Scientists have claimed Opelucid City, a city 1000 years ahead of its time, as their playground. Anything from it is nothing short of a miracle. Euphoria was no exception.

With a tiny glass bottle full of exquisite golden liquid, all your woes and tribulations vanish to give way to a light, inexplicable happiness. All for the neat little price of $4.95 - there's no excuse to be miserable. If an apple a day keeps the doctor away, then a vial of Euphoria keeps the depression at bay.

But Seokjin knows it's always the sweetest, most innocuous things that kill you slowly from the inside out.

Notes

Characters will be gradually introduced.

See the end of the work for more notes.
The chemical components for emotions were simple. Effortlessly, scientists managed to boil them down into tiny vials of pretty liquid. The only issue with that tiny bottle of joy you can buy for the same price as your lunch? It's designed as one size fits all.

Not at all.

Some people report that it was like a perpetual spring in the step that carried them to their pedestal. Instead of feeling 6 ft under the earth, they felt like they were soaring above it. Others reported restlessness, eyes darting back and forth like an intense tennis match, finding themselves on edge, searching for a threat they didn't understand.

But at that value, which you can have alongside your coffee, or in simple need of a pick me up, perhaps happiness just isn't for you. Joy exists everywhere. In the aisles of supermarkets, at the counter of convenience stores, a dash in chocolate to emulate a warm embrace. Crumbled into powder to give your skin that happy, sun-kissed glow.

Seokjin gets weird glances every time he turns down the offer of a sprinkle of joy added into his morning Americano. But in true pleasant fashion, they're resiliently cheerful, beaming down on him in a way that made him wish he'd grabbed his sunglasses on the way out. He hates to admit that his lifestyle forces him to operate like clockwork. Get up at 7, squeeze in a workout before wolfing down his breakfast on the way to work where he has to put up with fifty types of impatience and anger before they smooth over into dazed smiles.

"Watch where you're fucking go - oh sorry. I bumped into you. Forgive me!" The man before him looks genuinely apologetic, a terrifying but common flip from his previous ‘pre-caffeine and Euphoria’ incarnation.

"That's okay. If you had spilled your coffee on me, I'd demand your soul." Seokjin gifts him a brief smile. You have to be quick to respond otherwise you'd find yourself with a human puppy, tripping over their heels in an attempt to placate you. It gets irksome in about two minutes flat. The man all but skips off, as Seokjin enters the gleaming foyer of Chrysalis Pharmaceuticals.

Seokjin tries for nonchalance even though he knows he fails at it abysmally. He's not the only corporate tool who's been programmed to function this way. Right on cue, he rounds the corner. His initial red hair has faded into a soft tangerine, always with a thick scarf wrapped around him as if he could hide the fact that he's disappearing. But his smile, oh his smile. When he smiles, his whole face does and anyone swept in his radius can't help but succumb to happiness as well. No one should be allowed to be allowed to steal glances so freely. Everything about him is so soft that it isn't long before the burn building up in his throat forces Seokjin to leave before he does something ridiculous. Like apologise. But even if he fails to do that .. what he's doing... what he's doing will make it up to them, must make it up to them. He hopes against hope for forgiveness.

Seokjin takes a deep breath to compose himself. It's the same routine every day that he can't seem to break. No, he shouldn't break. Seokjin can feel himself crumbling, the pressure building within him until it implodes and swallows him whole. But seeing him, is always enough to reaffirm his resolve. Finally, he slips into the room, settling himself in the nondescript corner.

"Now that everyone's here, shall we take a look at the lab analytics?" the woman suggests jovially, as she places the new product line of joy before her.
Seokjin straightens in his seat, clutching his pen tightly. He's prepared for battle, and there's *no sword mightier than the pen.*

The day is as gruelling as always. If he isn't down in the labs to supervise the latest batch of Euphoria produced, he acts as Chrysalis' eye in the sky. At least his job doesn't involve sifting through customer complaints. In that department, phones ring as though possessed every second and the caller is rarely coherent. Fits of hysterical laughter or sobbing is what the consultants normally have to talk through. If he appears more lethargic than usual, he's met with boisterous laughter. "Why don't you take a pill? I'll loosen you right up!" The whole office guffaws each time, all of them sharing the same joke. Euphoria is here as well. But about as plentiful as you'd expect.

"I don't think it'd work around you." Seokjin smiles, his expression so sweet it makes the poison that comes from the ancient coffee machine in their building palatable.

"It sure works every time you look at your phone. Who are you texting? Your *girlfriend?*"

"Boyfriend, actually," Seokjin finds himself responding quickly, his cheeks flushing prettily beyond his control. He plays up the mortification, playing the perfect role of a lovesick puppy before his colleagues take mercy on him.

"I *knew* you were taken. Pay up!"

"How long have you been together?"

"Not long enough that I can get him to do the dishes," Seokjin says wryly.

"That's the love still talking. You didn't make yourself a feels cocktail, did you? Abusing your privileges like that!"

"I don't need it when I have him," Seokjin sing-songs, laughing at the utter faces of disgust of his colleagues.

"Urgh, stop. You'll make me sick."

The merriment is wrenched from every fibre of his being when a figure comes into view. Without his most striking features, his smile and scarf, he appears like a ghost, eyes unseeing, vacant. His vibrant hair isn't enough to anchor him to the world of the living. When the figure finally rounds the corner, Seokjin stands, a smile easily blooming at the corners of his lips despite the queasiness that stirs within him.

"Alright, can't be seen with you slackers, later." he says to cries of outrage and booing.

In the sanctuary of his office, the smile drops. To distract himself, he casts his gaze out of the
window, finding solace in the vertical garden clinging onto grim life on the sleek, modern tower.

Opelucid City, the city a millennia ahead of time. The only place in the world where scientists were on equal standing with world leaders. Another term was coined, Experiment City. Here, they had the perfect testing ground, a controlled area for scientists to let loose their wildest imaginations - as long as it was backed up with refuted data and evidence of course. All the inhabitants were familiar and open to being testers in one capacity or another.

For instance, vending machines carried both regular beverages such as coke and a more experimental blend - who said scientists didn't have a whimsical side? There was a drink called Baby It's Hot Inside which was the pride and joy of Shirakiku, delivering warmth straight to your fingertips as the perfect antithesis to a cold day, iced cherry roast beef tea which was a lot more harmonious than one would expect and then .. There was a breakfast smoothie, a thick liquidized concoction of bacon, fried eggs and toast with a hint of maple syrup. Apparently, it was a great source of protein. A hit with college students who had ceased to function in response to the all-nighters they had weathered. Once you ordered your drink, a holographic display would appear before you, ready for your input, a brief opinion as well as a scale from 1-10 for taste and originality. Sugars and Joy kept separately. That data gets sent to the manufacturing company to interpret, whether to let it hit the shelves or buried in deep, deep remorse.

On the streets roamed various creatures that couldn't be found anywhere on earth. Most non-lethal. Following certain incidents, genetic engineering was heavily monitored. Once, a hybrid of a tiger and a shark was created, affectionately referred to as a tiger shark. Assigned immediately to the central fountain as its humble abode, it seemed to enjoy its new surroundings, the creator flushed with pride. Only, within two hours, it wreaked havoc on the ecosystem, and devoured everything within the pool much to her dismay.

Companies were continually upgrading their robots used in service. The efficiency of supermarkets soared, both for the sake of time management and in consideration for the introverted where human interaction was an exceedingly excruciating endeavour. But nothing could quite replicate the charm of baristas. Opelucid City boasted a thriving cafe culture that encompassed a myriad of themes that was borderline wacky at worst, bewildering at best. Seokjin's personal favourite remains to be the library cafe.. Although he heard the casino concept was rising in notoriety these days.

Seokjin's company, Chrysalis Pharmaceuticals was one of the major success stories. Not even the entire brainpower of all the scientists in Opelucid pooled together could have predicted the response when Euphoria first hit the shelves. A drug that had the ability to instantaneously induce the lightest, inexplicable happiness? Within the first hour, the city had been picked clean. Panicked and slightly crazed, Chrysalis had pulled in all of their staff with severe overtime for a week straight in order to meet demand. That issue had long been a thing of the past but the need for ease of convenience continually pushed innovation.

Seokjin morosely closed the tab for a new restaurant (that had opened just three blocks from his apartment!) that highlighted the effects of time; carrots cooked in a second for the most crispiest chips, eggs melting to an impossible silky custard over three days ... With great reluctance he returned looking over various papers, wishing he had an intern to force it onto.
Careful, careful. He grits his teeth; lest he wants three hours of work splattered onto the carpet... that would create the most devastating crime scene. The pace is almost comical as he inches his way towards a certain person's cubicle.

"Seokjin! I keep telling you - wait ... is that for me?" Byulyi's heavy scowl immediately melts into a look of eagerness at the cake that he's carefully carrying. "What's the occasion?" she demands suspiciously. Byulyi had always been sharp, but even she wavered at the blatant provocation of a 5 layered, sweet behemoth. Still, that was much greater restraint than any of his colleagues would’ve displayed. The only kind of bribes accepted within these walls was diabetes.

"Don't tell me you've forgotten your own birthday." Seokjin smiles, eyes crinkling.

"I didn't know you knew it. Computers don't accept bribes, but I do. You're still not getting that report. Not like I can do anything about it anyway." She waves an airy hand, steadying the cake with the other as she impales it with a fork. "Oh my god, this is ... Did you make this yourself?"

"That's right."

"What did you put in it?" Forget sensible servings, Byulyi looks like she's five seconds away from demolishing it whole.

"Oh, just .. something we're playing with in the lab." When she starts choking, he laughs, hastily flapping his hand in front of her face. “A friend of mine wanted me to see if I would be able to make anything with what he called an asteria. It goes pretty well with ramyun too. He, uh... said he would tell me what it was after I managed to cook something with it ... "

The incredulous look doesn't budge, but with a shrug, she continues to take forkfuls of it with renewed vigour. "So do you do this for everyone? Is there anyone's birthday tomorrow?" she asks hopefully.

"No, but tax season is coming up. Just wait a month and I assure you, you'll have your weight in frosting."

"Well that's -"

Suddenly, they're interrupted by hisses of cake. It travels down the line of cubicles like the transmission of an innate signal, crazed eyes peering over walls in search of the elusive treasure. Cake. Cake. Cake, they hiss like a conjoined serpent, lips parted to reveal glistening teeth. In one eerie synchronised motion, all their heads snap to where they're standing. Eyes trained on the delicacy in Byulyi’s hands. Perhaps he should consider adding this phenomenon to the greatest mysteries of the city – do all office workers possess some sort of inane sixth sense for pastry?

Seokjin and Byulyi only have a second to exchange a terrified glance.

"Oh, hell -" Byulyi hisses, clutching the cake to her body and eyes darting forth in a desperate search for an escape route.

There's only one thing that spreads quicker than office gossip. Dessert.

News of the cake serves to prove that. Kwon Yuri, who Seokjin knows for a fact works five levels below them, is at the helm, elbowing people out of the way for her third slice. Seokjin edges to the side, bemused by the spectacle. His esteemed colleagues swearing over the top of each other for even a mere crumb. Uh oh, Dr Cho had joined the fray, this was going to get ugly - he was a hair-puller.
This would've been quite flattering had it not been for the fact that discounted, supermarket cake was really all it took for the most respected members of their society to stampede. As much as he'd love to linger to witness the sheer pandemonium he had just unleashed, Seokjin seizes this opportunity as a smokescreen. Keeping tight to the wall to avoid entering the cameras’ line of sight, he slips into the Nest, quickly shutting out the shrieks and wild squeals behind him.

5 minutes.

Snapping on a pair of plastic gloves, he promptly lines the new products tested, as well as the reports depicting the adapted formulae. No matter what form it takes, Euphoria is always a glorious golden, a substance that seemed to entrap the essence of the sun. Merely looking at it was enough to evoke the sensation of cheerfulness that you desired. But why would you deprive yourself of that joy? Not wasting any time, he whips out his phone. Within moments, he encrypts the photos with an app before sending it away to him.

honeybunch < 33 3 is typing ...

Seokjin's gaze doesn't leave the screen and he begins to pace the room in an attempt to quell his agitation. The words of his mother ring though his head. *You can't make the soufflé bake quicker by staring at the oven. Things don't work quicker under pressure; you should have more patience, Seokjin-ah.* Although in all honesty, he wishes he could've aggressively mash the ‘A’ button to have her cease talking.

honeybunch <333 :

tehee tysm hyungieee!! :3c <3

Without warning, the door is thrown open.

Seokjin allows the familiar knee-jerk calm to wash over his body as he turns to meet the intruder, face falling into a pleasant smile. *Fuck. Of all people, why did it have to be him?* He'd been careless, counting on the chaos of the crowd to provide him ample cover. Shit. Shit. *Shit.*

*He deserved to get caught -*

Soft tangerine hair barely obstructs the petrified eyes that meet his.
The world seems to still as they stare at each other for an eternity, both fearing and daring the other to move.


Not that it was a regular occurrence but Seokjin took pride in the calm he found under pressure. His features would take on a chameleon-esque aspect in response to the context, whether it be jovial, feigning surprise to lull the other in a bewildered trance until they drifted away, freeing Seokjin to finish his task. But he... He was a different matter entirely.

Park Jimin. Oh, why did it have to be you?

The lies have frozen in his throat, and if he had any less self-control, Seokjin was sure he'd be choking by now. His eyes desperately take in the other man for any inkling of weakness. That's when he notices the bloodshot eyes and the hand clutching onto the door knob for grim life is tremoring. He pounces upon it with savage relief and he prays for the fact that he's hardly being seen through Jimin's haze.

"You're not supposed to be here. And I'm not supposed to be here. So how about we agree that they both cancel each other out so that you're still in the running for that promotion?" he suggests in a voice like silk, attempting to play himself off as a figment of Jimin’s imagination.

After an age of contemplation, Jimin nods at last and backs away, movements noticeably uncoordinated, letting the door fall with a soft 'click' between them. Seokjin sags with relief against the counter, mildly disgusted at his ploy. But it's not the first time he's had to do such things.

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Disgust coats him like a layer of grime when he slips into his office. He buries himself in work, as an escape. As Chrysalis' eye in the sky, it's his job to stay up to date with whatever the city is thinking. He reviews ideas and postulated hypotheses by his fellow scientists, considering their potential. To either challenge the competition or meet the needs of the populace. He also filters through transcribing international papers as well but, due to the fact that Opelucid is deemed to be an age ahead of time, on a far lesser scale. Still, they provide a counterpoint to the level that the rest of the world is achieving, and possibly for a concept that had slipped Opelucid's notice.

"Next time, can you be a bit more discreet in giving me cake?" A sharp voice cuts through his concentration. He directs his eyes towards the door, taking in an immensely dishevelled Byulyi as she valiantly tries to smooth down her hair that has bloomed to double its volume. He bites his tongue to prevent a laugh from escaping, knowing that she would round on him like a ferocious lion if he did.

"Sorry, I didn't expect such an outcome," Seokjin says innocently, eyes wide.

"I only got to have three bites," she whines, "you owe me another!"

Seeing his attention otherwise diverted, she takes it upon herself to approach his desk, hoisting herself on top as she rifles through one of the numerous scientific journals he has scattered.

"Oh! Lee Soyeon strikes again huh?" Byulyi gushes, "A true guardian angel; I should've known that she’d be the one behind the Heracles case! Who knew there are so many corrupt economists? Did you know they're calling her the Crusader of Science?"

"Crusader of Science?" Seokjin repeats, amused.

"Yeah. It's true though! If it weren't for her... I shudder to imagine all the things people think they can get away with. Falsifying data.... they should be ashamed of themselves, letting themselves be blinded by ambition. We're scientists! We have a duty to the people," she growls.

"You don't think she's an annoyance?"

Byulyi’s eyes flash dangerously. “The only people that think that are ones that have been rightfully prosecuted, or live in fear of,” she scoffs. "Lee Soyeon is a hero, the hero people need. You don't think otherwise, do you?" She pins him down with a cold glare, as though challenging him to
"No. I've read through numerous papers to know how painstakingly thorough she is. Everything she writes is based on irrefutable fact and evidence... As it should be."

Byulyi nods, satisfied.

"You guys talking about Lee Soyeon?" a new voice asks.

Seokjin throws his hands into the air, exasperated. "Was there a memo sent out that my office was a new social hotspot?"

"Yes, we are." Byulyi raises an eyebrow. "By the way, I'm mad at you for eating most of my cake. And we'll see if that increases with this conversation."

"What do you think about her?" Seokjin asks curiously.

Yuri shrugs. "I won't deny the work that she's done has been immensely beneficial but I think there are better methods."

"What do you mean?" Byulyi barks.

"She’s overly pedantic, scrutinising every error. It just comes across as being rather smug. Such that, she's induced quite a number of embarrassing retractions. Her bull in a china shop, all guns blazing method is only going to cause trouble. And Lee Soyeon isn't even her real name. It's a pseudonym. Why take such great lengths to hide her identity?" Yuri rolls her eyes. "I'll bet it turns out that she's actually working for Morpheus Corporation or something worse, to take out the competition."

"Or it could be for the sake of her own protection. I'm sure there are a lot of vindictive people out there for her blood. She doesn't belong to anyone," Byulyi counters, calmly.

"The method that makes the most noise isn't always the best. You'll get written off hysterical that way and harm the rest of us."
"There's no room for hurt feelings when lives are at stake! If they had done their jobs correctly to begin with, she wouldn't have to do it for them! Or do you not remember the Belgravia Scandal?"

Yuri has the grace to look contrite. "...You're right. We don't deserve her, do we?" she concludes in a low tone.

"No," Byulyi says flatly. “The most fatal thing we can do is forget ourselves.”

At that, Yuri takes it as her cue to leave. Byulyi remains behind, still perched on Seokjin’s desk, deeply engrossed in Lee Soyeon’s article. The heavy atmosphere dissipates into one less tense as Seokjin continues to tap away at his computer. Byulyi isn’t wrong. How many had to pay the price for the folly of scientists before someone like Lee Soyeon came into the picture?

Far too many.

In the end, even in Opelucid City, humans were befelled by their own sword.

"Hey, Byulyi.... when did you start at Chrysalis?"

"Just two years ago. Why?"

"I remember you being headhunted by a lot of companies, Ceres Industries was one of them. So why Chrysalis?"

Byulyi frowns. "Because no one had affected everyone on such a wide scale as Chrysalis has. We're doing good things here."

"Yeah .. We do," Seokjin says softly.

"That's why you started working here right?" Byulyi asks, insisting on maintaining eye contact with him.
"... Right."

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When the clock strikes 5, there's not a soul to be seen at Chrysalis. The severe overtime has become the stuff of legends, a thing of nightmares. All of his colleagues were professional in the art of marking themselves scarce within the hour. What a riveting office fairy-tale it made.

Seokjin carefully keeps his eyes ahead as he leaves Chrysalis, knowing full well that Jimin will be exiting himself soon.

Seokjin would describe his commute to work as rather restful. In Opelucid City, one is never too far from public transportation, so any walk that need be done is rather pleasant. The train network is an intricate spider web, almost impossible to isolate a single path as it criss-crosses into other lines. But that makes it immensely convenient in getting from Point A to B. If you missed your intended train, another would come hurtling to serve within the next 3 minutes. At night, there were carriages designated for only women and children, as well as students. Due to these precautions, it wasn’t strange to see people out at all hours of the day. Students loiter by arcades, the overzealous at libraries that remain open for 24 hours, often with cafes within that allow for the perfect studying grounds. On the bottom floor are capsule rooms, commonly used closer to exam periods where leaving the library early was tantamount to blasphemy.

Seokjin passes a group of students and he can’t help but overhear their conversation.

“Hey .... you look sorta down...”

“I got so shit on our last test...”

“You know what you need? A bit of Euphoria, I’ll pay.”

The students run ahead of him, bringing Seokjin an odd sense of nostalgia. What brings you pain seems to cater to your path in life at that particular passage of time.

Often, Seokjin would take his colleagues up on their offer of dinner gleefully. Any opportunity to sample the vast smorgasbord blessedly within reach. But that encounter with Park Jimin had robbed him of every pleasure and the desire for the company of only one.
Opelucid City has many faces, but just as day melts into night, the past parts for the future. The city glitters like Christmas lights, each hinting at the marvellous technology potential they possessed. The air is crisp, the cold stinging his cheeks pleasantly. In this mild Autumn, there are far more couples that brave the night, either congesting cafes or hogging the boardwalk with their lovesick eyes that petrify anyone with the misfortune of accidentally meeting their gaze. He keeps his eyes trained on the boardwalk. A few years ago, following a seismic experiment of Poseidon Industries that went awry, the cracks had been filled by multi-coloured legos. There’s no shortage of beauty in Opelucid and it makes for an amusing pastime that the residents indulge in, Instagramming the bizarre sights that leave the rest of the world stymied.

Opelucid City took great care in preserving its ancient roots, for they serve as a reminder of humble beginnings or misfortunes best not repeated. In the metropolis, ancient buildings and temples are sandwiched between sleek, modern skyscrapers. But downtown in a unique blend of suburbia and the city hub, they exist in prevalence. Although virtually falling apart, Seokjin recalls his old apartment, one that he had lived in straight out of university, fondly even if the roof cried every night it rained and trembled against the howl of the wind. His current apartment reflects that rustic charm even if it houses the top of the line Artificial Intelligence.

Despite the convenience of travel, Seokjin opted to live downtown. The energy is more mellow by contrast, and instead of being swallowed in the gut of faceless beings, one may find themselves stationary long enough to befriend one another. In addition, green actually exists here. Seokjin might forget what a tree looks like living in the city for so long. True to Opelucid fashion, the plants that exist here are decidedly more unusual. Bellflowers that produce far too much noise pollution every time the winds blow, filling the air with a grating tinny music box sound, snapdragons whose patience should never be tested and when the season for it came, cherry blossoms, which possess flowers that cycle through all shades of the rainbow depending on the degree of sunlight that falls upon it.

Entering the foyer of his apartment complex, Spring Waltz coats the air. Upon seeing him, the elevator man breaks into a smile, abandoning his post at the piano to meet him at the Elevator doors. His dimples never failed to wring a smile from Seokjin even in his most hideous of moods.

"Long day?" he asks sympathetically, pressing the button for the 6th level.

"You have no idea," Seokjin groans loudly. They have a beautiful arrangement. Seokjin whines, and the elevator man provides a listening ear. Now that Seokjin thinks about it, he must act as the ear for the entire building. In spite of carrying the entire ire of the building, the elevator man was either flawlessly wonderful at his job or kept a steady supply of Euphoria nearby. Seokjin was desperately placing money that it wasn't the latter. A white stick poking out from his breast pocket stands out in stark contrast on the navy of his blazer. Following Seokjin's gaze, the elevator man laughs, pulling out a lollipop that has Seokjin's heart plummeting to his feet, recognising the tell-tale gold.
"You know, I really need to thank you," he says sheepishly.

"Oh yeah? And why’s that?" Seokjin dreads the answer.

"I used to be a heavy chain-smoker, then I woke up one day and I couldn't move my entire left side."

"I ... I'm sorry to hear that."

"Why?" The elevator man laughs. "It scared me into making a change. The Internet brought up some really inventive alternatives, really inventive alternatives. But then I happened upon these. Your company makes them, right?"

"That's right." Seokjin eyes the lollipop in the other's hand with immense dislike.

"I don't even miss it anymore. I never really did. You're my guardian angel, seriously. I don't... I don't ever remember being this happy," the elevator man breaks into a smile like a sun breaking over the horizon. "I can almost see sunshine exploding out of every orifice... Life is... wonderful," he concludes breathlessly.

Seokjin manages a smile that he hopes looks sincere. "I'm relieved that it's working out so well for you."

“Ah yes, one more thing. It’s no big deal but there was a virus that shut down the AI for around twenty minutes today."

“Really? In this apartment?” Seokjin asks, astonished.

“Don’t worry, I personally fixed it myself.” The elevator man puffs with pride.

“I really hope they’re paying you well. What can’t you do?”
"Oh! An eye for an eye!" The elevator man winks, gesturing to the bowl by the door, filled to the brim with brightly wrapped sweets.

"Ooh!" Seokjin cries excitedly, all his ire evaporating in an instant, as he eagerly unwraps one, popping it into his mouth. An ocean explodes on his tongue, the waves recede and a fruity sweetness lingers. "What is this?" He cocks his head to the side, as though it would allow him to sample the flavour more deeply.

"It's called the Pearl. Rating?"

"Seven." Seokjin nods.

"I'll pass that on. And, of course...." With a twirl of his hands, a cookie appears that he gives to Seokjin with an exaggeratedly low bow.

Seokjin pries open the fortune cookie. "Practice caution. Navigate the seas precariously. Wow. Did you plan this?" That coaxes a chuckle out of him.

"It must be destiny,"

At that, Seokjin actually laughs.

The elevator man smiles. "My work here is done. Oh and... I really liked those tarts that you made."

"You liked them?" Seokjin asks, pleased.

"Almost as good as Euphoria."

"Now that's a compliment." Seokjin flushes with pleasure.
"Any requests?"

"Fantasie Impromptu would be nice."

Seokjin waits for the elevator to close. He inputs the code into his door to the one that loves him unquestionably, the most in the world. There’s a pitter-patter of light steps, and Seokjin breaks into the most authentic smile of his day.

“Hey, did you miss me?” he calls tenderly.

Seokjin reaches for the treats that he keeps by the door, but Jjangu ignores them, in favour of his owner’s arms. Seokjin feels his heart explode with genuine joy, one that he wonders if Euphoria would truly be able to duplicate. When he looks up at him with such adoring eyes, he can feel his troubles melt away and just forget for a brief moment how deplorable he was. The one thing in his universe that he would never deceive. Man’s best friend indeed.

As he comes out of the shower, he nearly trips and breaks his neck on Jjangu’s curled form as he waits for his owner directly outside the door. Bending down, with one arm, Seokjin cradles him close to his chest as he settles himself on the worn sofa.

Within the walls of his own apartment, he feels his own walls lower. Throughout the day, it’s a taxing exercise in compartmentalisation, trying to maintain the perfect façade. But here, there is no such need. He lazes about in clothes that are three sizes too big, and with the warm weight of Jjangu on his leg, it’s the only time he truly feels at peace. Taking great care not to dislodge him, he stretches his arm for the tablet that’s perched precariously on the armrest of the sofa. Upon starting, recent news of a social nature regarding Opelucid dominates his screen. Things like which festivals were to take place that weekend and the like.

**BREAKING! THE SAVAGE GLOSS STRIKES AGAIN!**

Seokjin very nearly spits his coffee onto the screen as he furiously scrolls down, taking in the article.

“The seventeenth warehouse in the Industrial District has gone up in flames today,” Seokjin reads. “Police suspect that the menace, vigilante known as Gloss was responsible. Residents are warned to act cautiously for he is incredibly unstable and erratic but any sighting be reported to authorities immediately – oh for Pete’s sake,” he growls at the picture of Gloss in his ostentatious bismuth suit.
that took up an entire page. “Gloss? Gloss? Seriously? I would’ve called him the Bismuthman.”
Seokjin chuckles at his own joke as Jjangu whines, burying his head beneath his paw. “Okay, that’s just mean. Remember who feeds you.”

Seokjin hums tunelessly as he considers the article. It was virtually an open secret that at least one of the warehouses in the Industrial District was a location for illicit activities by the Underground. Despite that, the authorities were deliberately maintaining a blind eye until something catastrophic occurred. And even then, they weren’t afraid to label you a threat and issue a witch-hunt despite your benevolent objective. According to the article, there were no reported injuries, but whatever had been going on within its confines was now lost to smoke. This couldn’t be good. Hopefully, targeting that particular Warehouse wasn’t born from sinister intentions. Seokjin sighs; one problem at a time. He runs his fingers through Jjangu’s fur as though he could expel his discomfort.

At that very moment, *Fantasie Impromptu* trickles through the air. Huh, that was quick. He doesn’t think he’d hear his request for another hour at least. Honestly, where do they find elevatormen like this? But as the song progresses, Seokjin allows a sense of calm to wash over him, basking in the serenity as he wills all discomfort ebb out of him.

Out of the blue, something irregular on the floor catches his eye – when he glances toward it, he continues to stare for a few more seconds. Then he actually slaps his forehead. “Son of a bitch.”

His vase, in a million pieces.

Damn that elevator man.

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Time: 1:52pm. Location: Chrysalis Pharmaceuticals, Basement Lvl 1.

"Name."

"Park Jimin."

"Age?"
"Occupation?"

"Choreographer."

"Alright, Jimin-ssi, how did you hear about this trial?"

"I... I have a friend and after her father's death, she was inconsolable. We tried our best but... we couldn't reach her. But it changed the way she danced, you could feel the raw agony from every part of her. But one day, she came into the studio and... she was smiling. She was humming. It was a miracle. That's what the company is, isn't it?"

"Indeed. Now, we'll be keeping you overnight for observation -"

"I don't mean to interrupt but when will I -"

"After the trial, a cheque will be available for you to pick up at the front desk."

"I-I see."

"There is nothing for you to be afraid of. You'll take this pill and go to sleep. It'll be over come morning. Thank you, for helping us save more people like your friend."

Chapter End Notes

Google bismuth you will not be disappointed
there are no strings on me

The air was as crisp as the bite of an apple and despite the thin frost that feathered across the grass, families converged to downtown Opelucid City with their picnic baskets in tow as though possessed. A scene only given birth as the CBD lacked grass. Here, kites existed in all their aerodynamic glory and drones fought against the sky for dominance. Wise vendors took advantage of the crowds and within moments, stoked a fire that threw the scent of charcoal into the air, ready for corn and sweet potatoes. One had to keep a vigilant eye to avoid being tackled by raucous children. At least they were polite as they barrelled you over. All in all, it made for a fine autumn weekend where the residents could enjoy the sun and bottles of Euphoria could be seen peeking out from picnic baskets. Indeed, it would’ve been possessed the markings of a marvellous day ... had a grievous murder not taken place.

“Dammit! I thought I had it,” Kim Taehyung mutters with a frown, biting on his tongue in full concentration. He turns the dial on his radio until the static turns into a comprehensible language to humankind. Of course, it works after the age old, scientifically proven method of smacking it a few times.

A particularly loud squeal from a child robs his attention for a brief moment. Looking up in time to see their parents reprimand them crossly, shooting immensely apologetic grimaces to their neighbours whilst their child looks anything but chastised. A smile makes its way onto Taehyung’s face. Nothing in the world is more endearing than children, who begin life so sweet, so full of daring that gives them the strength to battle the world head on with nothing more than themselves. Nothing like boring, world-weary adults.

‘All downtown units report to District 14. Domestic homicide,’ the radio announces in a scratchy voice.

There it is.

Five minutes later, he’s ducking beneath a canopy of roses that ornamented what would’ve been a typical, boring suburban house. Practically a mansion by Opelucid’s standard, especially compared to the apartments in the CBD. Currently, the place is swarming with police, all of them who barely spare him a second glance, and any that did knew that Captain Kim would handle it.

Entering the house, Taehyung makes a beeline for Captain Kim, who is in the midst of barking orders to her right hand. Upon seeing him, she frowns. “Believe it or not, we’ve got this covered. Neighbour called it in after hearing the gunshots. It’s the standard –”
“The standard domestic squabble where one of them took Euphoria to calm his nerves before his deed, did he not? Also, the ninth similar incident this week,” Taehyung cuts in, raking his eyes over the scene. The victim was a middle-aged man, nothing remarkable save for the fact that his killer was his dear husband who after shooting him twice in the chest, took his own life with a bullet to the head. A tiny upended bottle lies mere centimetres from his hand, staining the carpet with its golden contents.

“Yes, but other than the fact that the culprit took Euphoria, there are no relations between victims so we’re treating these as separate incidents,” she says firmly. “And if it’s standard, why are you here?”

Taehyung sidesteps the question, heading for the mantle that could provide insight better than any hysterical family member can. Feathers from cushions and glass crunched underfoot. A standard murder it may be, but the victim had fought hard against being a statistic. All in futility, Taehyung mused grimly. Family portraits immortalised a façade the family hoped to exude. Of one that was whole.

“And what about their girl?” he asks softly, finger over the smiling child that stood between her parents that were now dead.

At that, the first sign of compassion cracks through Captain Kim’s professionalism. “She was with her Aunt. Lucky... or intended.” Her eyes find the fallen bottle of Euphoria, evidently, not the only premeditated element.

“Has there been a statement made by Chrysalis?”

“According to them, they aren’t responsible for any actions from the consumer,” she replies with the perfunctory manner of delivering a rehearsed speech, rolling her eyes.

“Really? And they couldn’t have put warnings on the bottle like every other company? Warning, may contain traces of nuts and induce rashness, restlessness and homicidal tendencies. Please consult your doctor before consumption.” He places the photo back onto the mantle; yet another family destroyed by the drug that supposedly was the cure to depression.

“This is not our fight,” Captain Kim says evenly. “I have my experts filing their reports. But... they’re virtually untouchable.”
“Still, we may have a case to present to one Lee Soyeon.”

“Who?”

“An anonymous entity who serves to be a huge pain in the ass for the research community. She reads scientific journals, spots the errors and fraud within them from the comfort of her own home before submitting her critiques by use of an anonymous server.”

“... Are you revealing what you get up to in your private life?”

“I’m flattered. But no. At the crux, she’s a fellow detective of a scientific nature, one who has protected the city at a far wider scale than I could ever hope to achieve. Just recently, she was in charge of uncovering the Heracles scandal. The company had attempted to roll out a drug that could heighten the core strength of an individual, very conveniently leaving out the fact that it elevated the taker’s heart rate to alarming levels,” Taehyung says, puncturing his words with a wide sweep of his arms.

“Lee Soyeon alone did that?” Captain Kim demands sharply. Taehyung can see her allowing herself to hope. On duty, she’s Captain Kim, the youngest ever to achieve that title of Captain and whose efficiency would put the city’s finest androids to shame. Many people had doubts that a woman would’ve been able to handle such a position, to bear witness to trauma after trauma on a daily basis, especially since homicide delved so greatly into the welfare of children. She’s had to harden her heart and most see her as an android herself. Despite that, she’s the most accommodating, and whenever a case requires his flexible thinking or ability to work outside of the law, she brings him in. In contrast, the police force’s detectives have at best tolerated him, openly despised him.

“It may not be the juggernaut that is Chrysalis... but it’s something.” Taehyung spins on his heel.

“Wait, where are you going?”

“You have your experts, Captain, I have mine.”

--

“Dr Chae, do you have a minute!” Taehyung sidesteps no less than three scientists in a Euphoric and caffeine induced haze in his bid to reach his intended person.
The man in question throws a furtive look over his shoulder as though he was hoping that his presence had gone unnoticed, despite the fact that he towered over most. From downtown Opelucid City, it had taken Taehyung half an hour by train to Opelucid Tech. Or, Opelucid’s future, its pride and joy. If you asked Taehyung how he had begun working with the scientists of Opelucid Tech, he would infallibly, with a large grin, declare that they were working towards similar interests. They on the other hand, would say that he had refused to leave for three days straight until they aided him. A fact that made Dr Chae double down on his efforts in temporal alteration.

“Oh god. You. Not really, I can’t just drop everything for you.”

“I’m here due to an ongoing murder investigation – ”

“It always is with you. Look, I’m busy. But ... Dr Jeon might be able to help you. He’s the youngest but most promising in this unit. Second door on the left, tell him that I sent you,” Dr Chae instructs, sounding mildly frazzled as he all but runs in the opposite direction, balancing several clipboards in his hands.

Only slightly miffed at being deferred, Taehyung follows his directions purposefully.

“I was sent here by Dr Chae and was told you would be able to assist me in a murder investigation,” Taehyung rattles without preamble, peering into the door.

“Murder?” Dr Jeon asks interestingly.

That gives Taehyung brief pause. Now that isn’t the typical response to hearing about a murder. He may have been forewarned that this Dr Jeon would be young, but he wasn’t particularly expecting anyone younger than himself. Taehyung pinpoints that difference to approximately two years. Surprisingly, his wide eyes, highlighted by black bangs that were artistically swept off his face, were free from the accessory of heavy bags. But here in Opelucid City, youth only worked in your favour, it did for him.

“I haven’t really had the opportunity to consult beyond the typical labwork here. So what do you need me to do?” The enthusiasm would’ve been cute had it not been for the serious issue at hand. Taehyung smiles, youth was good. Youth made one more open to methods that weren’t entirely endorsed by the books. Taehyung senses the start of a beautiful, budding working relationship between them. Dr Chae had given him an earful of what he thought of 3am calls even when Taehyung had impatiently explained that time was of the essence when dealing with a killer who
made use of a corrosive acid to dispose of his victims.

“Uh, it’s not strictly related to the murder exactly, but I need you to translate every paper that Chrysalis Pharmaceuticals has written into layman terms.”

Upon hearing Chrysalis, Dr Jeon’s expression darkens at the flip of a switch. “What in particular are you looking for?” he asks neutrally.

“And possible error that’s been masked, cherrypicking data, fabrication, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. Anything, I’m not choosy. I won’t be able to compensate you but I can give you a good word to Captain Kim who’s in charge of the downtown – ”

“Does this have any relation to Lee Soyeon by any chance?” Dr Jeon interrupts.

“Hey, respect your elders,” Taehyung says. “Yes. I want to bring down Chrysalis.”

Silence follows his ominous statement.

“Why exactly do you wish to do that?” Dr Jeon asks carefully.

“Because Euphoria isn’t the little pick-me-up everyone thinks it is. Do you know what count the murder was this week for using Euphoria as a calming agent before committing it? Nine. Do you know who it’s used by? Husbands. Wives. Brothers. Sisters. It’s a force destruction, leaving broken people in its wake. But you wouldn’t hear *that* on the news,” Taehyung says, pacing up and down. “Oh no, instead, you hear how much of a *miracle* it is.”

“... Alright, I’ll look over them for you.”

Taehyung is prepared to be turned away, told that his justice is misplaced. But he’s also prepared to wear them down, whether that be over a week of gentle persuasion or cutting confrontation – the last thing he expected was to be aided without difficulty. Although in saying that, Dr Jeon moves with the air of humouring someone, so perhaps gradual erosion would be necessary here.
“Ahh, the magical paper that started it all. Once upon a time, Chrysalis was a dream; you could even call it a foolish one. A theory. Then along comes the patent and boom, now it’s in every kid’s lunchbox,” Taehyung muses, tossing the journal onto the desk.

“Everything checks out. From the clinical trials, the typical amount of outliers. Just what were you hoping for?” Dr Jeon asks with a raised eyebrow, moving to stack all the journals they had perused neatly.

“Something that would let Lee Soyeon play her cards,” Taehyung answers back nonchalantly; he had doubted that a superpower such as Chrysalis would’ve left such an obvious trail.

“Regardless, Chrysalis is virtually untouchable.” Taehyung idly wonders how many times he would be expected to hear that.... to turn that into a drinking game would’ve been a thin veil for alcoholism.

“No one is untouchable,” he says immediately. “Not even fat cat CEOs who think they can escape scot free from murder.” There have been far too many cases of CEOs who believe that they’ve been granted invulnerability and using their position to create scapegoats to take the fall for them. No one, is above justice.

“As tragic as these events are, this isn’t the sort of thing that will command a retraction. I’m sure you’re more than familiar with alcohol related crime. Yet, production for that isn’t going to stop anytime soon,” Dr Jeon says pragmatically. He’s oddly tense, biting down on his lip for too many reasons that Taehyung could narrow it down to.

“Look at this.” Taehyung pulls Euphoria out from his pocket - he has never seen anyone have a more violent recoil. Huh. He files that reaction away for a rainy day. He turns the glass bottle in his hands, the gold liquid swishing against the sides. “There’s no warning on this for anything. No risk of excessive consumption, no over-giddiness, of having too much of a bounce in your step. Not even a label to ward off the frail or elderly. Doesn’t that strike you as something amiss? This isn’t the product that fell from the heavens. It can produce such acute paranoia that in the past years it’s risen astronomically as a factor in crime now, sitting snugly right next to drugs. The people that made them are not invincible and they need to be held accountable. I’ll be in touch.”

“Where are you going?” Dr Jeon demands, but beginning to realise that Kim Taehyung operated in
response to his whims.

Taehyung throws him a bright smile over his shoulder. “Into the belly of the beast of course.”

Dr Jeon waits until he had left before frantically making a call. “Hey hyung, something ... more accurately, someone, turned up. Kim Taehyung. He’s a detective and ... I don’t know how much power he has but ... this could ruin everything.”

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Taehyung makes himself comfortable on the couch, stretching out languidly against the plush cushions and idly watching the characters rapidly fill his screen. Whoever Lee Soyeon was, she was determined to keep hidden. He frowns. Scientists weren’t exactly a malicious bunch, but throw in the existence of money, millions upon millions of it, and it takes an astounding person to be resistant against its siren call. For a company with a net worth in the millions, Chrysalis Pharmaceuticals was situated in a rather modest setting. An ancient building preserved but its internal organs, the most modern fixtures you could think of.

“Um... Taehyung-ssi?”

Upon hearing his name, he immediately closes his laptop and leaps up, striding to the front desk towards the receptionist who was paper-white and clutching the phone for grim life. “H-he says he will see you now.”

“Excellent!”

Taehyung strides purposefully to the elevator, whipping out his phone.

“Uh... you don’t even know what floor to go to?”

“I presume CEOs get the entire top floor to themselves, do they not?” Taehyung says dismissively, eyes trained on his screen. “There’s a Chansey here. I must catch it. Give me a moment,”
After receiving instructions from the oddly stressed receptionist considering that he worked for the company that literally manufactured happiness, Taehyung notes that the way to the office was miraculously secluded. Or not. Even demons took time off during the weekends and a week off for Christmas.

If his life was to be depicted in a book, the author would’ve declared his actions rash and impulsive. Eh, what do they know? Sitting comfortably in their chairs without a worry in the world? Although, to be frank, they weren’t far off. The advantage granted to appearing like a bolt from the blue was that neither side would be prepared. Ergo, the purest test of one’s character.

The CEO appears unruffled at his sudden intrusion, behaving as though Taehyung’s appearance didn’t create a series ripples in a once still pond. In fact, upon seeing him, the CEO looks immensely apologetic, like his very presence had caused pain to Taehyung. His office however, could be eloquently described in a singular word, intimidating. The room was far too large for its lone occupant, the distance from the door to the brobdiganian, gleaming mahogany desk seemed to span a kilometre. The wide window was a wall in its entirety, allowing the CEO to keep constant watch on the city below. As he’s doing now, staring unflinchingly at Taehyung as he approached him at a collected pace.

Lesser men would’ve shit their pants.

“Come in, come in! I hope that it wasn’t too hard to find! I originally wanted my office on the ground floor as elevators make me nauseous, but they said it couldn’t be done.” The CEO makes a feeble gesture with his hand. “Lee Minhyuk, but before we talk, would you like coffee? I can’t think without it otherwise.”

“Kim Taehyung. That would be nice,” Taehyung smiles. The CEO makes a show of brewing it. On a proper tray with delicate, ornate china and everything. Taehyung didn’t know that coffee could exist in any other vessel that wasn’t the biodegradable paper from the café that he’s sworn fealty to.

“Euphoria?” Minhyuk asks in a way that isn’t posed as a question, already reaching for the sugar bowl to spoon the contents into its inky depths.

“I’m good.” The CEO’s head snaps up, a flash of red in his eyes before a serene smile finds its way on his lips. With a flourish, he sets the sugar bowl back down on the tray. Both cups were noticeably devoid of Euphoria. Taehyung stares at the dainty handle for a moment. At the very least, the damage he would cause would be limited to this pretentiously fragile cup alone.
“I must confess to doing a bit of digging before I arrived here; perils of the job, you understand.” Taehyung waves an airy hand. “But what gave you the idea for Euphoria?”

“Oh, it’s nothing special really. My family wasn’t wealthy and I knew a scholarship was my best shot. I was drowning, floundering. Trying to balance three jobs on top of keeping my GPA up and everywhere I looked I could only see my own debt. I was in an extremely dark place.” Minhyuk pauses for a brief moment, realising that Taehyung had begun to walk around his office, picking up his personal effects for closer scrutiny with something of a cavalier air.

“Go on.” Taehyung smiles encouragingly when Minhyuk falters to a stop. “I promise you that I’m listening.” But clearly, he wasn’t used to receiving nothing less than undivided attention as demanded by his status so when Minhyuk started again, his tone is rough before softening melodically.

“A-anyway... One day, I found myself peering over the edge and wishing that the cloud of darkness would lift. Of this building actually. Something clicked then. I only wanted to be happy. I found myself reviewing the chemical structure to happiness as I was teetering over the edge. Suddenly, I found myself taking a step back. Then another. Then another. Until I found myself pressed against a wall. Euphoria began as a way to keep me afloat, I had no idea that it would give me an empire... I’m honoured that something I created to save myself ... ended up saving hundreds of others as well.”

“Oh, you’re being modest. After all, happiness is one of the greatest pursuits of life,” Taehyung says, holding an ornate orb to the sun, watching in delight as prismatic beams were cast into the air. “You should think about holding motivational seminars,” he adds sardonically.

“I would appreciate that you not touch my things,” Minhyuk says sharply.

“But they deserve to be appraised! Isn’t this from Utopia? A hundred bucks a pop. Your little idea certainly gave you security. But nothing... is truly concrete in this world.”

Minhyuk narrows his eyes minutely. “Enough of the past. I believe you told my receptionist you worked for the police?” he asks in a level tone.

“Kind of. I’m a detective, specialising in unusual cases. Thankfully, in this city, I’m never out of work!”
“And what exactly dictates unusual?”

“Well, there’s the case of the disappearing District 11 on the 14th hour of every day as though by magic—“

“Actually, that’s—“

“And, if the rumours are to be believed, your dog disappeared under mysterious circumstances a few weeks ago.”

“What? I don’t have a—”

“it’s a tragic case,” Taehyung says sombrelly, “but I promise you that we’re not treating it any less. We will find your lost dog.” He takes a sip of the coffee, fighting against pulling a face at the bitterness. Strange, he thought that it’d be smoother.

“... He’s a beloved family member, yes. But I feel simply wretched that you’re dedicaing so many resources to find him, especially for me. I have my own means so please ... just drop your search,” he pleads.

“I don’t think you’re a bad person just because you failed to pay your parking ticket back in 2009. Everyone deserves happiness,” Taehyung says, voice still full of pleasantry.

The room becomes so quiet that a pin dropping may as well have been a canon blast.

Minhyuk strides to the large window that gives him the perfect perch to overlook the city as though he owned it, back facing him.

“I love this city. There’s nothing more than I want to see it happy. I want you to understand that. Oh! You barely drank any of your coffee... Euphoria makes it go down a lot easier.” Minhyuk smiles gently. “Chrysalis is well respected in Opelucid City. The only noise you’ll hear is your own desperate voice echoing back at you. So for your sake, leave, whilst you still can.”
A security guard appears at the door, ready to escort Taehyung out, leaving him no choice but to follow. Halfway down the corridor, Taehyung turns on him with pleading eyes. “I just really need to use the bathroom. You don’t need to trouble yourself following me! Just uh... where is it? Oh, round that corner? Thanks!”

Taehyung locks himself in the bathroom, propping his laptop on his lap. “That pointless conversation should’ve been enough to locate Chrysalis’ mainframe... and well... well... blackout in basement level 1, and yet basement level 2 is abundant in digital data. How curious. A singular point of entry and exit with a very scarily strong door. I think I’ll add that to today’s itinerary.”

Sliding his laptop back into his satchel, he pulled out a bottle of hair spray. Honestly, Opelucid City was a godsend for people as indecisive as he was when it came to hair colour. In a mere moment, his lavender hair was now a shining silver. To complete his Very Fun Disguise, he applied eyeliner and mascara with a very generous hand, even adding an extremely realistic scar or two. The art of concealment was to hide in plain sight. Content that he wouldn’t be recognised at first blush, he left, mindful of the cameras.

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Basement Level 1 of Chrysalis Pharmaceuticals turned out to be a long concrete corridor lined with numerous doors. If Taehyung learned anything from horror movies, it was that this was the perfect scene for a murder house. Just as he’s plucking the hidden lockpicks from his sleeve to relieve the mystery, an authoritative voice breaks the din.

“You’re not supposed to be here.”

Taehyung whips around. Well shit. He can just see Captain Kim’s calm that signified the wrath within if it got back to her that he was found in Chrysalis just hours after their conversation. He represses a shiver. But then, on recognising the familiar profile when he had conducted a background check on the Chrysalis personnel, tranquillity surges through him. “Oh, you’re Kim Seokjin, one of the directors on the board.” He might just have a chance yet.

Seokjin glares at him with deep suspicion. “And you’re the detective.”

“Guilty as charged.” Taehyung holds up his hands in the universal definition of surrender.
“Do you really think we’re hiding anything here? What we want is pure. For everyone to be happy.” Seokjin shakes his head, closing the distance between them.

“Do you?” Taehyung asks. “I find that true happiness is hard to achieve. Your Euphoria just a cheap imitation. A cheap imitation that’s destroying people’s lives.” The portrait of the broken family from earlier flashes through his mind.

“Is it? Parents work harder than anyone to keep their families afloat. Would you understand at the tender age of five why your dear old mum seems so angry all the time? Not understanding that it wasn’t hate causing it, but exhaustion? Fatal thoughts like that haunt children into their adult lives. Wouldn’t you want that to go away for the simple price of $4.95? Suddenly, your tiredness is washed away, and all your child knows is happiness. We do good things here,” Seokjin reaffirms coldly.

“Is that on the pamphlet they give out when they hire you? God, are you all brainwashed to believe that bullshit?” Ire has him advance towards Seokjin until they stand directly face to face. In spite of their sudden proximity, Seokjin is remarkably impassive, nothing to do with the centimetres he has on him.

“Throwing around baseless claims will only hurt yourself. Do you really think that you alone would be able to accomplish anything?”

Taehyung narrows his eyes. He feels as though from the moment he woke up, the world had been replaced by the set of an elaborate play; everyone but him privy to the script. Realisation dawns on him at that moment. With the way they were parroting these rehashed lines at him, looks like his intuition was right. There was more to Chrysalis than what meets the eye. Now wasn’t the time to step carelessly; like with every script, every action, no matter how seemingly inconsequential was deliberate. He prays he will escape the trap of red herrings.

“Well fortunately for me, it’s always been far easier to destroy rather than build something. It doesn’t take much to topple a house of cards. Just ask Lee Soyeon,” he says casually, full of nonchalance. But impressively, Seokjin’s face shows no change of emotion. In another conversation, Taehyung would’ve been delighted at the face of an interesting adversary, but now, he can only feel a white hot rage that he’s desperately quashing.

“You don’t have a warrant and despite whatever agenda you think you possess, you’re trespassing. Leave before I call security,” Seokjin says firmly, full of dignity and poise.
“Only because you asked so nicely. But tell me, how does it feel to have blood on your hands? I’d imagine it gets rubbed cleanly off whenever you roll around on that bed of money.”

“Security —”

“Save your breath.”

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Seokjin watches stoically as the detective rounds the corner and disappears from view, full of righteous justice.

Picking up a sword and chasing down every monster didn’t make you a hero - not in this time, not anymore. Sometimes, monsters couldn’t be slain. Or that’s what they wanted you to believe, confident that their own grotesque existence would secure their own protection.

Everything Seokjin worked for could’ve been ruined today, in one fatal slip by an incompetent idiot; could’ve bought everything crashing down around him, leaving him horrified in the inferno. How precarious was his throne? That detective was a flurry of fancy words and ideals; it wouldn’t be long before that would turn against him and devour him whole. The battle had raged on for far too long, any new characters introduced would upset this dance on a thread that Seokjin had carefully choreographed. He did not sacrifice himself to fail now. Was he a monster? Undoubtedly. Once this is all over, just let him.... die a human in the end.

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The thought of his apartment, his sanctuary, kept his strength up. The way home was never an excruciating endeavour. But today, just realising how fragile and vulnerable to the unknown he was, has left him stricken to the core, he can’t get there soon enough. Even the usual distraction of scrolling through his Instagram is failing. Seokjin just feels drained.

The elevator man dutifully bows his head upon seeing Seokjin’s sombre expression. This is beyond
the remedy of mere complaining. He just wants to shut himself away and pretend that he doesn’t exist. The elevator stops, and without turning back, he punches his code into his door.

“Oh, honey, you’re home! You promised you wouldn’t work weekends, you workaholic!”

Seokjin’s head snaps up. All exhaustion evaporated in an instant, neither of them move a muscle, but Taehyung is as relaxed as relaxed can be, leaning back on his sofa, as though it was Seokjin intruding on his sanctum sanctorum.

“Forgive me,” he returns stiffly, “those very important reports couldn’t read themselves!”

When Seokjin fails to deliver the lines smoothly, Taehyung stands up, holding a notepad in front of him.

*They’re listening.*

“It’s been a long day, you don’t mind if I shower first don’t you? Why don’t you join me?”

At that, Seokjin roughly pulls Taehyung forth by his shirt, pushing him none too gently into the shower and turning the water on full blast before getting in himself, grumbling loudly.

“Wow, we’re showering together already? We just met!” Taehyung cries, clearly enjoying himself, rivets of water forging multiple streams down his face.

“How do you know they’re listening, *who’s listening*?” Seokjin demands, ignoring the fact that his clothes were getting steadily drenched in his pursuit for answers.

“I found bugs all over your apartment. And oh... who knows whose ears they’re attached to.”

Seokjin feels the urge to rip out his lips if it means that he would stop smiling at him like that.

“How did you get past the elevator man?”
“... You have an elevator man?” Taehyung looks genuinely surprised. “I climbed.”

“My apartment is on the ... never mind. Tell me why I shouldn’t call the police,” Seokjin hisses.

“Well, judging from how quickly you reacted, I *might* be lying about the bugs ...but it looks like *you* have something to hide.”

“You just broke into my apartment. Are we really arguing about the semantics of who appears more suspicious?” Seokjin is beyond frustrated at this point. There was nothing worse than an idiot, unless it was a *persistent* idiot.

“I looked into you. All of you actually. Funny that you left working for the Derosa Institute off your resume. You were the one that organised that strike. Imagine that, one of the major shareholders, holding a strike. Afraid that they would turn you away at Chrysalis? Although, I suppose considering how unscathed you walked away from *that* wreckage, that embarrassing page in Opelucid history books, it probably worked in your favour. You may live downtown, but this is a seriously *spiffy* apartment,” Taehyung notes.

“You have nothing. What do you want?”

“I want you to help me. To see the downfall of Chrysalis and every bit of Euphoria destroyed.” This time, there’s no trace of slyness, Taehyung just looks determined.

“And what makes you think we’re on the same page? Why would I risk everything to help you?”

“Because that little speech you gave earlier? I can see right through you. I wasn’t the only one that wasn’t supposed to be there. My instincts are seldom wrong.”

“And what do you have?” Against his better judgement, Seokjin finds himself getting curious.

“Exactly what Chrysalis doesn’t want Opelucid City to know. That the moment your lips touches that bottle, you’re granted tragedy. I’ve seen things that would make you wish that it was a high budget horror movie you were watching.” That bravado slips and Seokjin is met with eyes that look positively haunted.
“...I’ll give you a trial.”
He wakes up in a cold sweat, sheets strangling him, choking him. Eyes still screwed shut, his fingers claw at his bedside table, knocking over an empty glass vial with a light *clink* as it hits the ground and rolls away, the sound searing itself into his brain.

Damn, was he out? His body continues to rebel against his mind, a losing battle as he finally throws the sheets off himself, carefully avoiding the strewn bottles scattered across the floor. It's routine that allows him to ignore the photographs full of smiles, his once pride and joy the golden play button in its frame, to fumble through his tiny apartment and stumble to the convenient store at the bottom floor of his building then to stagger back up three flights to his apartment. Everything is a blackout until he feels a trickle down his throat. He wipes the golden liquid off his lips with the back of his hand, feeling the life return to him once more.

Park Jimin only exists in two states.

**On Euphoria.**

**Off Euphoria.**

There are no snapshots of the rendition of his day, like recovering from a hangover. There's just emptiness. One bottle. Two bottles. Three bottles. But the emptiness waits like an old friend, encompassing him in its uncompromising embrace with sincere promises of never to let go.

The tiny bottles jangle in his pocket.

Whether the day is early, whether it's cold, hot or warm, is meaningless. But the clock tells him it's 5:37am.

Monday. It's Monday. Work. He has work. A smile works its way onto his face, like bugs crawling under his skin and stays there, affixed until Euphoria wears off. In the mirror, the smile looks unnatural on his face, stretching his skin to its fullest capacity. He barely recognises himself anymore.
He pulls on pants, staring at the worn hole in his belt for a few seconds. Oh, it has to be pulled tighter. What happens when he runs out of holes? Will he disappear? His shirt hangs so loosely on his frame that was once packed with muscle. The scarf was new. Something he didn't remember buying. Did it belong to someone in the office? Once, twice, he winds it around his neck, covering the scary smile, and the dark stubble that has grown in, at odds with his bright hair. Time to leave.

*Drip. Drip. Drip.*

Right, mustn't forget to turn off the taps.

Oh? They're all tightly turned off.

Oh?

He's crying.

Why?

He's happy.

--

"Your face is puffy."

"Excellent."

Seokjin is pissed off.

Not only had the detective refused to leave after his clothes had been put through the drier, he had
liberated his closet as though it was his; actually just made himself home as though it was *his* apartment.

"Why do you have so many white shirts?"

"I change them on the hour. Stop looking through my things," Seokjin snaps back, hair on end from the amount of times he’s run his fingers through it in frustration.

“Okay!” Taehyung calls, now elbow deep into his sock drawer.

Then he refused to leave. Or at least take the spare room. He had claimed a good portion of Seokjin’s bed and had set up his laptop and phone as a dual, blinding beacon, searing into his eyelids and brain. As the final cherry on top, he kicks.

So now, Seokjin was nursing bags that refused to disappear even under double the amount of concealer he normally used as well as bruises that crawled up his legs. That would've been fine ... had he not woken up with the detective handcuffed to him. He needs caffeine if he’s going to be able to wrangle the day.

"Really?” Seokjin demands snappishly. The handcuffs clank between them. "You know they're going to make you undo them ... Unless you think of swallowing the key!"

"... Or I can threaten to tell your superiors what you're up to."

"... Well, that'd be a lot neater. Undo them.”

“Can’t, my hands are tied.... or something,” he says with a sly grin.

When Seokjin looks like he’s three seconds away from throttling him with the chain, he explains in a rush, “There’s an inbuilt time mechanism. I’ve set it to six hours, and there’s no override... well... not one I think you can do anyway.”

Seokjin buries his face in his hands. It’s far too early in the morning to deal with one implosion after the other.
As Seokjin is brushing his teeth Taehyung elbows him for mirror rights, quite literally painting on a different face. The Taehyung he was familiar with gradually disappeared as a stranger took his place. He had been elated that his face had bloated to double its size, proclaiming that it added a layer of disguise that he needn't bother with. Seokjin raises his arms to protect his face as Taehyung liberally sprays a new colour onto his hair. Sunset. A lump forms in his throat that he wills away.

"What's for breakfast?" Taehyung asks brightly, hoisting himself onto the counter and kicking his feet. Jjangu immediately curls beneath him. Traitor.

That's it; he's smothering him with a pillow.

"I know what you're thinking -"

"Then you should run."

"You need to earn my trust. That and I'd like to see what you get up to on a daily basis."

"You still haven't given me any reason to trust you."

Taehyung quirks an eyebrow, eyes finding the brightly coloured bowl on the kitchen table that contained the bugs he had disabled.

"Do you have many guests over?" Eyes sweeping over the apartment, settling on the creepy number of photo frames that just bore him, a repulsive shrine to himself. “You’d put Narcissus to shame.”

"Other than you? No," Seokjin says bluntly.

"Not even that honeybunch you keep texting?"

At that mention, Seokjin stiffens slightly. Taehyung smiles at him with perverse delight. “No. But the elevator man has access to every apartment. He's something of a jack of all trades handyman,”
Seokjin explains.

Taehyung's eyebrow is in danger of disappearing into his hairline. “Oh? He must be paid more than the Queen. Not many know how to wrangle an AI on top of prodigious piano skills.”

"Perhaps he's living his childhood fantasies of being an engineer one day, and a plumber the next.” The last thing Seokjin cares about is his sense of self unravelled before the hands of the detective but the last thing he wants is for him to go after the handful of people that make his life worth living.

They eat the fried eggs straight out of the pan, not bothering with plates. Taehyung's eyes sweep over the emptiness of his fridge, as though it was another puzzle piece of his identity. Being inside his apartment was like allowing him access to a cheat code.

"We're going to use the elevator, not perform some deformed spider crawl down the side of this building, okay?"

Taehyung had the gall to look mildly offended as he stuffs lifts into his shoes until he's a centimetre taller than him. He's painstakingly thorough, Seokjin will give him that.

"Wait on a moment, mi, mi, mi miiii." Taehyung adjusts his pitch to a higher register as Seokjin stares. “Huh? Where's your elevator man?” Taehyung narrows his eyes, his tone now gratingly high like nails on a chalkboard just as Seokjin passes the button for the ground floor.

"He takes reprieve from 3 A.M. to 8."

"And what happens during the hours between that? Every man for themselves?" Taehyung asks flatly.

Seokjin doesn't deign him with a response. The high from the lack of sleep is starting to wear off. And if he doesn't get a dose of caffeine soon, well, Taehyung will have to drag his corpse to his desk otherwise. So he's a bit impatient, hauling Taehyung behind him before he can commit the lobby that he traded for the fire escape to memory. All Seokjin wants is silence.

Unfortunately, the universe has the peculiar habit of going against his wishes and, instead, grants him a Taehyung that refuses to shut up. He's waving to the children that are closely followed by
harried parents trying to usher them to get to school on time, and greeting every passerby cheerfully. How in the hell is he functioning at this time of day? As far as Seokjin is concerned, the world doesn't exist before 9 A.M. Seokjin looks at everything through bleary hate-tinted glasses as he manages to claim a seat on the subway, releasing a sigh of relief.

Taehyung talks his ear off during the ride as Seokjin does everything he can to remain upright. It's Taehyung that leads them to the Chrysalis building but Seokjin jerks him forcefully in the opposite direction for his prescription of clarity.

"No Euphoria," he says firmly to the barista. Taehyung's Cheshire grin looms above him, as Seokjin glares at him with distaste. "Shut up... Please."

The chain jangles between them.

With bits of his brain gradually functioning once more, Seokjin is acutely aware of how, despite Taehyung’s casual posture, his eyes continually sweep over every environment he was in, analytically processing everything for future use. He sure as hell didn't want to know what Taehyung would categorise his intense fixation on Park Jimin under and enters the elevator immediately. A routine broken, perhaps he was going into withdrawal. Seokjin wills himself to not seek out the tangerine amongst the black. It’s too early for him anyway, he berates himself, trying to avoid seeing his reflection in the mirrored wall.

--

*It was meant to be revolutionary, Chrysalis Pharmaceuticals’ first foray into painkillers. Smiling through your pain had never been more literal.*

*Jimin’s body had finally cried out in protest. It did more than cry. It broke down into a twisted mess and his YouTube channel was paying the price. Even standing caused pinpricks of pain to shoot up and down his frame, racking it with tremors. The Dancer’s Curse. His friends did their best to keep the channel running, even producing some of the most inventive and inspired choreographies he had ever seen but, it was still his channel and the comments continued to flood, carrying a vitriol he had only been an innocent bystander to, never the intended target. But recovery couldn’t be rushed, no matter the deity you worshipped, despite how much you throw away your pride to beg and even if you worked yourself raw. Time was his enemy and it was a cruel, unrelenting force. As his view count plummeted so did his bank balance.*
He was desperate.

They all were.

His physiotherapist mentioned it during a session. Chrysalis Pharmaceuticals was trialling a new form of Euphoria that was designed to combat pain sustained from serious injury. Jimin remembered Sejeong and her glassy eyes after the death of her father. Euphoria held out its hand, and pulled her from herself, and now, she was the one keeping him afloat with her crescent eye smiles. He could... he could be like that too right?

Without hesitating, he signed up.

Drug trials weren’t a thing to be feared in Opelucid City. The scientists were careful to disqualify anyone that didn’t meet their criterion or showed risk of adverse effects. Considering that, it was a great way as a student or single parent to earn quick money to satiate your child’s desire for the newest shiny gadget or appease a friend on their birthday.

Jimin just needed the money.

The only thing he remembers from his life three years ago is when the drug trial Euphoria finally wore off, he was left with an all-consuming hollowness that tore the very fragment of him from himself. An entire shelf of Euphoria went into his cart at the supermarket that day.

--

In Seokjin’s office, Taehyung pulls up a chair next to him, but instead of staring over his shoulder unwaveringly like he expected, he props his legs up on his desk, playing on his phone. A few hours pass in comfortable silence. Silence except for the buzzing from Seokjin's phone. Texts sent so closely together, that it could've been mistaken for a call. The display name confirmed that it was a honeybunch<333 contacting him once more. Not that having a warm and cuddly exterior was the requirement after all, even aloof people could commit to relationships, but there was nothing in Seokjin's behaviour that hinted that he had a deep connection to the person that was currently, missing you so hyungieee.
"Hey Seokjin, want to go ... Uh." Byulyi screeches to a literal halt as she takes in Taehyung’s presence who beams merrily at her, waggling his fingers exaggeratedly. Seokjin blinks at him several times in consternation. "Was today bring your partner to work day? Because damn, I should've told Yongsun about it."

"No. I signed up for a study about whether there’s a correlation between prolonged exposure to a person and if it would trigger homicidal tendencies. Spoiler alert, it does," Seokjin deadpans.

"You had to sign up for a study to know that? I could've told you that. Better leave before I become labelled as an accessory. Later."

“What?” Seokjin sighs, sensing Taehyung’s eyes boring holes into the side of his head.

“You just lied to her.”

“Would you rather I told her the truth of why you’re here?”

“Your CEO already knows anyway.”

“What - ”

“You just did it so casually. No pause, no nervous physical gestures, no increase in rapid breathing, hell, not even an iota of trying too hard to be cavalier.”

“Considering the circumstance, I would say possessing that ability is rather pivotal.”

“Let’s just say that I have a lot of experience with certain people that exhibit a lack of a physiological response whilst not being entirely truthful.”

“Oh? Has reason decided to kick in to inform you that you’ve behaved rashly?” Seokjin shook the wrist connected by the handcuffs, causing the chain to clink ominously.
"Nah, if you wanted to kill me you would've done that right at the beginning."

"That's very true." Seokjin smiles.

Taehyung sighs loudly, resting his head on the desk.

"Chrysalis is as clean as a whistle. The only thing I've accomplished here is catch a Mr Mime and Cloyster. Tch, city privileges. The only thing I can catch by my apartment are Zubats."

"What did you expect? For information to be floating about freely?"

"That would be nice. The result is the same nevertheless."

"Have you... ever failed?" Seokjin asked cautiously but unable to keep the curiosity from seeping through his words.

"What's for lunch? I'm hungry," Taehyung says instead, keeping his gaze firmly on the space above Seokjin's head.

Only slightly deterred, Seokjin reaches for his drawer, pulling out a worn menu. "Just order whatever, then press that button. An intern will come and bring something up from the cafeteria downstairs."

"Wow, you really are a workaholic." Taehyung leans on his chair, trying to peer into every cranny of the opened drawer before Seokjin slams it shut. Inside, it's almost crammed to the brim with scientific journals, no recent ones as far as he can discern.

"Or it's because the circumstances are a bit different today," Seokjin says acidly.

He finally turns away from his computer, rubbing his eyes and grabbing his phone, finally responding to the enigmatic person that carried the concentrated adorableness of fifty kittens. Angling the phone away from Taehyung's line of sight, he quickly sends out a few replies before opening Pokemon Go himself.
"I can't fail," Taehyung says quietly, abandoning the higher pitch he had adopted throughout the entire day. Seokjin remains deathly silent, afraid that noise would terrify him out of his honesty. Even the hum of his colleagues in the other room seems too loud. Clefairy bounces on his phone far too cheerfully. "Failure means the perpetrator lives to torment more innocent people."

"Have you ever been wrong?" Seokjin fears his response. Taehyung’s work is unquestionably noble. But no one can have a 100% success rate, it was just unfortunate that his shortcomings would result in serial killers on the prowl for more lives to claim.

"Right up until the last note is sung." Taehyung smiles bitterly. "Predetermined perception is a hard thing to control. Being well-educated and charitable is a shield for a lot of them. But failure comes in events beyond that..."

"How?" Seokjin asks in hushed tones.

"Love. Loyalty. Humans ... are a real piece of work. It doesn't matter if their significant other cuts people up in their free time. Take me, spare them. A confession debunks a case, hook line and sinker. Doesn't matter if they're lying."

"And you're able to face it on a much grander scale. Why are you so confident?"

"I can't not try. What about you? Fancy yourself a hero?"

"Hell no. Guilt. Even if you did find the information you wish for incrimination. It's nothing compared to seeing it in person."

"Ah. No wonder you're so determined to destroy yourself."

The intern arrives then. Both of them pick at the food he gives, no longer hungry.

"You get the interns to fetch you water, paper clips when you run out and your lunch. Yet you won't let him file your work."
"Walls have eyes and ears, didn’t you know?"

"Wise cookie."

--

It had been a few months since Seokjin had started at Chrysalis and he had not done anything beyond menial tasks that no one could be bothered finishing. Whenever someone wanted him to stay back a bit extra to mind the Euphoria maturing, he did. Whenever anyone needed him to find a journal dated back to 1996 to use as a reference, he was already halfway up the ladder, flashlight in hand to hunt down the elusive copy. So when they needed him to come in and take blood samples from the test trial subjects at 7pm and 7am, he did.

Seokjin would never forget it.

Truth be told, he wouldn’t have recalled any of the faces of the trial testers before they had taken Euphoria. Perhaps one of them had a fear of needles that he had smoothed over with a smile. That moment was forgettable. He left, ready to return in twelve hours as the subjects retired to the rooms in Basement Level One. He was at the end of the hall, when the first wave of laughter hits. Shrill and hysterical. They pierce him like arrows and he can’t leave fast enough.

Twelve hours later, he returned to dutifully take a new blood sample of the subjects after taking Euphoria.

He wished the hall was silent. They still rung with laughter, not the kind coaxed from hearing a riveting joke. This was strained, forced. Like if you were held at gunpoint. The voices are hoarse, gravel and cracking but laughter continues to pour from their mouths and quake their bodies.

They’re taken into the room, one by one.

They were convulsing so much, they had to be strapped down for Seokjin to insert the needle. They twisted against the restraints, still laughing, cackling even with their voices hardly above a whisper, with dried tear tracks of mirth on their faces, contorted to the extent that they couldn’t be identified. Their mouths stretched wide, causing rows upon rows of wrinkles to sag grotesquely,
hanging down their face. They don’t see Seokjin but rather the comedy that loops behind their eyelids.

Park Jimin laughs so loudly that Seokjin is frozen. Only recognisable due to his red hair aflame as he throws back his head and cackles. His hands are clammy as Jimin writhes under the straps, eyes narrows into slits like a serpent about to strike stares at him unwaveringly, still laughing, cackling like Seokjin had just told him the most spellbinding secret. Seokjin came to wonder if Jimin was his own personal devil sent to torment him.

Seokjin tries to ignore, tries to forget everything about him. But the universe had a cruel sense of humour when a year later, it granted him Park Jimin, now an employee at Chrysalis Pharmaceuticals.

--

At the end of the lunch hour, the intern returns to remove the plates they had hardly touched. Seokjin gives his computer his undivided attention once more. This time, Taehyung carefully opens the drawer. Seokjin's office is bare, devoid of any character or personality. The stationary on his desk is office issued, not containing a single commemorative pen, no photographs, and even the display picture of the honeybunch<333 is nondescript. From a cursory glance, if not for his handsome face, Kim Seokjin wouldn't warrant a second look. All by design. Taehyung has to marvel at the ingenuity of it all.

Taehyung fans the journals across the desk, Seokjin too occupied to take any notice. The dates span a five year period. Flicking through it, he's rewarded with blue and red pen marks in Seokjin's handwriting, pressed so deeply they leave indentations through three pages. ... The infamous Heracles case. With his phone, he snaps several pictures; this would be an interesting conversation with Dr Jeon.

"Huh."

"What?" Taehyung asks after several hours of lapsed silence. For the most part, he had delighted himself by filling his PokeDex. Especially since Chrysalis was sandwiched by no less than five PokeStops. Tch, again, city privileges.
"Chrysalis ... might just have some competition."

"Oh? What is it?"

"I think... I think I may have just stumbled upon a miracle," Seokjin breathes, enthralled, pure wonder blossoming on his face. “At the Psykhe Institute, they’ve moved beyond creating mere happiness, acknowledging the full spectrum of emotions that humans can express. Love. Hope. Nostalgia ...”

"There's no such thing," Taehyung says bluntly. “You of all people should know that.”

“Transparency is everything, and they aren’t afraid to list their shortcomings but they also suggest counterproposals. At this stage, it is still very much a hypothesis but ... it’s rather promising.”

“Oh, great. Shall we call this future sect of crime, ‘Compassionate Murder’?"

But Seokjin remains engrossed in the paper, seemingly petrified. Taehyung squints over his shoulder, trying to keep calm. An enemy had been made out of Chrysalis only for a successor to immediately step out of the shadows? They hadn’t even chopped the first head of the Hydra before another spouted. Taehyung casts his glance to the ceiling; why was he still surprised? The very nature of his work was a constant cyclic battle where triumph was almost as bitter as defeat.

The handcuff issues three shrill beeps before it clatters to the ground.

“Good riddance.” Seokjin braces himself against the chair warily lest Taehyung decides to bind them together again. Instead, Taehyung whistles merrily, twirling the handcuffs around a finger before tossing it on Seokjin’s lap.

“Consider this a memento of our time together,” he says with a roguish wink, completely missing Seokjin’s bemused expression as he turns on his heel and leaves in an overly dramatic fashion. That’s... weird. For science, Seokjin insists as he pockets them.

In the absence of the detective, Seokjin's day progresses far more uneventfully. Right on the dot, the synchronised shuffling of papers from most of the employees of Chrysalis informs Seokjin that getting help from them would be a futile endeavour. Seokjin stretches in his chair, delaying his leave. There’s usually a mad rush for the elevator at this time, and he does not enjoy getting too
personal with the ones that work on Level 8. Instead, he decides to head to the roof - whilst Taehyung may have survived an entire day with him, there’s nothing he desires more than unshared air.

--

Where is it? Has it been moved? Where is it? Where is it?

Five levels down, Jimin leaves behind a wreckage in his quest for Euphoria. You’d think for a company that produces it, there’d be a bottle lying on every surface. Not the case. He remembers doing this last week, entering a room he had never seen before and found it occupied. ...Who was it again...? Fingers rake through his hair, remembering things hurt.

Where is it?

Anything. Just anything to end this unbelievable agony.

Air. He needs air.

--

Seokjin halts abruptly. Despite the loud creaks that the door to the roof makes from disuse, his presence goes unnoticed. Unable to help himself, Seokjin growls quietly; is he not allowed to have a moment to himself today? He’s prepared to slink backwards but, with a sinking stomach, he recognises that tangerine hair anywhere. And Jimin... is far too close to the edge.

Like he was performing for an invisible audience, Jimin leaps onto the railing, arms outstretched, body bent back at an impossible angle like a graceful swan.
No. No. No. Seokjin chants like a mantra. Like a bullet from a gun, dread acting as an impossible catalyst, Seokjin is tearing across the roof, hands bunching into the back of Jimin’s shirt.

For a moment, Seokjin fears that they were both going to tumble over the edge. A primal desire to live kicks in, granting him strength he didn't know he possessed, and hoists them back hard onto solid ground. Jimin continues to fight him, thrashing against his iron hold.

"Why isn't this enough!" Jimin hisses, twisting far more viciously than anyone with a serious addiction should, growling at him, guttural. "I'm supposed to be happy!" The bottle slips from his fingers, falling down to the earth below ... Like they could've been.

"Are you?" Seokjin grunts, turning him around to stare at him directly into his eyes. “Are you?” he asks, gentler.

At first, Jimin doesn't answer but at last, he finally stills, tears falling in a cascade down his face. Drip. Drip. Drip. The droplets of water lands onto Seokjin’s shirt, leaving him frozen in horror. “N-no,” he whispers brokenly. "I need it, I can’t feel anything without it."

"You don't need it, Jimin, no one does." Seokjin's voice is shaking; it's the conversation that he's put off having so long, put off because he was a coward. Put off because he was content to live in a delusion that Jimin wasn’t issuing a silent plea for help.

"I do."

Jimin's rage is terrible behind the veil of his tears. Monster. ...And Seokjin was the one that created him.

His lips move without sound first, before the words exit in an exhaled rush. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry..."

Jimin looks up, tears carving a million paths on his face. "W-what?"

"Blame me. Chrysalis shouldn’t have done that trial. Do you know what should’ve happened that day? If people knew what had happened in that basement? Chrysalis Pharmaceuticals would’ve been buried, it wouldn’t exist. But someone waved their wand and now you can’t walk 1 metre without it being shoved in your face. And I... I- I was too afraid and tried to pretend it didn’t
happen. It almost worked … until you showed up. I should’ve begged for your forgiveness then... but I was a coward to go set things right and just watched you from afar convincing myself that you were okay when you weren’t… when I saw exactly what it can do. I'm sorry," Seokjin chokes. Apologies as it turns out, don't elevate the weight on your chest, it compounds it, grinding you beneath its foot like you were an ant.

Each heaving gasp that Jimin makes is a stabbing pain from a white hot sword directly into Seokjin's midsection.

"I can tell you, that Euphoria doesn't fix anything. For some people, it works like it’s the miracle it's supposed to be. Happiness... It's addictive isn't it?

"But you …"

"I know exactly what Euphoria can do... What it did to you."

"I want to feel something!"

"When was the last you took Euphoria?"

"This morning...."

"It's not Euphoria that's making you feel. I'm not going to lie, it's not going to be easy. Euphoria is more addictive than nicotine and you'll feel like dying and worse of all, there are no reported cases of overcoming Euphoria because it's not technically an addiction. Jimin, what do you want?"

"I want to be human again."
Jimin shut down.

All his fight was used in their exchange, but even that was too much for him to handle. He had leaned heavily against Seokjin the entire journey, too weak to walk. Seokjin hoped that it wasn't like this all the time, the thought of him struggling to return home caused him immeasurable pain. God bless his morning workouts.

His relief was compounded when a seat was available on the subway, he lowered Jimin into it, standing close as through standing guard. Shame that the horror had already broached the defence, and shame that horror was Seokjin. His stop came far too soon, slinging his arm over Jimin, Seokjin half dragged him out of the station.

Was he always so thin? Seokjin gnawed on his bottom lip in worry, but it was pointless asking unanswered questions now, not now when Jimin's eyes were far too vacant. The earlier struggle could've been believed as an illusion.

On the walk to his apartment, many people stopped to him sympathetic looks, one brave child even held up her cherished bottle of Euphoria. A smile warred on his face. But the little girl is so insistent, that he tucks the bottle into his pocket to placate her.

If the elevator man was surprised about his guest, he was professional enough to keep it concealed. Thankfully, he kept his antics to a bare minimum on the way to his floor.

"Any requests?"

"Beethoven’s Silence, please.” Perhaps something restful was in order.

Jjangu greeted him at the door, but apparently deemed Jimin as not enough of a threat to growl. Or not human enough. Seokjin brushes away that thought as he guides Jimin to the sofa.

... Now what?

Seokjin had been so intent on making sure that they didn’t lumber into the path of an incoming train that he hadn’t thought about what to do next. Comfort was something he was woefully ill-equipped in. He had lived alone for so long, he had forgotten how to take care of himself let alone another person. Especially not someone fighting off intense withdrawal symptoms.
Jimin was shivering.

Blankets, Seokjin thought in relief. Pulling them out of the closet, he dims the lights and drapes it tightly over Jimin's form, indecision freezing him once more.

Well... A hot meal never hurt anyone, he decided. The late nights and additional weekends had taken a toll on his kitchen, leaving it barren. Eggs without bread. Cereal without milk. Blasphemy. How could such soul mates be divided?

With a quick scroll through his phone, he ordered ingredients from the supermarket nearby. As he set the pot to boil, he felt tendrils of guilt. Sure he could've ordered takeaway, but he needed to busy himself, he had no idea what to do, and he hoped in the act of familiarity, he would derive a form of strength and grit.

His groceries arrived in the dumbwaiter, no less than fifteen minutes later, all the while nervously pacing. The existence of an elevator man meant that whatever was ordered from the outside was subject to unarguable inspection in respect to the safety of your neighbours. But after that, it arrived in a chute directly to your apartment to save the effort of carrying a heavy load up stairs or to have the elevator man risk a back injury list just because you craved red velvet cake at the asscrack of dawn.

The act of methodical chopping, the sizzling of aromatics in the pan did wonders to soothe him. After such painstaking care to isolate himself from human comfort, he had just invited one of his largest regrets right into his home. Tucked a blanket around it and made it comfortable. He stilled, eyes darting to the window. Taehyung had disappeared as abruptly as he appeared, and although it had just happened once, Seokjin couldn't help but wonder if his appearance would be regular event in his life. Not tonight ... Please.

The elevator man must have sensed the desperation emanating from his, for his request played softly far sooner than expected. For a solid minute, he played to absolute silence and then...

"Oh," Jimin sighs softly - life flickers in his eyes.

"Do you recognise it?"

"I ... danced to it once."
"You're a dancer." Seokjin feels his heart sinking, the urge to turn away is strong but it’s high time he faces the skeletons in his closet.

"Choreographer and was."

Seokjin adds that to the ever growing list of regrets that he has. Things that they will never be able to pay back for at least three lifetimes.

Seokjin shows Jimin the spare room. But it's clear that neither of them will be getting any sleep that night. Jimin tosses and turns the entire night and screams as though the devil lurks within his sheets. Only, they’re trapped within the contains of his skull and refuses to let go.

Jimin is laughing without humour, bent over the toilet bowl in a twisted form of worship. Resolve crumbles in the face of adversity and Jimin is on his knees, his fingers twisted into Seokjin’s shirt, crying, begging for just the slightest hint of Euphoria through heaving gasps.

“I need it, I can’t live without it. I’ll do anything. P-please... I’m weak, so weak...”

“You can do it, I know you can.”

“Fuck you, easy for you to say. Just a little bit, wean me off... I’ll do better tomorrow, I’ll quit tomorrow, I promise!”

Seokjin isn’t aware he had a heart to bleed from, but seeing Jimin in such a state, the very epitome of desperation brings forth an overwhelming cascade of pity, but somehow, he has the strength to resist. To refrain from pressing the tiny bottle of Euphoria that now weighs a tonne in his back pocket into Jimin’s clammy hands, to give him the slightest form of relief against his nightmarish hell. It’s only going to get worse, plus one, times three, squared, cubed, multiplied by infinity before the prospect of better would arise. He was supposed to be the strong one here, and yet here he was crumbling alongside Jimin without the pathetic excuse of Euphoria addiction.

Twice, Jimin’s tried to break out of Seokjin’s apartment. Once, with bleeding fingers he tried to go for the window. Seokjin has his height advantage over the reckless abandon driven by withdrawal and ultimately, Seokjin is left with no choice as he handcuffs Jimin to his sink. He’s almost grateful that he spent a trying day with the detective. Six hours. The journey to daybreak, battling the dark for light is Jimin’s grand stage against adversity.
“Fuck you, fuck Chrysalis, I don’t fucking care anymore. Just let me drug myself into oblivion,” Jimin is against the cool tiles, venom spewing from his mouth at equally the same rate as his pleas in a tsunami of acid. The switch is jarring, a growling monster one moment, then piteous the next. “Please, please please, just give it to me! I have nothing anyway! I’m nobody!”

Jimin looks up through bloodshot eyes. “I don’t want this anymore! I want to be numb, this hurts... this hurts so much.” He’s crying without tears. His body is beyond exhausted but the yearning for Euphoria is stronger. This is what Chrysalis created, Seokjin thinks in disgust. An all-consuming dependency, of shackles born from his mind and whipping the body into submission and turning him into their loyal servant.

This isn’t a romance where someone emerges from the shadows and kisses your pain away, murmuring that you’re beautiful into your wrists. No resolution is on the horizon. Jimin is the celebrated star of his own tragedy with a buffoon in Seokjin. Any idiot could see how this story panned out in the end.

Jimin curls in on himself, a pain bone-deep, soul-deep, existence-deep reverberates through his body. He was wrong to deny Euphoria. He was so goddamn fucking wrong. It had always been there for him, to soothe him when his friends turned around in disdain and walked away. When his bank balance hit the negatives. When he just needed someone. Who was this bastard for taking it away from him?

“You’re a murderer! DIE! JUST DIE. GIVE IT TO ME. GIVE ME EUPHORIA!” Jimin’s shrill screams echo off the tiled walls, trapping Seokjin in a prison of hatred.

Despair drives Seokjin from the bathroom, leaving Jimin screaming at the world. Like a flip had been switched, the sound is wrenched from the air. But the silence howls, deafening. Suddenly, there’s an almighty crash. Heart thumping in his chest, a new bout of strength had seized Jimin’s faculties. Crazed, beyond reason, he’s rifling through the medicine cabinet with a sole desire in mind, throwing the bottles carelessly behind him.

“No, Jimin!” Seokjin cries, throwing himself against him.

“You’re pathetic. What kind of person doesn’t have Euphoria in their home?” Jimin snarls.

“Jimin, please remember. Why are you walking through hell right now?” Seokjin doesn’t care that he’s pleading to insanity, if Jimin has descended to the realm of no reason, then Seokjin is closely following.
“To feeeel.” A cruel mocking taints his words, his hands spasming. “I’M FEELING EVERYTHING. YOUR FEELINGS. THE GODDAMN UNIVERSE’S. MAKE IT STOP!”

“You want it? Fine!” Seokjin pulls out the bottle from his pocket and Jimin all but moans in want, falling to his knees, immediately, horrifically docile. A calm spreads over the very core of his being, as the golden sheen of Euphoria is reflected in his eyes.

“P-please.”

“But just remember why you’re doing this. Do you feel human yet? Intensely. To be human is to feel pain, and it will never let you forget it. It won’t ever get better, but you will be okay.” Seokjin sets the bottle within reach, tossing the blanket and pillow by his feet. A new emotion has entered into the fray of Jimin’s frazzled state. Confliction.

When Seokjin returns to his bed, heart thrumming in his ears. it was up to him now. This was wrong. Jimin doesn’t deserve his sorry attempts at catharsis. But... Seokjin bolts upright. What the hell did he just do? He was supposed to be the strong one, dammit! Addiction was the thickest, suffocating haze against reason, and ... oh my god, what did he just do?

The bottle is gone from its perch and Seokjin sags to the ground. He had just tossed Park Jimin to the hounds and let them tear him to shreds. Again.

“I did it,” Jimin croaks, startling Seokjin out of his stupor. Jimin’s cheek is mashed against the tiles. The open meaning is unclear until Seokjin sees the bottle in the depths of the toilet.

“Yes, you did,” Seokjin smiles faintly. “You really are something,“

The handcuffs issue three shrill beeps.

Until dawn, Park Jimin was a fighter.

Off Euphoria.
Chapter End Notes

Words refused to string together to form sentences for this chapter. My forte isn't characterisation nor science fiction and yet lo' and behold, look at this fic I've written hah... I get the inkling that the backstory is a bit out of place, but hell must descend for the protagonists to rise
"Yes, this is the Heracles case."

"I know that. I want you to tell me what all this shorthand means."

At least the detective had some measure of common courtesy, Dr Jeon thinks idly. Sure, he had burst into his lab without so much as a warning, causing him to jump a metre into the air. But he had brought him this frappuccino that used vapour from clouds, from the new place that was notorious for their hour long queue before testing his patience. Well, that explained why Dr Chae had squished himself into a cabinet half his height when he heard the detective’s booming voice.

"And where did you get ahold of this?" Dr Jeon asks, levelling him with an even stare.

"A friend," Taehyung says dismissively.

Two could play this game of obtuse evasion. "Is this to do with a case you're working with?"

"Eh, of sorts." The detective is the portrait of cavalier, leaning angular against the edge of the table, surveying him over the high mountain of magenta whipped cream and taking an exaggeratedly long sip through the straw.

Dr Jeon doesn’t even bother to mask his irritation, purposefully meeting Taehyung’s eyes with an extended sigh. “You know, a lot of scientists add their own observations on the side like this. You’ll be turning over every stone in the world before you find Lee Soyeon. And you don't know if this was her working or it became noted after her paper."

"Seems like you know something about it," Taehyung remarks, the unfiltered panic that spreads across Dr Jeon’s face may as well have been a signed confession. "See, Lee Soyeon could very well be your average citizen, with a painstaking insistence for detail. Or she could be in a very decorated position in one of the most lucrative companies with a perch overlooking the city. Now, I don't believe she's working for them, merely protecting her identity."
"So why are you trying so hard to find her if you approve of what she's doing?" Dr Jeon tries for impassive but ultimately fails, his fingers twitching beneath the arms he has crossed over his body. If only everyone was as bad at lying. Taehyung was infamously referred to as the Criminal of Liars, successfully wrenching a confession from the most unlikely of culprits, so much so, that the other detectives down at the precinct suspected that he had achieved that through unsavoury coercion, forcing innocent people to parrot lies for the sake of a sensational case. People lie, and their body language is their police. Taehyung was finetuned to pick up insignificant details that many people dismissed based on technicality, but that also involved a razor-sense focus on every individual tick and tell that people had when under pressure.

"Because I have such a ludicrous, overflowing bounty of Euphoria-induced evidence that would prove every paper otherwise. And I think hand delivery is the way to go in this situation. But tell me, Dr Jeon, you're sweating a bit. Do you have a connection with Lee Soyeon?"

"I ..." Dr Jeon draws in a deep breath casting his glance to the floor. “I'm a big fan of hers!” he blurts out, looking shocked at his own candour. Dr Jeon gives Taehyung such a strong look of horror that even he’s taken back a little.

"Well don't look at me like I said it."

Dr Jeon’s mouth continues to open and close, as he fights to muster something to say.

"I did hear about how she had an exclusive fan club dedicated to tracking down her papers... Are you a member, Dr Jeon?" Taehyung continues to press him relentlessly and although he hasn’t moved, he has Dr Jeon pinned against the corner.

"What? I -" He flushes a beet red, eyes darting about the room as though he was desperately hoping for someone to swoop in and save him.

"Can I use your account?" Taehyung asks enthusiastically. "I can be privy to updates on her latest takedown!"

"I.... I don't really use it!"

"So you do have one." Taehyung's eyes dance menacingly, trained on Dr Jeon who grew smaller and smaller as the conversation carried on. Perhaps it was a bit unfair. Dr Jeon wasn’t a killer.... yet, anyway. But there was no time for gentleness.
"I-I -"

"The fate of the city rests on this," Taehyung tells him seriously, "you don't ... I don't know... make collages out of her papers and post them on the fan site do you?"

"I would never!" He squirms underneath Taehyung's gaze.

"Okay, you know what. This isn't an attack on your private life -"

"I told you I don't -"

A heaviness settles on Taehyung's frame. The severity of the situation wrenches all the sound from the air. "This case doesn't have a happy ending. Or even an ending but... Here, when you read this, I hope you'll understand. It's not enough to say that harm is inevitable, not when it does this." Taehyung hands him his tablet.

"Why am I looking at someone who was charged for vandalism?" Dr Jeon asks blankly.

“Oh yeah. He was a real ass. Really fancied himself a Banksy, possessed the candour to *graffiti* on an *active crime scene.*”

“That’s appalling. But again.... I don’t see how this holds any significance.”

Taehyung reaches over, swiping across the screen to reveal the picture of a young woman.

“This was their girlfriend. The true victim of this case.”

“But the events are unrelated?” Dr Jeon’s brow furrows.

“The victim was in an on-off relationship with the perpetrator. More off than on recently, greatly in part due to the fact that he tended to fly off into raves and rants that terrified her. But every time
they did meet, he was careful to slip her Euphoria without her knowledge. She mistook the happiness as her own, and kept coming back despite the pleas of her friends. Stockholm Syndrome. Even after he was incarcerated, she still visits him, the urge is too powerful. We met her, when we were interviewing him at the prison. He’s lucky that that wasn’t the crime he was tried for. What a joke. Vandalism. She's one of the few cases of Euphoria dependency that we officially have. Of course..." Taehyung smiles harshly. “Everyone in this city is an addict one way or the other."

Dr Jeon grows sombre with every word uttered, finally culminating in his eyebrows set like arrows over his eyes. “That bastard," he whispers fiercely.

"The city had an equilibrium with crime. Of course, that's not a good thing. But it was far more preferable to the shambles that Euphoria left when it swept in. At least people know alcohol and drugs impair your judgement and are generally all around, bad decisions. Euphoria? Nope, why, it's a miracle."

Dr Jeon bites on his lip until it becomes puffy. “I'll help you," he decides resolutely, a war of indecision marring his face.

Taehyung had seen a kindred spirit in Lee Soyeon, and now one in Dr Jeon. He was glad he had driven Dr Chae to the brink of annoyance.

Yet... Taehyung counts fifty-three acts of dishonesty. Hands wringing at least seven times. Mouth moving without sound, four. Hands moving to cradle his body, three. Avoiding meeting his gaze, eleven. After the first consultation, Taehyung had done a comprehensive background search on Dr Jeon Jungkook. The kid was seriously talented. Numerous corporations and intelligence agencies getting down on their knees, begging for so much as a second glance. And yet, he chose to work at the place that shaped him, Opelucid Tech. Admirable? Undoubtedly. Suspicious? Absolutely.

Man, he sure hoped he wouldn't betray him in the end. He was cute. It would be a shame if something sinister lurked behind that adorable smile.

Taehyung was goddamn sure Dr Jeon knew exactly who Lee Soyeon was.

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Seokjin's apartment is a sweltering thirty degrees. He's down to his t-shirt and seriously contemplating being without it but Jimin still shivers under three layers. None of them got any sleep last night. Seokjin places a bowl of porridge in front of him that has Jimin shake his head furiously, fearing that it'll make a reappearance up his throat. At the very least, he promised to stay hydrated.
"Hyung, you should leave for work," Jimin states, his voice a wisp of air, pale face peeking out of the blankets he's swathed himself in. Seokjin takes in the bloodshot eyes competing with the purple swelling around them, his lips like cracks in desert sand. Jimin looks positively haggard. At first, Seokjin had only intended to take a day off. But the bandages around his arms bear reminder that sometime during the first day, Jimin had been convinced that bugs were writhing beneath the surface of his skin. His scream had been piercing as he raked his nails over his arms trying to dig them out.

Seokjin had experienced the demon possession of Euphoria when first administered, but even out of its cruel grip, it continues to leave haunting reminders into the flesh. “Nah. I have like a million sick days stockpiled. I'm old, I need my beauty sleep.”

Soon, that day off turned into two then three, then before he knew it, it was Friday and he saw little point in coming into work then. If it wasn't for the languid blinking, Jimin posed uncanny resemblance to a corpse.

Jemin withdraws his head, as though natural light was blinding even though Seokjin has purposefully kept the curtains closed to ease his discomfort.

Seokjin hates himself for starting a mental countdown for when Jimin's mood will switch again. The man is more a danger to himself than others. He's almost grateful for the weak lethargy. Right now, an interesting case has presented itself. There's no record of overcoming Euphoria addiction because it wasn't labelled a fatal drug to begin with. So Seokjin has been keeping a log of sorts, documenting the highs and lows. He'd like to say there's a predictable element within the unpredictable chaos, but that's all it remains. And despite the surges of strength, Jimin remains frail for the most part, and even summoning one word answers are an exemplary feat. They've been careful to avoid anything that could possibly trigger a mood, as it yanks upon Jimin’s body forcibly like a puppet on strings and leaves him positively spent afterwards. But it changes. One day, he could deal with Seokjin reading to him, but the next would have him tearing that book out of his hands and throwing it forcibly across the room. Or nonplussed by Seokjin's quiet humming as he cooks to bellowing across the room to shut up. For the most part, Seokjin leaves him alone. Time is all he needs.

Belatedly, he realises that he's been stroking Jimin through the blanket. He doesn't seem to mind, rather, there's a subtle curve to his body as though he's loosely wrapping himself around Seokjin's frame. Raise the body count to two, as to who is deprived of human contact. Well aren’t they a pair.

"Want me to continue where I left off in Brave New World?"

Jemin may have let out a groan; understandably, his expression of emotions was still a bit flat. “But
that's so boring."

"The perfect lullaby for sleep," Seokjin teases.

"Sleep," Jimin agrees.

Offering one last pat, Seokjin leaves for his bedroom.

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Seokjin’s head barely grazes the pillow when there's a crash, a lot of cursing and a muffled scream. Seokjin sighs. Is it too late to feign ignorance? Why does serenity allude him? Is he not allowed a moment of peace? Seokjin rushes into the living room, to find a Kim Taehyung in an intense standoff in his curtains.

"Dammit, hyung! Who leaves the curtains closed in the middle of the day," he whines, tangled within the drapes and flailing wildly like a dying fly, swearing every second word. Huh. For some reason, Seokjin had the impression that Taehyung had gracefully Black Widow'ed into his apartment. Guess he was wrong. The thought of him lying in a helpless heap at an empty apartment and Jjangu unsure to label him a threat was before hurriedly straightening himself out in the definition of cool nonchalance to meet Seokjin was actually uplifting. Even without the presence of the elevator man, his apartment was more well-guarded than he thought. Good to know. His apartment price was well justified. "Hyung! Save me!"

Seokjin is all for leaving him to grapple with his curtain quicksand but Jimin rouses at the noise, jolting upright. His eyes are wild, swivelling in their sockets to the tempo of his heavy breathing.

"I'm free!" Taehyung squeals, leaping up. “Who the hell are you?"

"I don't think you're in a position to demand who has the right to be in my apartment," Seokjin says icily.
"I thought we had something. I thought I was the only one!" Taehyung cries out exaggeratedly, hand raised to wipe away invisible tears.

"You need to leave," Jimin says snappishly, throwing down his blanket in a universal declaration to fight. Seokjin is torn between watching with glee, letting Taehyung receive his due (he’s still sour that he had been handcuffed to him) but also not wanting Jimin to get slapped with an assault charge. Why is morality such a heinous duty to uphold in this society?

Taehyung’s eyes slide from Jimin to Seokjin as though putting two and two together. A metaphorical light bulb pings above his head.

"Oh! Am I meeting the enigmatic honeybunch less than three three three?"

"Are you an idiot?" Seokjin rubs his nose bridge and sighs, "Jimin, it's okay. He's a detective who's taken a very strong personal interest in Euphoria. He's a pain but for the most part he's harmless." Taehyung all but beams at his stellar profile description. "Anyway... Park Jimin, Kim Taehyung. Kim Taehyung, Park Jimin. Jimin is a colleague of mine."

"How old are you?"

Jimin looks to Seokjin for help who gives him a raised shrug in return. "I'm... 25," he answers, regarding Taehyung warily, like he was a crocodile ready to lunge.

"Hey, we're the same age. Let's be friends, Jiminnie!"

Jimin looks rather alarmed but drained at the same time. Seokjin doesn't blame him. The detective is a handful even with a clear consciousness. Jimin cards his fingers through his hair before he sinks back into the couch, boneless. Seokjin snags the end of the blanket and settles it over him under the detective's hawk like gaze. The detective thrums with a sort of nervous energy, and call it petty, but Seokjin will not be the one to crack first.

"Do you want anything? I think I have tea."

"No you don't," Taehyung fires back. "You have, like, five bottles of sesame oil though, what's up with that?"
"...What did you think I would be hiding in my kitchen?"

Taehyung shrugs. "You'd be surprised. In one of my cases, a pistol was hidden in a cereal box."

"Well, that's killer." Before Taehyung has the opportunity to the weak kneejerk pun, Jimin surprisingly speaks up.

"Pistol?" Jimin's eyes widens, "What sort of things do you deal with?"

"Homicides, mostly." When Jimin looks a little green, Taehyung ploughs on, "But not exclusively. Anything unusual or physics-defying. You know, the odd lost person case, tracking down missing dogs, how to break into banks, why on earth District Eleven keeps disappearing on the 14th hour of every day - "

"You know, that's because of the light reflecting panels that hits it at the angle of Horus at the exact and every time."

"Oh, is it? I dropped out of high school. Mystery solved then," Taehyung shrugs.

"Really? How do you do your job then? Opelucid City is one of science and don't you specialise in bizarre happenings?"

"I consult heavily with the scientists at Opelucid Tech. Right now, I'm being engaged by a very charming kid. Eh, school wasn't for me. My kind of thinking didn't align with that system... That was made very clear." Taehyung's face darkens. "According to the endless stream of zeros and Fs, I am, by their assessment, stupid."

"Sorry," Seokjin says automatically. Opelucid City was one of academics. Unless you exceed, there wasn't much left for you. A degree was the key to lifelong security. That's why students worked themselves to the bone. The hand that grips the pen is caked with blood, their textbooks stained with litres of tears in concentrated disappointment and anyone that leaves the library at the God forbid reasonable hour of five p.m. is met with scornful mockeries of failure, failure, failure. How many were driven to despair? No wonder so many sought the comforting embrace of Euphoria. Once upon a time, he was one of them. That left a bitter taste on his tongue, and he wonders if a sound peace of mind is worth the trade-off. But Jimin, sandwiched between them, is a
reminder why this simply couldn't be condoned.

"Eh, I knew I wasn't. I can pick things up really quickly. So I told them to shove it for telling me lies and here I am today," he says, with a flourish of hands.

"That's admirable, stopping crime instead of causing it." The detective raises an eyebrow, bemused that Seokjin was capable of paying him a compliment. Only where it was due. Opelucid has a deep dark filthy secret that is a shadow of its shining accolade. The Underworld. Where no more dreams are harboured in Opelucid City. It’s more than just sinister... It's just sad. Of burnt out, promising students, of scientists who just didn't know where to draw the line, such brimming potential that the city no longer regards as their own. But at their core, they weren't evil. If you can find a trusted disgraced scientist who'll concoct you a cure to Venus' Graze that's half the price of athenadyx then you have no other choice.

- 

"It's what's right," Taehyung shrugs. "Anyway! How have you been?"

"... I've been good." Seokjin glares at him suspiciously.

Taehyung drops heavily onto the couch next to Jimin who shrinks immediately. "Well, since you mentioned tea, I'd like some now."

"Fine." Seokjin reaches for his phone to place a grocery order when Taehyung kicks it out of reach.

"Okay, what the hell -"

"Look at Jjangu, anyone could see that he's been neglected. Take him for a walk!"

"You -"

But then Taehyung is pushing him out of the apartment, slamming the door shut behind him. Well, the grocery store should have an aisle of rat poison, Seokjin grumbles. Still miffed, he makes the snap decision that it’d probably be quicker to indulge the detective’s whims rather than deny. Still, there’s a bitterness that makes itself home when he summons the elevator to his floor.
“I have been neglecting you haven’t I? Do you even remember how to walk?” Seokjin coos to Jjangu, preparing to step into the elevator, when he jerks to a sudden halt. “Oh! ... Hey!” Where he had been expecting empty space is the elevatorman, impeccably dressed as always.

“Seokjin-ssi! Thank goodness. How’s your friend?” the elevatorman exhales in one breath.

“He’s.... okay,” Seokjin says, still recovering from his unexpected appearance.

“That’s good.” The elevatorman sags against the wall, eyes closed.

“Uh.... well.... you don’t look good.”

The elevatorman’s eyes flutter like a butterfly’s wings before they open to reveal bloodshot eyes. “You haven’t left your apartment,” he says in an accusatory tone.

“...wait. Have you slept at all in a week?” Seokjin asks, hand jumping to his face in alarm.

“Heh. The hero must remain vigilant for enemy forces can slip in in a blink of an eye. A momentary lapse is all it takes to collapse an empire.” The elevatorman looks anything but heroic in his current state, where even a toddler could overpower him.

“Still! You’d do that for me?” Rather than feeling touched, Seokjin is on guard, surveying him through a thin guise of suspicion.

“I’d do that for anyone here! Remember to bring this up when evaluation arrives,” he says with a tired wink that looks more like a blink in his current condition.

“Jesus,” Seokjin says helplessly.

The coffee cup is trembling violently in the elevatorman’s grip, the stick of his patented Euphoria lollipops resting against the rim.

“You need to stop using Euphoria.” Seokjin hardly hears his own voice. The sound seems to echo
as though they were trapped within a chamber, each time it ricochets, it grows fainter and fainter.

“Why?” The elevatorman breaks out into a wide smile, stretched across his face as though by invisible hooks. “I’m so happy.” There’s never any use talking to anyone post-Euphoria. Blinded by their own bubble of manufactured happiness, the world is glimpsed through gold-tinted glasses. Seokjin knows, Seokjin knows, but just like before with Jimin, he will plead to insanity until his throat gives out.

Jjangu lets out a sharp bark after Seokjin’s grip on him grows too tight.

“Hey.... you’re still in sweatpants. Aren’t you supposed to be at work?” The elevatorman cocks his head to the side, to the extent that it’s perfectly perpendicular to his body. For a sickening moment, Seokjin wonders if it would just simply pop off.

“I’m taking some time off just to look over my friend.” It’s become instinctual for Seokjin to smile whenever he grows uncomfortable, the greatest weapon that his face can afford. The mirror smiles back at him. In the same vein that Jimin can’t tell the difference between genuine happiness anymore, are all his smiles authentic?

“You’re such a good friend Seokjin-ssi. You’re such an angel. You’re –”

“Stop.” Seokjin’s draws in a shaky breath. The elevator is suddenly too small. The acrid sickly sweet of Euphoria intermingling with espresso permeates the air, coating his tongue in an unpleasant fuzziness. But it’s the snarled smile fixed between the dimples that he had thought were so charmingly endearing that looms above him like a guillotine.

“I can sleep now, right? I did my job.” The elevatorman sounds almost childlike now, looking up at him with large, red eyes as though he was the adult figure he had to wheedle to obtain his personal desires.

“Yes, please sleep.” That’s the only thing Seokjin can say that will help.

“But the wicked don’t rest so I must keep on marching. Who knew I didn’t need sleep? Euphoria is the Nectar of the Gods.” His words slur into an incomprehensible mess, they’re merely sordid ramblings of the intoxicated. Yet, instead of flowing through one ear and out the other, they dance about Seokjin’s mind where they sting like vindictive hornets.
“No. It’s made by humans mixing a few choice chemicals in a vial.”

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“Our humans? Gods?” Seokjin’s heard this spiel before. Gods were only a concept, for a pyramid had to possess a pinnacle. But he’s had colleagues who were punch-drunk on their own grandeur, on their own brilliance that they were blinded from seeing the path before them. No one was omnipotent or invulnerable.

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Now even his home no longer remains a safe haven.

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He’s a fucking curse. All that’s next is for the detective to drop dead. The elevatorman whom always lightened his spirits, on top of that, was fantastic at his job. What did Seokjin give him in return? A horrific dependency on Euphoria. Hell would be too light a punishment. Euphoria did it. Euphoria took the elevatorman from him.

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“‘You’re right. A freak out at every break of routine won’t do.’

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“You’re right. A freak out at every break of routine won’t do.”
The outside air does little to soothe him, but the serenity does. If you asked any denizen of Opelucid City what their fitness regimen was, without fail they would respond with punching a clock. Unless you were struck down by an unforeseen illness (Prion Inc. *really* needs to consider their safety protocols) everyone was either at work or at school. Only the city never sleeps, people bustling about like ants; they almost crawl over the other in a desperate bid to get to their intended location as quickly as possible. Seokjin wasn’t exaggerating when he told Jimin he worked as hard as the sun.

But here in downtown Opelucid, only the elderly or toddlers are present. Serenity. Seokjin’s apartment is on a strip that is paradoxically bustling. Walking to the grocery store, he passes by a butcher, bakery and bookstore all crammed together. A café lies at around the bend, providing sweet relief from the mundanity of stocking one’s pantry for the week. Nestled beneath a monstrous tree that produces every fruit known to man that spawns inventive specials and coaxes feats of curious bravery from children as they sling across its boughs. Despite the absence of a leash, Jjangu stays close to him.

Ah yes. Another reason why his kitchen was shockingly bare. Reading the labels to ensure that no Euphoria was used in either the production or incorporated within was a tedious and frustrating task that gradually whittled away the hours. In just a few short years, Euphoria had consumed the city.

As he browses the racks, his mind drifts back to the couple back at his apartment. Jimin was meek in his listlessness but his mood oscillated unpredictably. Five days clean after three years. Taehyung could be brash, upfront and handled delicate situations about as well as a lion holding a mouse in its jaws, but Seokjin trusted that he wasn’t entirely insensitive. His very job required handling people’s emotions like tweezers in a game of Operation. One misstep was equivalent to a fatal electric shock to the system.

Done. He hopes his apartment wasn’t in ruins.

---

Cold fingers wrap around Taehyung’s bicep for a light squeeze. Taehyung stares at the hand for a moment before smiling bemusedly up at Jimin. “Yes, that's an arm.”

"Just making sure you're real," Jimin mumbles, averting his gaze. The only thing from Jimin that even emulates life is his bright hair. The contrast is jarring. You’d assume that the muscles in his
face were frozen for he doesn't portray any emotion. Taehyung knows exactly three people who bore the same characteristic, but the endeavour to bring it up demanded careful navigation.

"I thought I was imagining it, but are you hot? I'm dying here." Taehyung jumps up to find the thermostat. "Jesus. I know this autumn has been colder than most but thirty degrees is kind of pushing it."

"Seokjin-hyung adjusted it... for me," Jimin mutters incomprehensibly.

"Ah." Taehyung isn't known for beating around the bush. But he knows the damage that being forthright can bring - there's a scar on his thigh to show for it.

Surprisingly, it's Jimin that speaks first. “Do you really catch serial killers?” Trying very hard to talk to force his thoughts that are swimming in tar into words.

"Yep!" It wasn't uncommon for people to be curious about his career; he was the one and only in Opelucid City.

"You... You don't get scared?"

"Of who? The victims?” Jimin visibly finches. "Serial killers think they're God. Nope, they're every bit as human as we are. They think they're clever, feeding their sadistic desires. They think they can get away with it."

"You've seen the things they do... You’re not worried they'll come after you?"

"Aww. You should mind that heart, Jiminie, hurting over strangers already," Taehyung coos, but Jimin doesn't even react. It takes words twice the time to sink into his comprehension, more for him to form his thoughts, and yet more for them to leave his lips. All that energy sapped him of the ability to form emotional responses. “I can take care of myself.” Even the smirk gets understood through Jimin's swimming vision. Taehyung's frame is smaller, even smaller than the one forged from Jimin's starvation that he might have envied once upon a time.

Taehyung leaps to his feet, heading for the kitchen and pulling cups out of a drawer.
"...Have you been here often?"

"Nope! I've got a good memory," Taehyung grins, reaching for the pitcher of water,

"Did you always start with... them?"

"I had a thing for arson cases," Taehyung says conversationally, as though they were discussing the weather, placing the cup before him. “Drink. My forte is closed room murders.” At Jimin’s questioning look over the cup as he complies with a single sip before his throat decides to rebel, Taehyung smiles broadly, his arms open as though preparing to hug the universe. “In other words... a perfect murder. Well. They wish. A man is killed by asphyxiation in a room where the only point of exit or entry is locked from the inside. There are no secret tunnels nor rooms. How could the phantom killer have escaped?”

"Perhaps he had... those light panels from District Eleven,” Jimin jibes weakly.

"Well now I know!"

"Are there a lot.... of murders like... that in Opelucid City?" Jimin frowns.

"You'd be surprised. And the answer to the above is that it was helium leaked through the air vents."

"So how did you become a detective?"

"I started with cold cases. There are no expectations. You can take as long as you want and there's no concept of failure.”

Bzzt.

"...I'm either imagining... things or that's your phone."

"Not mine.” Taehyung strides over to Seokjin's that he had kicked from him earlier. His nose
“Scrunches up. “It's that honeybunch<333 again, god they're persistent.” Taehyung settles heavily next to him, whipping out his phone with a cord. "Aha! There!"

"Uh..."

"You didn't see anything," Taehyung insists, now scrolling through Seokjin's phone.

"What... are you... looking for?"

"The proverbial needle in a haystack. You see, in this modern age, one's phone is their life. Their digital heart, their digital brain... And apparently in the case of Seokjin-hyung, his digital stomach," he says, scrolling through an endless eight of food photos. Jimin looks away immediately, feeling queasy. "Forty-seven contacts and his most frequent correspondence is with them... Mother was texted three weeks ago for cancelled plans. Oh... He's one of those people."

"Those people?"

"The ones where their partner becomes their entire universe," Taehyung scoffs.

"Ahh... It doesn't seem like it..." Jimin frowns.

"Again, mind that heart of yours," Taehyung comments. "Look at this. This is sickening. I can barely read through this -"

"You're not supposed to go... through someone's private texts!" Jimin flushes, turning away from the increasingly lovey-dovey script that Seokjin had adopted.

"But this is horrifying; dreaming of you.” Taehyung pulls back his lips to make a kissy face, to which Jimin recoils. “Seokjin-hyung responded with; I'll keep your dreams sweet and the nightmares away.” Taehyung broke off with a little scream.

“Oh my god, stop, stop,” Jimin demands, jamming his hands over his ears.
“Woah, I just had a flash of the future. Imagine the train wreck of a breakup that would arise out of this relationship. I want to be there. With popcorn. Man, they have each other wrapped around their finger, and God, okay, look, if I had looks of a god like Seokjin-hyung I'd be sending selfies to my significant other to remind them how much of a catch I am every second too, but this is a bit excessive and... huh?” Taehyung's face goes blank.

"Did it just shut down?” Jimin notes, startled. “What did you do?” Then he winces, grabbing his head with a moan.

"I didn't do anything!"

"You hacked into his phone!"

"Apart from that!” Taehyung traces the screen with a finger, thinking hard. "I need to X-ray this."

"What? Why?"

"To check if there's some mechanism that caused that."

"Again, you hacked into his phone."

"I could hack into yours with the same method and nothing would happen. So unless this is really old, it's far more likely that is the case. And since you're going to demand why, what kind of person would install a self-destruct into their phones, hmm? So Jimin, tell me a bit about yourself.” Taehyung changes tack at the speed of light.

Jimin blinks several times, wondering if he heard correctly. "I -"

"Ah you know what? Why bother asking questions out loud when Google exists? Oh wow! Is that your YouTube channel? Damn you got some smooth moves. Look at you go. Woah. Are you still packing that much muscle -"

"Stop."
For the first time, Jimin looks present. Right now, he was livid. Okay, Taehyung may have just crossed a line a little bit.

"You have no right to do that. You're a stranger to me." Jimin's emotionless flatline only serves to make him ever more so formidable.

"I'm sorry," Taehyung says immediately. For someone still within the walls of withdrawal, Jimin was intriguingly bright. It wasn't that he saw killers everywhere, it was that they could be anywhere so he treated everyone like one. He should dial back the hacking, not without the backing of circumstantial evidence anyway. Dr Jeon and Kim Seokjin may have had it coming but Park Jimin surely didn't. "So... how long have you been off Euphoria?"

"How did you know?" Jimin's voice is flat. Taehyung knows that part of it is due to it being the only emotions he can express after being played mercilessly like a fiddle.

"I know the signs."

"Five days."

"That's incredible."

The eyes that scrutinise him from the barricade of the blanket are blank.

"If you can be without it for five, you can last eternity right?"

Jimin doesn't grace him with a response, eyes falling shut. Yeah, he deserved that. He wonders what Pokemon exists in downtown Opelucid and whether it's better than the hellhole that is his apartment.

Is it supposed to be this quiet? There's not even a foil of a ticking clock. It feels... fragile. Taehyung remembers his original objective. Kim Seokjin. He's gleaned all that he can from his immaculate apartment. Personal items were purposefully removed to confuse people like him. No one, no matter how vain, kept a photographic shrine to themselves. The few books that graced the shelf, held in place by a Super Star bookend, only served decorative purpose, judging by the thin layer of
dust on them. A rule broken since one of them was now lying on the coffee table, a fine crease along the spine. The clothes Jimin are wearing are Seokjin's but the ones in the spare room were someone else's. Honeybunch<333 perhaps? It had been unoccupied for some time. If they were trying to keep the flames of a long distance relationship alive, it may explain the vomit-inducing conversation they were forced to uphold. Did he manage to pull something right from under Taehyung's nose? In the heart of the enemy on a day to day basis, no less? That's impressive.

"Hey - "

The door swings open.

What luck.

"Hey, Jjangu." Taehyung scoops him into his arms, pressing his face into his fur. “You know, I have a dog. They should meet.”

"Are you trying to get in my good graces through my dog?"

"Oh damn. Saw right through me," Taehyung deadpans.

Seokjin gives a humourless chuckle, putting the groceries away in the time for the kettle to boil. "Well, I've checked Jjangu's schedule, and he's free every day of every year of his life."

"And when are you free?"

"Oh, uhm..." Taehyung doesn't miss the way Seokjin's eyes finds Jimin's. Taehyung knows guilt when he sees it and that was a fucking guilty look.

"Your phone turned off," Jimin reports, ever so dutiful.

"Oh yeah, it's been doing that since I dropped it in the toilet."

Taehyung knows it's disgust that crosses his face, but Jimin's expression is still a flat neutral.
"Who touched it anyway?" Seokjin speaks sweetly but menace laces his words.

Taehyung grinds his teeth together. Solidarity in the face of blame. He hasn’t known Jimin for long, but he knows that he would die for him. If Seokjin thinks he can intimidate him into spilling his guts, he's got another thing coming. He's been bound to a chair, held at gunpoint and nearly drowned but held strong and now he sends his torturer flowers in prison. Seokjin will have to pry it from his cold dead lips.

"It was Taehyung." Jimin's voice is still airy, faint like the caress of butterfly wings. But the conviction rings true.

"Traitor," Taehyung gasps in shock. Clearly, Jimin didn’t think the same.

“Of course it wasn’t you, Jiminnie,” Seokjin coos. Realisation hits Taehyung like a truck. He has no allies here.

As Seokjin advances on him with an ominous expression that promises pain, he blurts out, “You and your boyfriend are disgusting together, by the way.”

“Are you an idiot?” Jimin asks, mirroring Seokjin earlier.

“What? I’m already going to hell. May as well sin enough to get a throne down there and be comfy. Wait! The kettle is done! At least give provide me with your hospitality before you kill me," Taehyung begs.

It shouldn't be smugness, but that's what radiates from Jimin in droves.

"If you're interested... I can hook you up with some people I know."

"No."

"No! No! Not like that! As you know, my focus has been Euphoria for a while. Because of that, I
know a few people. Not many. People like you who are trying to stay clean. They meet up every fortnight; that’ll be tonight. I can give you the address and their numbers. You don't need to of course, but I've found that overcoming adversity with people in a similar situation has a bolstering effect. You don't need to talk or anything, you can just listen if it's too difficult," Taehyung says extremely fast.

"I'll go," Jimin says quietly.

"You will?" Taehyung positively beams, the corner of Jimin's mouth may have lifted into just the barest hint of a smile. "Where's your phone?"

"Will you come?" Jimin asks imploringly.

Seokjin nods. "Of course."

--

One of us, their eyes said.

Three people out of Opelucid's entire populace struggling to stay clean.

They speak with a sweet familiarity, virtually friends bonded for life. But Jimin supposes, denying the demon his victory qualifies. They keep glancing at him hopefully but he keeps his gaze down, twisting and untwisting his fingers together obsessively. Seokjin is outside, waiting for the indicator that he can't handle this to whisk him away. He can't find his voice.

One by one, they stand up. Their smiles are small. Only as wide as their mouth allows and not forcibly stretched across their faces. They can smile? Will he? For him, they relive their horrors. But the only thing they trigger is the flood of saliva into his mouth every time Euphoria is mentioned.

He wishes he had Euphoria.
They did too. None of them are the definition of better. They survive in a state of okay. What is it he wants? Support? Knowing that he has kindred souls?

This is the furthest into knowing that he has a problem. They're a distant memory now, but he remembers being the centre of numerous interventions staged by friends. He doesn’t know what he wants. But what he does know is that he doesn’t want to feel like this forever. So if he has to walk through a thorn-lined path to do so, so be it.

He stands.

Immediately, they smile gently up at him. Their smiles enhance their features, melt them into a veneer of soft sweetness. Not like his. Where it mars him into something unrecognisable.

Euphoria didn't give him happiness. But it took away his pain. Now, everything is on fire. Euphoria possessed his body and became Park Jimin. For three years, Park Jimin didn't exist. It was Euphoria walking. It worked its way into his organs, and called them its own. Now it's left, leaving the tatters of his body left to work out. What is he now?

"I'm Park Jimin."

They look at him like he had done something heroic.

He scrambles to sit, but instead of shrinking, he can meet their eyes.

Seokjin was convinced that Jimin was his devil.

Jimin was too late to realise that Seokjin was his.

Off Euphoria?
Surprisingly, I managed to cough out something very heavy on character interaction and world building with minimal plot. Who knew? A few things to note. I still endeavour to subvert particular tropes. For instance, the existence of the Underworld which is not inherently a source of evil in my story. Say if a photo of you was submitted with you within its maw in court, it wouldn't be seen as damage to your character, merely provide you with an alibi.

I also wanted to explore the realm of alternate forms of intelligence. Particularly lateral or deductive thinking. Yes, the city prides itself on academics but what happens to everyone else that doesn't fall within that bracket? It's very easy to give into despair with that sort of ingrained societal thinking. But hey, all that goes away for $4.95 doesn't it?

End Notes

This is the tumblr for all my kpop spam, for any ask you want to shoot my way, any troubling plot holes that you may spot haha or easter eggs that you unearth.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!