, disrupting a very disgruntled Taehyung, who did not appreciate having his head jolted off Jeongguk’s stomach from where he lay studying for his finals.

“I got in,” he whispered.

“Congrats,” Taehyung grunted. “You’ve been trying to figure out that password for a week.”

“What? Oh, no, not my Twitter. I- look.” He shoved his phone under Taehyung’s nose, impatient now that excitement bubbled in his chest.

Taehyung blinked, eyesight readjusting, then scanned the email. “Oh my god. Baby, that’s amazing! I’m so happy for you!”

Jeongguk clutched his phone to his chest, a wide smile blossoming on his face. “I can’t believe it. I’m going to be...I’m going to be working on an actual set! Camerawork, and set design, and lighting, and menial intern tasks like coffee and note-taking. For three months. It’s going to be amazing,” he sighed, collapsing back.
The confirmation of his internship filled his head for weeks. It was all he could think about. Fantasise, really. Working on the set of a real film was a dream come true.

Until Taehyung received his own email the day after finals had come to an end. They sat under a large oak tree on campus, basking in the shade, a brief reprieve from the overbearing sunshine. Jeongguk only noticed something was off when he realised Taehyung had been staring at his phone for the past five minutes.

“Tae?” he nudged him with his foot. “What’s wrong?”

Wordlessly, Taehyung handed him his phone.

_Dear Kim Taehyung-ssi,

We at the Korean National Contemporary Dance Company are pleased to inform you that we have reviewed your portfolio extensively, and have decided to elect you as a member-in-training for the upcoming season. We believe exposure is good for any artist, which is why we have decided that you are best suited to complete your training at our sister company in Tokyo, Japan.

We understand that you are currently in your final two semesters of undergraduate schooling, which is why the Korean National Contemporary Dance Company has chosen to select you as the recipient of our Education for the Arts grant, in which we will cover all costs for your final semesters of schooling at the esteemed Tokyo University of the Arts while you train under our company. Korean integration is well-accounted for in the TUA system. However, we will offer complimentary schooling in Japanese language as well, which can be taken at your leisure. Travel dates and specifications will be provided upon confirmation.

We hope to hear back from you soon in confirmation of your acceptance, preferably no later than June 21st. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact us.

-Best Regards,

Kim Inseo, Head Coordinator of the Korean National Contemporary Dance Company

Jeongguk didn’t know why he was shaking. “That’s great, Taehyung,” he managed to force out, although he almost choked on the words.

“Is it?” Taehyung whispered, taking his phone back.

“I- Obviously. It’s...it’s your big break.”

“In Japan.”

“In...in Japan.”
Taehyung’s gaze fell back to the email. “I don’t know what to do,” he admitted.

“You email them back and tell them you accept. Tae, this is a once in a lifetime opportunity. The most prestigious dance company in the country wants you. Badly enough to pay for the rest of your education.”

“In Japan,” Taehyung repeated, and Jeongguk could see tears forming in his eyes. “That’s a year, Jeongguk. At least. I can’t… I can’t go away for a year. I can’t leave you, and Jimin, and Hoseok, and my dad, and Tannie, and Junsoo. I can’t… we were going to get an apartment…”

“Hey, shh, it’s okay,” he soothed him, wiping the tears from his cheeks. “You don’t have to make any decisions now. They’ve given you two weeks to think about it. So take some time and let it sink in, okay?”

Taehyung nodded, but Jeongguk knew that email would consume him. And it did. For the next two weeks, Taehyung was uncharacteristically quiet, reading and rereading the email on his phone.

Jeongguk did his own contemplation, attempting to figure out what he would do with his life if Taehyung were to up and leave. Would they stay together? Could they make long-distance work? Or would Taehyung want to break up? He almost considered going with him. It crossed his mind more than once. But he couldn’t leave. He had too many commitments here. The next sessions would be his last, as well. He had his internship in autumn, and it was his final competitive season. They were being pulled in opposite directions, like fate had decided it didn’t want them together after all. And the fear of losing Taehyung hurt deep in his heart, a little more every day.

“So?” Jeongguk finally asked, the night before his confirmation was due. And even though he didn’t want to show it, his hands shook just like they did the day Taehyung had gotten the email, fear cutting painful tracks through his veins. He thought Taehyung should go. Logically, it made the most sense. This was what he’d been wanting all his life. And Jeongguk refused to be the one thing keeping him here. Keeping him away from his dreams.

Taehyung took his hands in his own, stroking softly over Jeongguk’s knuckles as they sat on their bed. The silence killed him, devoured him and tore him to shreds. He just wanted Taehyung to speak, to say anything, to end his pain-

“I’m not going.”

Jeongguk stared. He must’ve misheard.

“What?”

And… Taehyung smiled. A wistful smile, gentle and soft. “I’m not going, Gukkie. I wanna stay here. I want to stay with you, and our friends and families. I want to work with my kids and get an apartment and finally kidnap Tannie. I want what we’ve always talked about since we were kids.”

“But…” He tightened his grip on Taehyung’s hands, searching his gaze for regret or hesitation. “But you were made for the stage.”

“And the stage can wait,” Taehyung insisted, placing a small kiss on his forehead. “I’ll email them back and tell them I can’t accept a foreign offer. They’ll be annoyed, probably, but with any luck, my scouting next winter will place me under their judging panel again and they’ll offer me a domestic contract. I like what I have now, and I don’t really see any reason to go changing my life again. I’m finally happy. And I’d like to stay like this for awhile.”

“It’s your dream…” Jeongguk trailed off, tears slipping from the corners of his eyes. He had no
idea why he kept reminding Taehyung of all the things that could convince him to go. He just couldn’t stand the thought of holding him back from his future.

“And sometimes,” Taehyung reached up, brushing each tear away. “That’s all they are. Dreams. A dream I had when my reality was at its lowest. But now that everything is falling into place, I’m finding I like my reality more and more. My dreams are different now. Simpler, but so much more special. So I’ll come up with another dream. And we’ll see if it comes true.”

He nodded, relief sweeping through him even as he cried happy tears. “A-and what’s your dream now?”

“My dream?” Taehyung cocked his head, thinking. “Hm, it’s no fun if I say. Gotta keep you excited about something.”

That coaxed a laugh from him, slowing his tears. “It excites me every time you breathe, baby.”

“Thank god the bar is so low,” Taehyung teased, looping his arms around his neck. Jeongguk let his own slide into place around his waist, knees pressed together from where they both sat cross-legged, Jeongguk in a pair of sweatpants and Taehyung in his hoodie.

“The bar isn’t low,” Jeongguk assured him, eyes shut as he pressed their foreheads together. “You’re just exceptional in every way.”

“I can’t do long division for the life of me.”

“Will you let me have a single romantic moment, please?”

“Gukkie, you can’t put my sarcasm on hold, that’s not how it works.”

“Can I at least put your mouth on hold, then, while I get in a good line?”

“Oh, please, operator-”

“We’re not roleplaying as sexy late-night caller and horny phone operator again. That was a one time thing when I was stuck at home, okay?”

“Fine, fine…” A brief moment of silence passed where they just gazed into each other’s eyes. Then a playful smile tugged at Taehyung’s lips. “Hey, Jeongguk?”

“What?”

“I’m kinda really in love with you.”

He couldn’t help but return Taehyung’s smile, pulling him closer by the fabric of his hoodie.

“Hey, Taehyung?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m kinda really in love with you, too.”

And for a moment, they just grinned at each other like dorks before breaking into laughter. Their kiss was anything but graceful, more a mess of giggles and hand-holding with a few sloppy presses of their lips than anything else, but to Jeongguk, it felt perfect. Dreams were precious things. A vital lifeline, especially when the world seemed to be so unforgivably dark. They all had dreams. Wishes they clung to when they looked up at the stars, and prayed for something, anything to
change. But he found himself looking to the stars less and less the longer he had Taehyung by his side. Instead, he met his gaze, and saw every single one of his wishes coming true.

He could only cling to him tight and hope Taehyung’s came true, too. Until then, he’d be right by his side. The storm had raged long enough. Sunlight broke through the clouds. Summer had arrived.

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Hint: Taehyung’s dream had something to do with another diamond, a middle-class apartment, a thriving cinematography career for his wonderful husband, and maybe, just maybe, one more fur baby to keep Tannie company.

Hint #2: All of Taehyung’s dreams came true. Perhaps Jeongguk had it right all along, and he should have placed his faith in destiny from the start.

Chapter End Notes

I...wow, I honestly have so much to say but I don't want to bore or overload you. First and foremost, from the very bottom of my heart: Thank you. Whether you have supported this story from its beginning, joined along the journey, or have just read it today, thank you. Every bit of support this fic has received has surpassed my wildest dreams, and for that, I'm incredibly grateful. I jokingly refer to this fic as my trash baby, because when I began it, that's what I expected it to be. Never did I think that it would become my most popular work to date, so thank you.

I've had so much fun with these characters and this story line over the past few months, and it will be difficult to part, but I think I'm ready to say goodbye.

If you're interested in knowing what I'll be coming out with next, feel free to check out my twitter! And truly, thank you so much for reading and sticking with this story.

twt || cc

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