

on the red couch



This is a work of pure fiction.

This is not real. In any way shape or form.

fic·tion (n.)

1. a. *An imaginative creation or a pretense that does not represent actuality but has been invented.*

b. *The act of inventing such a creation or pretense.*

2. a. *A literary work whose content is produced by the imagination and is not necessarily based on fact.*

b. *The category of literature comprising works of this kind, including novels and short stories.*

Just so we're all clear :::grins:::

Note from Wedspawn

God, thank you. All of you. Thank you. I know... it's old but I can't say it enough or strong enough. Thank you for trusting me with your YunJae and Yoosu and God, thank you for taking Min7en into your heart and letting our baby have a secret, smexy love. Thank you for letting me pour angst into your lives and hopefully I've given you enough sweetness and laughter to balance out a little bit of it.

Mostly, I wanted to say that I love you. I have been given so many friends over the past few years. People who have stumbled across of these stories and stayed. I can't say I love you enough as well. I think it's like a star that I touch and it burns away the silly specks of words that I toss at it because really, it's that consuming.

You've been patient with me over these four books to let me build a world and tear it apart and then rebuild it again. If you will let me, I will continue to build but in smaller doses... much smaller doses and I hope you find it in your hearts to welcome the boys back into your world. Well, my version of the boys because I know you will never misplace the real ones that you hold so dear.

They are brilliant and talented young men whose faces I've taken and created characters for. While this is fiction... purely fiction... I hope it has given some enjoyment for you and has perhaps introduced you to some new friends as well. I know I cherish every one that I've made since So Much Mine first went up.

Once again, thank you... those are such little words for such a large feeling I have for all of you.

Saranghae. I love you...and domo.

One

Rage drove Jaejoong out into the rain, its hot liquid heat burning up from his belly and into his flesh. It bubbled with a fury so great he feared touching his face in case he found blisters rising on his skin yet the rain falling from Tokyo's dirty night sky did nothing to ease the sick anger coming from his soul.

Japan's dirt fouled his tongue, the grit of the enormous city sitting in the back of his throat with each swallow he took. The air stank, curdled sour with the stench of sweat and unfamiliar rotting foods. Even in the calming coolness of the dark, Tokyo's foreign babble of sounds and smells confused Jae's senses. With ever turn he took, he was reminded of his otherness.

The language was confusing, a harsh slithering of sounds so very different from the burbled softness he heard in his mind. The people were cold, separating themselves with an avoidance of the eyes and the sliding of their faces to the side. They lived in pockets of solitude, bleeding nothing of themselves into the air around them and Jae's hands itched with the need to grab someone... anyone... and shake them until they were forced to look at him.

He'd do anything to stop the loud silence around him.

Even if he filled it with his own sobbing, Jaejoong longed to find something to hold onto in the thunderous nothing he was drowning in.

Shoving his fists into the pockets of his torn jeans, he dropped his head and slogged through the rain, finding awnings and overhangs to duck under when he could. The district the members were placed in was close to the entertainment district making the commutes to various studios and interviews relatively short but the residential area was poor, filled with a transient population with no connection to the area other than work or play. Love hotels jostled shoulders with small convenience stores, sometimes sharing a doorway between them so customers could grab condoms or alcohol before renting a small sex-scented room for an hour or two.

Slinky music leaked from a cracked open door, catching Jaejoong's ear. The thump-thump-thump mimicked the angry beat of his heart, throbbing along his rage until the rhythm fell into step with his ire, finding a groove and hooking Jae in. The sounds seduced him, blending the odd cadence of Japanese with a brain-catching beat. Stepping towards the door, he was stopped by a meaty hand on his shoulder, thick sausage-like fingers gripping him tightly.

Nearly double in width as Jaejoong, the man dominated the front door to the club, a black t-shirt shining with glow-in-the-dark kanji stretched over his full chest and belly. Above them, a neon sign blinked with the same kanji, a flickering butterfly winging from one side to the other in a stream of pink and purple. Men stepped around them, their long stares at Jaejoong's body swallowed up by a red velvet curtain hanging across the club's entrance.

The man babbled something at him but Jae only caught every other word at best. Shaking his head in confusion, the singer dug money out from his pocket, offering it to the bouncer, wondering if he had enough for the club's cover charge.

"Not understand," Jae struggled to find the words he'd learned, his Japanese suffering under the tightness of his soul. "Money? You need money?"

"*Baka*," The man growled, shaking Jae's shoulder hard enough to rattle the singer's teeth.

Jae frowned. He knew that word. It was used often enough by the crew shooting their photos, usually aimed at him. Cocking his head, the singer almost turned away, giving up on finding solace in the middle of the city's crying cold but the bouncer gave him another shake.

"Men here. Only," The man pointed to the kanji Jae couldn't read. "*Hattenba*. You like?"

"I just want to...dance," Jae said in Korean, gritting his teeth, looking for what he needed... what he wanted to say. "*Shiga*. I don't care."

The man's bulk gave way, leaving Jaejoong barely enough room to squeeze past him. A woman sitting in the shadows gave Jae the barest of glances as she took a few yen from his hand, stamping the back of his palm with a woodcut tanuki press. The ink shimmered, glistening under the erratically glowing black light bulb hanging near the club's curtained entrance. Shaking off drops of rain from his hair, Jaejoong pushed past the velvet curtain and let the music and lights hit him full in the face.

The floor was filled the men, slender and fat together, rolling into a tsunami of bodies carried forward by the loud techno music cutting away any hope of conversation. Beating with a furious tempo, the dance music throbbed and dipped, moaning with exasperation with a thoughtless frenzy Jae envied. It moved and writhed, taking the dancers with it. Unlike the clubs he'd known in Korea, the main dance floor was brightly lit, illuminating various men's faces as they sweated and lost themselves in the pursuit of seduction.

A few feet into the club and Japan's cold mask fell away, leaving the raw deviance of its true face for Jaejoong to see. On the wall nearby, a man old enough to be Jaejoong's father pushed a young man up, his large hands lifting the younger man's shirt up and his mouth lowering to suckle at the turgid nipple emerging into view. The young man's head was turned, his eyes screwed tight either in ecstasy or in denial that he was allowing another man to touch him. Another man smoked a cigarette as he watched the pair, his eyes shifting away from the scene only long enough to roam an assessing eye over Jae's long legs and pretty face. When Jaejoong walked past them, his attention drifted back to the couple, smoke wrapping around his craggy face and lifting into the high ceiling above.

The decadence and desperation were recognizable, as familiar to Jaejoong as his own oddly shaped features. Furtive looks either dripping with guilt or lust were cast his way, fishing lines hoping to lure a warm body or wet mouth to a stiff shaft hidden only behind unbuttoned pants. He had no illusions that the men surrounding him were looking for anything other than a hot, moist tightness. Many would go home to a wife or the echoing vacant confines of an apartment, satiated after divulging their perversions in the uneasy safety of a dim dance club.

Loud with music and razor sharp with desire, the language spoken behind the curtain didn't matter. It was the same club, no matter where it was hidden or the faces of the men kissing in the dark. It reeked of shame and self-loathing, a pungent stink Jae knew he could never truly wash off of his skin.

If he were going to be drowning in anonymity, Jae thought, he would revel in its pleasures as well as its pain. And if he were lucky enough, he could forget ... even just for a moment, the ember of anguish that drove him into the rain and onto Tokyo's wicked streets.

And it was everything Jaejoong needed at the moment.

An unseen hand followed the line of his thigh, curving about until fingers rested on the inseam of his jeans. They were skilled fingers, stroking thoughtfully and carefully as if testing out the man wearing them. Glancing up through his lashes, Jaejoong found himself staring up at a man slightly older than he was, possibly even a decade or so unless the Tokyo streets left a more jaded mark than the gutters of Seoul.

The man touching him resisted the crowd's push, blocking the tide from sweeping Jae from his feet. The hand on the singer's leg remained as Jae stepped forward, placing himself on the edge of the concrete area the club used as its dance floor. Meeting the man's black eyes, Jae let himself fall into the music, not hearing the words as lyrics but as another instrument, unknown sounds and phrases providing a backbeat to the jangle and bass river flowing from the club's sound system. The lights changed, spangling red over

his face and shoulders and the man's hand followed the beams, tracing the hard line of Jae's collarbone under his shirt.

Ignoring the brushing fingers, Jaejoong closed his eyes, pushing away the thoughts of his life. Yunho's anger and tightness melted although the sourness of his lover's words remained. Could he even call Yunho his lover, Jae asked himself, pulling back from the numbness for a moment, listening to the argument in his mind.

They'd fought, again. Hammering at one another's weak points until Jae felt like breaking under the fists of Yunho's words. Japan was different, the manager said. You will be different, someone else said. Any hint of his love for Yunho would cauterize any hope the members of making it in Japan. You will be distant, he'd been told. You'll be apart from Yunho and there will not be a hint of anything between you but the respect of one member for another.

The crowd swallowed the first man but another took his place, crowding in tight against Jae's lithe body. Ignoring the sour curdle in his stomach, Jaejoong closed his eyes, losing himself in the rush of music as it poured over him. A rush of sick burned his throat, working up with green sharp claws to his mouth. The driving thump pushed into him, filling long untouched places. It teased him, tendrils of want uncurling from his belly. Jaejoong wanted to believe the hand on his stomach was his lover, that the fingers caressing the back of his neck belonged to a sloe-eyed Korean who'd promised him forever.

Forever is only as long as lust, a voice from the past whispered.

Back then, Jaejoong had been naïve enough to believe that love would conquer anything.

Now he was not so sure.

He missed...everything. Yunho's laughter and kisses. The bed they would hide in and lay against one another, quiet so they could hear one another breathe. Everything that was wiped away in the rush of Tokyo's activities, including the security that he'd had in looking out into an audience to see a sea of red lights filling in the dark emptiness he feared he'd face every time he stepped out onto a stage.

There were echoes in his darkness and Jaejoong reached into the black, trying to find anyone... anything... familiar to hold onto but there was no one...nothing ...there.

Fingernails scratched his arm, cutting his skin. The brushed slice was accidental, a common enough thing in a dance floor full of people but the sting was different now, tantalizing and seductive. The pain whispered away, leaving nothing behind but a craving. Jaejoong ran his own nails up the length of his bare skin but they were too blunt to do more than kiss a few welts along the porcelain surface.

"Are you scratching an itch or do you want someone to hurt you?" A voice whispered, hands cupping Jae's ass from behind. "Are you looking for someone to hurt you, pretty?"

Hearing Korean was a surprise but welcome. Leaning his head back, Jae pressed into the warmth behind him, letting hands tug him close and long arms wrap around his chest. He slithered to the beat, feeling the man holding him fall into the low sway of their hips. Yunho never danced with him like this, never losing himself in the primal push of bodies. It was always precision and skill with the group's leader and Jae wished he could sometimes take away the perfection and show Yunho the sensuality of bodies touching and moving under the lights and drums.

This man...the hands and hips pressing into him... moved nothing like Yunho. He rocked his hips to follow the beat but his body flowed up and around Jaejoong, an enticing, warm sensual dancer caught in the moment. His tongue flicked once then twice, dabbing a wet on the hoop through his tragus.

"Let's find someplace else to be," He nearly shouted Jaejoong's ear, his Korean a throaty growl raking through Jae's desire. "There are too many people in here for me to do what I want to do with you. Okay?"

"Okay." Jae whispered, knowing the man couldn't hear him but the nod he gave was clear enough. Wrapping his hand around the other man's fingers, the singer followed numbly as he was led back outside into the wet night.

Two

“Get out.”

Yunho’s broad frame filled the doorway to Yoochun’s room. He stood, face set into a dark glower as Junsu untangled himself from the baritone’s legs. Sprawled on the bed, it took mere seconds for the couple to separate, much longer than Yunho wanted to wait. Crossing the room in a few long strides, the leader grabbed Junsu’s arm and lifted him off of the mattress, pulling Yoochun’s comforter with him.

He was fierce, a commanding presence in their lives but Yoochun didn’t seem to pay the older man any mind. If anything, he returned Yunho’s glare with one of his own, steadfastly refusing to dip his head down in humility. In the dimly lit room he shared with Jaejoong, Yoochun found comfort in making Yunho uneasy, pushing back at the stubborn man’s imperious directives.

“I said, get out,” Yunho growled, yanking Junsu up further. The younger man yelped and jerked to a stop, his other arm held captive by his lover’s hand.

“You don’t need to go anywhere, Susu-ah,” Yoochun tilted his chin up, staring defiantly back at his leader. “Hyung doesn’t tell you where you can go or stay. And this isn’t his room.”

“One of you needs to let me go,” Junsu gasped, being dragged forward then jerked back when Yoochun refused to give way to Yunho’s growling. “I’m not a pair of take-out chopsticks...”

“I want to talk to dongsaeng alone.” He let go of Junsu, hard and unmoving when the younger man tumbled back onto Yoochun’s legs.

“Funny how I’m Yoochun when things are going well for you and Jae but when you’re angry at him, I’m dongsaeng again,” The baritone said with a cocky smirk, wrapping his arms around his lover’s belly. The loose hug tugged Junsu’s shirt up, a slender line of tanned stomach a golden slash under Yoochun’s paler skin. “Is that what you try to do to Jaejoong when he doesn’t think what you want him to think? Try to make him smaller?”

“I think I hear Changmin calling me.” Junsu extracted himself from Yoochun’s embrace, uncomfortable at the brewing tempest. No amount of peace-making or teasing would take away the thunderous tones rumbling between the two men and he’d rather not be a victim of any battle the two had over Jaejoong. “Chunnie-ah, come find me when you’re done. We can go to the ramen shop and get something warm to eat. The rain and your open window are making me cold.”

“I told you I’d warm you up, baby.” Chun grinned, unable to stop himself from leering at Junsu’s round ass as the other stood up. Slapping his lover’s rump, he dodged a quick slash of Junsu’s hand at his head, falling back into the pillows.

“Baby,” Junsu repeated the English word back. “Try not to get your teeth punched in. Hard to eat tempura ramen if you can’t chew.”

“I’m not going to be the one having to chew around my swollen tongue,” Yoochun muttered but he kept a wary eye on the simmering leader. Yunho’s eyes were narrow slits, hard glittering agate in a cold stony face. Chun waited to speak until Junsu closed the door behind him, leaving them alone with their anger. “What do you want to talk about, eh? Maybe that bruise on Jae’s shoulder? Or the limp he’s been trying to hide?”

“I didn’t... I didn’t know he was there when I turned around too fast,” Yunho took a deep breath, trying to steady the rise in his blood. Casting his head back, he stared at the ceiling until the cold air from the open window froze his lungs. Dropping his gaze down, he asked, “Did he tell you I hit him?”

“No, he said he got in your way on the staircase but I figured you were probably yelling at him and turned around to yell some more, hitting him,” Yoochun admitted flatly. Sitting up, he folded his legs under him, leaning back on his hands. His own anger tightened his long fingers into the bed’s rumpled sheets, fisting the cotton in his curved palms. “But then maybe that’s Joongie’s way of saying he forgives you anything...even for beating him when he tells you you’ve hurt his feelings.”

“I. Do. Not. Beat. Jaejoong.” Grabbing Yoochun’s shoulders, Yunho slammed the smaller man back into the wall, puffing the curtains out with the force of the shove. “He fell. I tried to catch him...”

“Hurting me while saying something like that isn’t helping you, hyung,” Chunnie spat out the honorific, smearing away any respect the word might have held. “How many times have you pushed and shouted at him? Before you slept with him, it was worse but now, it’s almost the same. Let go of me, hyung. I’m not Jaejoong.”

“He’s angry at me because we can’t be...like we are at home,” Yunho released the younger man, working the tension from his grip. “Joongie-ah was the one who insisted we stay behind doors before and now he chafes at being told we can’t hold hands or touch. It’s not my fault that the company is stricter here but we all agreed that we would do our best. I am doing what I can.”

“And it’s not his fault you cannot touch him here. Japan loves to see men doing fan service but no, Kimura-san thinks that we cannot be as open with ourselves as we are at home but you still take it out on him instead of trying to push back at the people who tell us to stay hidden. Whose fault is that, Yunho?” Yoochun flung his acidic thoughts at Yunho with a splash of heat. “Why do you take out your anger on him? Because you’re not man enough to speak up for him? You don’t love him enough to say no when someone tries to shove him aside? He said no for you...looked to you to support him in this and what do you do? You agree with Kimura-san without even a fight. If that’s how you love someone, Yunho, then don’t start crying when you find yourself alone.”

“Like how you spoke up for Junsu?” Yunho tossed back, cocking his head when Yoochun rose up off the bed. “I noticed you didn’t say anything to Kimura-manager. Is Junsu okay with you sleeping with Jaejoong?”

“How could I say something when our *leader* folds over like a piece of origami paper?” He asked. “Junsu understood how you feel. Susu-ah always understands because he worships you. You are his surrogate Junho, the older brother who is more like a lover than I am sometimes and unlike you, I am not jealous about my lover’s brother.”

“You say I’m jealous of you?” Yunho spat. “Jealous of what? That he speaks to you when he slides past me? That I come home after getting food to find the two of you on the couch like lovers hidden from the moon? Is that what this is about, Yoochun? Maybe you’re tired of Junsu and decided that your soulmate brother is the one you want instead?”

Fighting was not something Yoochun had much experience with. Of the five members, only Jaejoong and Yunho possessed any skill with their hands, the leader’s honed skill from years of martial arts while Jae’s quick and dirty jabs were born of the gutter he’s scrambled from but Yoochun gave it his best. The hit was hard, and he’d forgotten the basics of how to hold his fist yet the crunch of Yunho’s lip shoved up against his front teeth was more than satisfying, even with the sting across Chun’s knuckles.

Yoochun tasted blood before he could finish his smile. Yunho’s clenched hand connected solidly with his jaw, his molars biting into the meat of his cheek. Ducking his head down, Yoochun launched himself at the older man, sending them into Jaejoong’s bed. Flailing, Yoochun tried to get another strike at the leader but Yunho’s limber body and elastic grace made hitting him too difficult.

“Shit!” Yunho swore, hissing and yelping loudly. “Did you just... bite me?”

“Fucker,” Yoochun growled, rolling off of the bed to get away from Yunho’s long reach. Bouncing on the balls of his feet, he held his fists up, preparing for Yunho to hit him. “Come on then.”

“You bit me!” Yunho lifted his shirt, staring at the half moon indents on his side. “What are you? A girl? My sister bites!”

“Why are you fighting?” Changmin interrupted from the open door. “And what are you doing on hyung’s bed?”

“Go away, monkey.” Yoochun said in English as he curled his lip at Yunho. “Precious Leader and I are talking.”

“*Maknae*,” Min corrected Yoochun absently. “Your Korean is getting worse the more Japanese you learn and your English is horrible.”

“He’s right, Min. You shouldn’t be here,” Yunho said, sitting up. Wiping at his mouth with the back of his hand, he winced at the smear of blood on his skin.

“I thought the days of fighting over Jaejoong were over,” The youngest of their group asked as he turned on the overhead lights. “Ah, look, your mouths are red like the old-style geisha. Wait, that was black, yes? So much to remember.”

“Yunho is having problems being a man.” Yoochun snagged a towel from a hook on the wall. Dabbing at his mouth, he cleared his tongue of blood, spitting a splatter of red into the fabric.

“Me?” Yunho asked incredulously. “Who bit?”

“Who can’t stick up for the person he’s supposed to love?”

“At least my lover isn’t looking for someone to be his brother.” Yunho shot back.

“Better than my lover looking for someone to be his sister,” Yoochun replied. “Maybe that’s where Joongie-ah is. Looking for a real girl instead of the misshapen one he got instead. Tired of being on top but too scared to let Joongie put it into you?”

Min debated separating the older members as they tussled again but as he contemplated how to pull apart the two stronger men, Yoochun hit his head on the end table and let loose a howl that brought Junsu to the door.

“Aish, they’re still fighting.” Junsu grimaced, stopped from entering the room by Min’s hand on his stomach. “Minnie-ah, I have to stop them.”

“No, they’ll either stop themselves or have to explain to the stylist about the bruises on their face for Monday’s photoshoot.” Min grinned when Yunho stopped short, one fist clenched into Yoochun’s shirt as he held the other up to get in a good punch. “Better, ne?”

“Ah, Chunnie.” Junsu winced at the dribble of blood on his lover’s face. “Why do you fight?”

“Because he’s an ass,” Yoochun answered. “What’s that word in Japanese? Min! What’s that word?”

“*Roba*. But that’s probably not the one you want,” Min sighed. “It means donkey. Maybe *dokyun*? Dumbass?”

“That works. *Dokyun*.” The baritone extracted his shirt from Yunho’s grip, pushing the older man away. Standing up, he hissed when Junsu grabbed him by the chin to inspect his face. “Susu-ah, don’t. It hurts. His fists are harder than his head. I think I swallowed a tooth.”

“What are you fighting about?” Min asked again, putting himself between the older men.

“You were right. They’re fighting over Jaejoong,” Junsu said quickly, too busy inspecting the damage to Yoochun’s mouth to see the poisonous looks he got from the brawling members. Yoochun jabbed a stiff finger into his boyfriend’s ribs. “What? It’s true. You’re mad at him because he wouldn’t tell Kimura-manager that he and Jaejoong belong in together in one room and he’s mad at you because Jaejoong cuddles with you when he’s upset. Hyung gets jealous and you get... defensive.”

“It’s true,” Min agreed when Yunho opened his mouth to protest. “You do get jealous.”

“It would be easier if you didn’t.” Junsu shrugged. “I’m not jealous of Chunnie and hyung.”

“That’s because you’re not insecure,” Yoochun said. “The only one more insecure than Jaejoong is Yunho.”

“Get out before he starts hitting you again,” Changmin said, shoving at Yoochun’s shoulder. “Let me talk to hyung.”

“Wait, this is my room!” He protested as Junsu led him out. “Why am I getting kicked out of my own room?”

“Because I am hungry and you need to wash the blood out of your mouth,” Junsu complained. “The clubs get out soon and if we don’t go now, the ramen shop will be busy. I want to eat now.”

“You’d think Junsu and I were brothers,” Min laughed as he closed the door. “These days, he’s hungrier than me.”

Yunho flopped down onto Jaejoong’s bed, smiling despite himself. The singer couldn’t resist surrounding himself with soft pillows, a star field of bright colours against black sheets. Pulling a deep crimson cushion from the pile, Yunho held it up to his face, inhaling his lover’s green tea scent. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d woken up with the smell of Jaejoong on his body or the feel of the bright-eyed singer’s mouth on his sex, his skilled tongue circling under his shaft and playing with the sensitive spot at the tip. He closed his eyes against the wet forming on his lashes, refusing to let Min see him shed any tears.

The room was filled with items that should be near his own things. Stacks of CDs piled up on a table, Jae’s itchy fingers liberating them from the others’ areas. If he wasn’t mistaken, that was his shirt draped over the back of a chair but Yunho didn’t mind, not if it meant something he owned was wrapped around his lover’s body.

“It’s okay to cry, hyung,” Min sat down next to the other man, tucking his legs up. “Even in front of me.”

“No, it’s not.” Yunho shook his head.

“You’ll cry in front of Jaejoong but not me?” Changmin sighed. “It’s not fair that you treat me like I’m as bubble headed as Junsu. I might be the youngest in body but I’m not the baby. We know you and Jaejoong are fighting. It’s hard not to notice the cold when you fight. It’s like we all become penguins and we have to watch where we step or we’ll slip into the freezing waters.”

“I’m sorry for that, Min,” Yunho apologized, rubbing his face with Jaejoong’s pillow. “I am.”

“At least this time, you’ve not stolen Jaejoong’s mattress,” Min said, glancing over at his leader with a sly look. “Although I think you’re going to take that pillow with you and hide it under your sheets, no?”

“Probably,” Yunho laughed despite himself. “I came in here to ask Yoochun if he knew where Jaejoong went but... things become complicated. I get angry without even knowing why. I feel my stomach give up its juices and I taste the sour in my throat when I think of Jae’s bed without me in it. It wasn’t that long ago, you know, that I couldn’t imagine being with a man and now, I can’t imagine my life without him. It hurts, Changmin, to be without him.”

“It’s like trying to breathe the ocean,” Min agreed. “Air and water both have oxygen them but we can’t pull anything into use but the taste of our own tears.”

“Only you could make love science, mankae,” Yunho laughed. “I pity the woman who falls in love with you. She’ll spent half her time trying to make sense out of your thoughts.”

“Some people stay up late just to hear my thoughts, hyung,” Min smirked, ducking his head before Yunho could see the slow, wicked smile on his face. “But this isn’t about me. It is for you and Jaejoong to straighten out. Why didn’t you say something to Kimura-san when he told us where we were sleeping? We worked so hard to gain some freedom and now we are back to being trainees again. Sharing a room with you and Junsu isn’t bad but I’d rather be on my own. You mumble in your sleep about being alone and Junsu sings in his. I might as well sleep in the living room for all the rest I’m getting.”

“If we fail here, in Japan, then the company has reason to split us apart,” Yunho said softly. His stomach twisted as he heard himself speak his fears. “What will become of us then? We’re bound to the

company so they can use us in whatever way they want. The three of them... Jaejoong, Yoochun and Junsu... they are singers and musicians that are strong enough to do solo work but you and I, what of us? What would become of us? And how would Jaejoong and I survive working apart when we can't even survive sleeping a few doors away?"

"I think that we will always be strong enough to be family," Min nodded assuredly. "No matter what happens, have we not always said that five minus one equals nothing? Don't you feel that in your soul?"

"I do. I wonder sometimes if Jaejoong does."

"Jaejoong would die for you. He's already proven that he would live for you." At Yunho's silent nod, Min continued. "If you can't trust him to love you if the company splits us apart, how can you trust that he loves you at all? And if you fear that we're going to be apart, shouldn't you fight for whatever second you have with him now?"

Yunho's fingers touched something oddly textured under the pile of cushions. Curious, he dug around a bit and swallowed his words before he could reply to Min's question, pulling out an old worn hoodie Jae hid under the mound. Although too battered to be worn and thin in places, the garment had been folded carefully, tucked beneath the pillow Jae slept on. Patched over in places with embroidery thread and stained, Yunho's name was still visible on the inside collar, the strong black letters stitched in by Mrs. Jung when Yunho and Jaejoong were merely trainees. He'd almost forgotten about the hoodie, its elbow marred with a red splotch from Seoul's rich clay mud but he'd known Jaejoong once held it in high regard, solely because it was once Yunho's.

"Ah, he still has that," Min sighed, wrinkling his nose. "At least he doesn't wear it anymore. But maybe then, he sleeps with it because he cannot sleep with you?"

"What happened to the baby that was too shy to say anything?" Yunho teased, smiling woefully. "When did you get so wise?"

"I think I'm learning about how to give my heart to someone, even though I know they are going to break it," Min whispered, trying to silence the cajoling gremlin in his head. "Talk to Kimura-san. He has to listen to you and if not, then we will work something out. What you have with Joongie-ah, it's real and sometimes too bitter-bright but it is yours. You knew Jae was the one... just like you had to be the one for him. You should fight for it, Yunho. Isn't he worth that? Isn't he worth everything?"

Three

"They're fighting again, hyung," Min whispered as he curled himself up into a ball. The patio's overhang kept the rain at bay but a small waterfall of dirty water fell from its crinkled edge, splashing random drops onto Min's bare feet. The building's outer wall was an odd stucco and his t-shirt caught on the uneven surface, pulling up from his waist. He'd been worried about the rain leaking down his collar and onto his back but considering the his heart rate and temperature spiked when he heard Se7en's voice, a little cold water wouldn't do any harm.

The rain drops ran over his long toes, swirling around the sparse hair on his foot before trickling down his ankle. If he closed his eyes, Changmin could almost imagine the moisture was Se7en's tongue. *After he'd sucked on an ice cube*, his mind grumbled, *The water was too cold to be from Se7en's hot, sexy mouth.*

"I can't even have sexual fantasies without having my craziness correct me," Min complained then winced, hearing Se7en chuckle. "This is wrong. You shouldn't laugh at me when I do stupid things."

"You doing stupid things is what makes you even more sexy, baby. And don't call me hyung. I already feel like a dirty old man." Across the phone line, Min could hear Se7en pop open a beer bottle, the ping of the cap hitting a hard surface bouncing past Se7en's laughter. "Yunho should be happy he has Jaejoong. What's his problem now?"

"Why does it have to be Yunho with the problem?" Rubbing at his wet ankle, Changmin glanced up at the falling water, peering up at the too bright night sky. "Maybe Jaejoong started it."

"Jaejoong wouldn't start something unless Yunho was to blame," Se7en replied. "Yunho's the husband. The wife is always right and if he hasn't figured that out by now, then he's got no one to blame but himself if Jaejoong finds someone else to make him moan in the middle of the night."

"Who's the wife between us then?" Min asked, chewing on his lip. The burn of shyness crept up over his face and he was thankful no one else was around to tease him about the flush. "I wouldn't mind being right all the time."

"You and I, little mink," Se7en growled. "We're not going to play house like the two of them do. You're never going to be a wife to me. I don't need you to fall into some traditional bullshit role that people think a man has to be in just because he loves another man. I intend to treat you like a man...with a man's needs."

"Haven't you...ever thought about it? I mean, about a guy that acts more like a woman?"

"If I wanted a woman, I'd have chased after one. What I want is a long-legged Minku to wrap his body around me and groan when I bite into his neck as I push him apart. I intend to do the same for you."

The image of being ribboned around Se7en's strong body chased more blushing red across Min's cheeks and he turned his head to fan cold air over his face. Swallowing, he tried to bring the talk back on topic but he was stuck with the idea of Se7en's long fingers stroking at his hip bones. "Why do you call Jaejoong the wife? He's not... feminine."

"He's not but Yunho wants someone who is traditional. Someone who will do what Yunho says." Se7en replied. "He wants more of a girl. He should have stuck with Heechul instead of falling for Jaejoong. That one is more of a woman than my mother."

"So you could chase after Jaejoong and forget about me?" Min hated his words as soon as he said them, hearing the green taint of jealousy in his voice. "I'm sorry. That was wrong."

“No, it’s fair,” Se7en agreed. “You worry about why I find you sexy and you think about the one person you believe to be sensual. Jaejoong is sexy and a lot of trouble. He’s not someone you’d want to keep unless you were in love with him. I don’t know if I could love someone like Jaejoong. I like my men to be confident sexy smart asses not beautiful broken kittens.”

“Oh.” Changmin took the phone away from his ear, resting his forehead against the faceplate. Taking a deep breath, he calmed his nervous stomach and kept his voice as even as he could before answering. “I like ...”

“Go on,” Se7en said around a mouthful of beer. “Tell me how you see me.”

“Wicked,” Min answered without thinking. “Sexy. Wicked. And painful.”

“We’ll work on the last one, Minku. I promise you, I will do my best not to cause you any kind of pain. Physical or emotional.”

“I don’t like them fighting.” He sighed, uneasy about what to say. Se7en confused him, keeping his thoughts muddled long after he hung up. “I just wish I had something to tell them to make them see that they love each other and they just hurt one another when they fight.”

“That’s how some people love, baby. I still blame Yunho though.” Se7en admitted. “Jaejoong doesn’t seem like someone to seriously throw sticky rice onto a relationship just for drama’s sake. Yunho should have told your Japan manager that he and Jaejoong were going to share a room. If they can’t hide their relationship from your management, then they should use it as leverage. Tone down the affection if they can live freely in your apartment. I’m surprised Yunho didn’t think of that. He’s an ass but he’s not stupid.”

“He thinks if he causes waves, we’ll be split up,” Min shared. “Told me Yoochun, Junsu and Jaejoong were soloist material where he and I are more support.”

“Do you believe that?” Se7en hissed.

“I don’t know.” He shifted, squinting his eyes so the lights from the surrounding skyscrapers turned bokeh against the shifting night sky. He swallowed, trying to convince himself that the dots of light were fragmented by the squint of his eyes and not a hot splash of tears. “No.”

Changmin didn’t know the words spilling from Se7en’s mouth. It was mostly Japanese and some English. Harsh, molten and angry. He caught a phrase or two but much of it was beyond him.

“Yunho is a fucking asshole,” Se7en said, his voice rough with emotion. The words were blunt, phrased in the coarsest Korean Min knew. “I’m going to kill him for saying that to you.”

“It’s the truth, hyung,” Min replied, trying to find some footing in the slippery conversation. “The three of them are better musicians than Yunho and I. It’s the reality of things. I’ve come to accept that it’s not my name the audience will scream.”

“You’re not listening then,” The other man growled. “And you hide, tucked in behind your two older members like sushi rice in an inari pocket. You should step out of that shadow, Changmin. You’re worth more than what Yunho thinks he is. If he wants to be less than the other three in talent, that’s fine. That’s for him. I’ll be damned to Hell before I let him do that to you.”

Changmin kept silent, listening to Se7en’s words over in his mind before speaking. “You... what you’re saying is what Jaejoong wants from Yunho, isn’t it? That...”

“Passion?” Se7en offered. “Support?”

“I don’t know the word. Faith,” Min whispered. “You don’t know me well but you have faith in me. More faith than Yunho has in Jaejoong, I think. I wish hyung would support each other that way. Jaejoong does. I hear him now. Better than I used to. I can hear his faith in Yunho, more faith than Yunho has in himself.”

“That’s what love is, Minku,” The other man said softly. “Love is when you have a strong enough faith in your lover that you can carry him when he’s hurt or down.”

“I’d want to do that...” Min stumbled, catching himself before he broke open.

“You’d do that for me...or for your *boyfriend*?” Se7en prodded, the lush swirl of words tingling places Min wanted to ignore for the moment. “No, don’t answer that for me, baby. Not yet. It’s too soon and I think my heart would break if I heard you lie to me.”

Tucking his knees up to his chin, Min cupped his hand over his eyes, blocking the light out. “How do you know it would be a lie?”

“Because if you said yes, you would be lying. I’d know it was a lie because it’s too soon for you to have that much faith in me. Especially since I’ve not yet tasted that sweetness hidden inside of your body.” Se7en chuckled, deep and seductive at Min’s hissing gasp. “And if you said no, that would be a lie because I know you. You’re like Jaejoong in that way. You have a deeper faith in the people you like rather than yourself.”

“You think I like you?” Min tried to scoff at the other man’s prodding but Se7en’s words hit too close to his heart. He was falling fast for a man he desperately needed not to love. It would be physical only, he’d promised himself. Only enough of a relationship to lose his virginity and some of the naïveté he couldn’t seem to shake.

“I think you not only like me, Minku,” Se7en’s words slithered and dipped, lapping at Min’s groin and leaving a hard wetness he didn’t think he could shake off any time soon. “I think you can’t wait for the day when I have you underneath me, so lost in what I’m doing to you that you won’t be able to remember your name. We’ll talk about how much you like me then.”

The rain nearly hid the sound of the front door opening but its telltale snick brought Min’s back up. “Shit, someone came home. It’s probably Jaejoong. If he catches me out here in the rain, he’ll yell at me.”

“Yell back. He’s been walking in it,” Se7en suggested but Min could hear him hide a yawn.

“Go to bed,” Changmin ordered. “It’s late and we both have a full day ahead tomorrow.”

“No, Minku. My day’s going to be empty because I won’t be seeing you,” Se7en said, laughing when Changmin sputtered. “Good night, baby. Think about me as you fall asleep.”

Min whispered a good night and stared at the glowing screen of his cell phone then wrinkled his nose in frustration. “If I think about you as I fall asleep, Dong-Wook, there’s not going to be any sleeping.”

The screen door slid open, and despite knowing someone would come looking for him, Changmin still jumped when Jaejoong stepped out onto the balcony. The rain plastered the older singer’s clothes to his too thin body, the wet fabric clinging to the ridges of Jae’s shoulder blades and collarbone. A silver ring glistened from its place on one of Jae’s toes, its carved moon and stars catching the reflection of the towers’ lights.

“Who are you talking to?” Jaejoong sounded tired, worn down from the day. He smelled of beer and cigarettes, two habits the Japan manager wanted him to break but the singer seemed determined to show any sign of rebellion he could, sometimes coming in late reeking of a nightlife Min worried about. “And why are you out here in the rain?”

“I needed some air,” Min fumbled with his phone, tucking it into his pocket. Reaching for the book he’d left next to him, his fingers closed over something solid and he hefted it up. “I brought something to keep me company.”

“A shoe?” Jae’s eyebrows lifted. “You’re talking to your shoe?”

Changmin nodded, struggling to keep his face neutral. “Of course. What else would I be doing with it?”

“You’re strange, Minnie-ah,” The singer said with a heavy sigh. “Get off the balcony. It’s wet. You’ll get sick.”

“I will soon. It’s nice sitting here and looking at the lights.” Min rested his head back against the patio’s glass divider. “Are you going to sleep?”

“Going to try.”

“Did Kimura-san come back?” Changmin asked Jae.

“No. I think he is staying at one of the hotels tonight. He said something about scouting out a place for a photo shoot. He’ll be in tomorrow probably.” Rubbing his face did nothing to erase the stink from his body or the heavy weight of exhaustion drowning his heart but Jae tried, giving the youngest a weak smile. “Don’t get sick! You’ll fall behind in your Japanese and complain that I’ve cheated because you couldn’t think to learn.”

“Pffts.” Min grumbled as Jae shut the screen door to leave Changmin to his thoughts. “You cheat because you give people those big round puppy dog eyes and they melt across the floor to give you help. I’m surprised you know more Japanese besides *Of course, Jaejoong-chan. I’ll do that for you. No, don’t get up. Let me.*”



The shower was empty, not surprising at past two in the morning but Jaejoong checked the bathroom carefully before he stripped his clothes off and turned on the water. Working his arm over his head, Jae tried to loosen the knot on his shoulder, turning around to stare at the bruises running across his shoulder blades and down his side. A dark black line intersected the small of his back, angling down to the rise of his ass. A faint swelling remained along the diagonal hematoma, puffing pink in spots where the welting had yet to settle.

Too tired to care about anything but getting clean, Jaejoong forced himself to gulp down a few ibuprofen, holding them against the roof of his mouth with tongue as he stepped into the shower stall. Pursing his lips, he captured some water and swallowed, letting the capsules ride down his throat. Pressing his hands on the tiles, he leaned into the stream, groaning when the pounding water hit his tender skin.

“God, Yunnie-ah,” Jae shut his eyes, his throat tight against the pills he’d taken to ease the ache in his body. “What the hell am I doing?”

He could feel the faint bruises left by fingers on his thigh and when he moved, another span of parallel streaks throbbed on his upper arm. Turning the water down until it cooled, Jae bit his lip and scrubbed the tears from his eyes, washing the salt of his anguish down the drain.

The scent of the vanilla soap brought more tears to Jae’s eyes. They’d shared the fragrant bar between them once, sometimes getting more of the froth on the shower walls than on each other but those times were past them now. Especially since Yunho refused to do more than give him bland, placid looks and rarely reached over to touch even his hand.

“You’re killing me, Yunho,” Jae whispered. “You might as well take a knife and carve my heart out. I can’t live like this. I can’t lie anymore. It was okay when I could have you when no one was looking but now...there’s always someone there. Always someone shoving us apart. Why aren’t you saying something? Why does it look like I’m the problem?”

“Or is this what you needed to get away from me?” Shocked, Jaejoong stared up at his reflection in the foggy mirror, the dark grey contacts he’d put in that morning bleached nearly white from the overhead light. “Maybe this is what you really wanted? Some way of not having to break my heart too much? Was that it? Are you done loving me?”

“God.” Sobbing, Jae crumpled to the floor, curling over his crossed legs as a sharp lightning streak of hurt flowed out from his belly and seared his throat. “It makes sense now. You needed a way out. Why didn’t you... God, Yunnie-ah. God this hurts so much.”

Jaejoong didn’t know how long he sat there, balled up and aching but the chill of the tiled floor eventually crept into his marrow, freezing up his muscles and the throbbing of his injured knee jostled him from his grief. Wiping at his face with a damp towel, he sniffed and rubbed his tear-swollen eyes. His contacts shifted and he swore lightly, pinching them out. Cradling the grey rounds, he tried standing and fought back a cry of pain when his knee refused to unbend.

Stumbling, Jae tossed the contacts into a cleansing container and hobbled to the bathroom door, holding the towel with one hand as he struggled to walk. The bedroom he shared with Yoochun was frigid.

Both windows were open and his best friend lay under a mountain of quilts. Frowning, the singer debated shaking Chun up from his sleep when the covers shifted and a second pair of feet emerged from under the sheets.

“Shit. Junsu.” Jae growled and shoved his uncooperative legs into a pair of sweats, pulling on a t-shirt before heading back to the living room. Digging a blanket out from the hallway closet, he stretched out on the living room couch, stealing a few cushions from the love seat to rest his head on. A sliver of light crept out into the living room from the hallway, forgotten and left burning when he’d finished raiding the linens.

“Get up or leave it on?” He debated, closing his eyes to see if the light leaked through his lashes. He’d almost convinced himself to leave it on when his phone rang, chirruping a sensual R&B riff. Flipping the phone open, Jaejoong growled softly into the speaker. “Do you know what time it is? I was going to sleep.”

“I have a pretty boy say that to me all the time,” Se7en replied. His voice was thin, any humour he’d shared with the youngest Dong Bang singer swept away under a razor edged tightness. “What’s going on? Are you okay?”

“You shouldn’t be calling me. That’s what’s going on,” Jae said, flopping back onto the couch. “If Minnie finds out I know about you two, he’ll kill me and then kill you. Or maybe he’ll kill me first while you watch and then wrap you in thin guitar strings and hoist you up until you bleed slowly to death over my corpse.”

“It’s bad enough when Changmin worries me talking about exacting revenge. I don’t need two of you doing it. And I’m not the one who wants to keep us a secret. Your little boy wants that.”

“Min is no little boy. Not any more. If Yunho finds out about you, *you* won’t be a boy anymore... little or otherwise so you two better figure out what you’re going to be before he sniffs around any more. One of you needs to tell him. I can’t keep lying for all of you. It’s hard to keep track of who knows what.”

“Your dongsaeng is stubborn, like his leader. You expect him to listen to me?” Se7en retorted. “You need to start keeping track of your phones. If you hadn’t picked up his phone by mistake when I called, you’d not be lying to him or anyone else right now.”

“I thought it was mine.”

“You have what? Three? Four phones? Who the hell needs four phones?”

Jaejoong growled. “It’s late, Dong-Wook, and I’m tired. What do you want?”

“I wanted to know if you made it home.” Se7en said. “And to see if you’ve told Yunho about Kimura.”

“Yunho doesn’t need to know about Kimura-san,” Jae said, his voice breaking as he choked the words out over his tongue. “It’s... he doesn’t... need me any more, se7en. Knowing about Kimura would just bring him guilt and he’d be obligated to do something, either because we were lovers or because he’s the leader of the group. We can’t afford that here. Not now.”

“So you’re just going to let Kimura... “ The other man hissed, forcing air between his clenched teeth. “God, you are so fucking stupid, Jaejoong. I don’t care if Min finds out that you know about us. It’s not right what’s happening to you. You don’t deserve...”

“You don’t know what I deserve or don’t deserve, Se7en,” Jae replied, cutting the other singer off with a cold slice of words. “Maybe everything that’s happening... Yunho. Kimura... maybe this is what should be. Maybe they’re right and I am going to Hell for what I am. For who I am.”

“Yunho’s father was right. No matter how far away as I get from Itaewon, I’m still nothing more than a whore. Not fit for his son but good enough for a quick fuck. The problem was that I believed he loved me and he did too, for a while.” Bitter, Jae bit his lip, dabbing his tongue at the spots of blood forming along the ridge of his teeth. “Good night, Se7en, and don’t call me anymore. Min hating me is the last thing I want to worry about right now.”

Four

Japan closed in, spiraling in on Jaejoong until he felt his ribs crack with each breath he took. Buildings crowded in against the picture window, steel and glass fingers breaking through the city's asphalt skin, reaching towards the dirty grey sky. The season's rains pounded back as if Heaven's fury could somehow push the intruding constructs back beneath the rolling streets but the skyscrapers remained, impervious to the desires of the storm. Impotent, the tempest fought back the best way it could, licking at the tops of the taller buildings with forked tongues of lightning, sparking and arcing over the highest points of the city.

Alone, Jae stared out at the watery city, wondering at the emptiness he saw there. Far above the busy night streets, he couldn't make out any people, their bustling forms either lost from height or the rising fog weaving through the tangle of buildings. Resting his forehead against the cool glass, he closed his eyes and relived the group's performance in his mind, wincing at the memory of the audience.

Or, better phrased, the lack of one.

Barely able to eke out a hundred people to attend the event, they'd sang and danced, twirling around like trained monkeys in matching organ grinder suits while the audience sat motionless, not a murmur of appreciation or a clap. The silence overwhelmed them and Yoochun admirably held himself together until they'd gone off stage. Then the tears fell and their frustrated anger flew on newly sprouted wings.

"Why are we doing this?" Junsu shouted, fists clenched tight to his sides. "Why are we here when no one wants us?"

"Patience," Kimura cautioned. "It will take time."

"Time we don't have," Yunho replied, his voice almost steady but Jaejoong could hear the cracks in it. "It took us a long time to rise in Korea and now this, we're behind where we started and the longer we stay here, the more ground we lose at home."

Jaejoong couldn't help but think it was ironic Yunho would speak up to this, for the group as a whole, when he could say nothing about his lover. But then, Yunho wasn't trying to leave the group, just discard an unwelcome and unneeded lover he was still tied to.

The sound of a door opening behind him brought Jae out of his thoughts and he opened his eyes, watching as their Japanese manager entered the hotel room he'd rented for the night. The man was tall, long legged and broad shouldered; dressed in an Italian suit altered to fit his trim waist. From all appearances, he was a powerful, confident player in the music industry, sleek and suave with a chiseled face and dark sharp eyes. His mouth was thin and set, ripe for negotiations and slick words. His casual tousled black hair accented his square face, a spiky cut gelled away from his forehead.

Most women and some men would consider Kimura to be handsome.

Jaejoong considered him to be a sickness he had to endure. Especially since it didn't appear as if he could recover from it any time soon.

"You look pretty like that," Kimura said, undoing his tie as he came up behind Jaejoong. His Korean was flawless, barely accented and smooth. Tossing the silk tie onto a table, the manager slid himself into the bow of Jae's body, leaning forward until he could reach around the singer's slender waist. "Bent over, like you're waiting for me."

"I'm not waiting for you," Jae replied sharply, pulling up and stepping away from the glass.

“No, I suppose not.” He let Jaejoong go, watching the singer slid away. Kimura’s fingers reluctantly released the other man’s wrist, his fingers leaving a band of red around the bone. “But you should be. I can give you what you want. What you need. What the group needs.”

“We just need to work harder. We...”

“Didn’t you see the audience’s reaction tonight? No one clapped during your performance. No one shouted or screamed your name,” Kimura reminded him. “The response afterwards? The polite applause? Did you think that anyone was going to leave that theatre and rush out to buy your single?”

“It’ll take time,” Jae insisted, running his hands through his hair. Stress left strands of the silky hair on his fingers, thinning slightly near the back where the stylist bleached it too far before the filming on one video. His head was still recovering from that colour change, small kernels of scar tissue from the blistering on his scalp. “We have time.”

“The company is giving you two years but you know that if you don’t turn something around soon, they’ll pare you down to a different grouping.” Kimura shrugged, keeping his smile tightly contained when Jaejoong whirled about to face him. “They might let you and Yoochun perform together. Perhaps move Junsu to a solo act or maybe even pair him up as a duet with BoA. I don’t know what they’ll do with Changmin. He’s fairly useless as a performer. Perhaps that other group that belongs to your company... that large one.. maybe they’ll split him into something there. As for Yunho, well, he can dance but really how is that useful for a music group?”

“Yunho and Min are good singers,” Jaejoong snapped. “They’ve worked hard to come to this.”

“And you’re holding them back.” Crossing over to the wet bar, Kimura opened a decanter of alcohol, sniffing at its amber contents. “Do you want a whiskey? I’m making myself one.”

“No.” He was reluctant to approach the man but instead returned to the window, pressing the flat of his hands against the pane.

“Are you thinking about what I’m offering you? What I’m offering the group?” Kimura returned to Jae’s side, his shoulder against the glass as he sipped his drink. Jaejoong smelled the potent liquor, smoky and musky as it sloshed around a handful of ice cubes.

“It’s not right...” Jaejoong looked up, meeting Kimura’s smug glance. “You...”

“I’m not an unkind man, Kim,” The manager said softly.

“Then why do I hurt?” Jaejoong asked. “Why do I have to change my clothes in the bathroom or wait until the others have left the dressing room?”

“When you say no to me, I get angry.” Kimura shrugged, an elegant lift of his shoulders under his suit jacket. “You can’t expect me to like it when I don’t get what I want. I want you, Kim and I need your group to succeed.”

“And if I say no again?”

“Then you’ll probably hate what comes next,” The man said, his eyes narrowing as he placed his glass on the table.

Picking up, the silk tie he discarded earlier, Kimura wrapped its length between his hands, fisting either end. The blue-striped swath was around Jaejoong’s neck before he could move, tightening up behind him as Kimura twisted it tight, knotting his wrists together as Jae struggled and fought for air. “Does that feel good, pretty boy? Do you think that I wouldn’t just choke you until you pass out? Then what? Do you think you can stop me from taking what I want while you lie there unconscious?”

“Or,” Kimura let a little slack through and Jae gasped, sucking in huge mouthfuls of air. “Maybe when I’m done with you, I’ll continue what I started. It would be a tragedy but then Junsu could move towards the middle, because in the grief, the members know that you would want them to go on. The Japanese love tragedies. They would flock to Tohoshinki and worship them for overcoming such pain.”

“Don’t,” Jae hiccupped, sliding his fingers under the tie to give himself some breathing room. “Don’t do that to them.”

“Do you know what I like even more?” Biting into Jaejoong’s ear lobe, Kimura played with one of the piercings, tonguing at the metal stud. “I think I might want to see how it feels to be buried deep in someone as I choke them until they lie cold. Maybe not you. You’re so very beautiful. A visual shock, don’t they say? Maybe someone more frail. Someone like Shim.”

“No.” Defiant, Jaejoong tilted his head back, pulling free of Kimura’s grip. Leaving the tie dangling, it flapped as he moved, unraveling from around his neck. “You lay one hand on Min and I’ll...”

“You’ll what?” Kimura cocked an eyebrow, his smirk creeping over his face. “Kill me? Tell someone at the company that I’m trying to seduce you? How do you think that will be received? They will think some Korean upstart is trying to begin a scandal and I was acting out of good faith. I provided you with an apartment, spending money and contacts. I’ve even secured your passports in a safe so they aren’t stolen. Any interpreter you know works for my company. Do you think they wouldn’t translate what I wanted them to?”

“I can’t... I don’t want this,” Jae said, tears staining his face as Kimura retrieved his glass from the table.

“I know your history, Kim,” The man pointed out. “Lying underneath me a few nights of the week isn’t much of a leap from the countless men that probably have already stretched you open. One compared to tens. How bad can it be? And what I like isn’t that brutal. Nothing more than a few scratches and bruises. You’ll get used to it. Like riding a horse. Your muscles will be sore at first but then you’ll be accustomed to it in no time.”

“No. I won’t... betray...”

“Yunho?” The same Yunho who stepped aside for me when I told him I wanted you?” Kimura shot back. “The same lover who didn’t say one word to keep you when I assigned rooms? He easily sacrificed you to get ahead. I don’t understand why you’re so stupid that you can’t see it for yourself. We all make sacrifices to get what we want. You were one he easily cut. Now it’s time to do your part.”

Turning on his heel, Kimura grabbed Jaejoong’s arm as he flung his drink away. The glass hit the far wall, shattering in an explosion of shards and ice, the whiskey folding into a wave and falling to soak into the plush carpet. The light sand coloured threads darkened, the puddle spreading as the carpet drank up the flung whiskey.

Hooking his foot around Jae’s ankle, Kimura twisted the lean singer and slammed him down. Hitting the floor, Jaejoong yelped, his front teeth cutting into his tongue. A bright dot of blood speckled his lips, spreading under the crush of Kimura’s savage kiss. Trapped between their mouths, the blood mingled with the manager’s spit, forced back into the singer as Kimura’s tongue explored the recesses of Jae’s mouth.

It was over as quickly and brutally as it started, the dig of Kimura’s knee into Jaejoong’s groin while his hands clenched Jae’s hips, lifting him up and pounding him back into the ground. Holding the rattled younger man down, Kimura straddled Jaejoong, his knees resting on either side of Jae’s thighs.

“Last week, on that night when I waited for you at the hotel?” Kimura bent over until his whiskey-soaked breath washed over Jae’s face. “You were to meet me and instead, I was left waiting. I won’t be kept waiting again, Kim. Go home now but I’m giving you one week to decide what you’re going to do. After that, I either take what I want from you...” Kimura’s hand roamed over Jae’s belly, twisting at the ring through the young man’s navel. “Or I’ll take what I want from one of the younger ones. Your choice. But make it soon.”



The apartment was dark when Jaejoong cracked open the front door. His back twinged every time he moved too quickly and his spine felt bruised where he’d hit the solid floor. Sneaking into his own home

seemed foolish but as he padded into the living room on his bare feet, he looked about the open-space apartment and wondered at how much of a home it truly was.

Scattered about were pieces of the members' lives, a discarded jacket or a pair of shoes left under the low table. A video game controller had been left out but the rest of the system had been packed back up, ready for either a quick move or more realistically, out of the way for when Yunho and Junsu practiced their choreography.

A pillow and blanket sat on the end of the couch, evidence of Yoochun and Junsu taking over the supposedly shared bedroom. With Kimura still at the hotel, it meant an empty bed somewhere but Jaejoong was reluctant to lie awake tossing under his sheets if another member lay sleeping next to him. Or worse still, finding an empty bed in Kimura's room, leaving himself open to the man's predatory ways.

"Living room is better," Jaejoong said, sliding down onto the couch.

Hunger tugged at his belly, reminding Jaejoong he'd not eaten in hours. Sleep warred back, telling his body he only had a few hours to catch some rest before he had to be awake and practicing at the dance studio. The sharp pangs in his stomach won out and he pulled himself to his feet, stretching his arms over his head and wincing when his back muscles jerked and pulled.

A packet of instant ramen practically fell into his hand when Jaejoong opened the cabinet. Filling the cup with hot water, he placed it into the microwave, almost falling asleep as he waited for the appliance to ding. Shuffling back to the couch, Jaejoong sat down and peeled the cover back, realizing he'd forgotten to grab a utensil.

"Screw it," He muttered, sipping at the hot broth. Steaming noodles hit his lips and he bit off what he could, chewing slowly. The salty soup calmed his nervous stomach, shreds of noodle hitting the emptiness in his belly and staving off his hunger.

The hallway light flicked on and Jae glanced over his shoulder, expecting to see Yoochun. When Yunho appeared around the short wall, he choked, nearly inhaling the noodles in his mouth. He wasn't prepared for his body's reaction on seeing the other man. The belly that had been crying in hunger a few minutes before now warmed and clenched, mewling in need of the man's hand along his skin. Inside, his core ached, tightening with the lack of Yunho's hard heat delving deep into him.

All of those things were pushed aside under the glare of the hallway light and Yunho's silhouette looming over his shoulder and Jaejoong turned back to his noodles, fishing out a mouthful between pinched fingers. Tilting his head, Jae was about to take a bite from the dripping mass when Yunho crossed over to the couch and folded into a crouch next to the singer.

"I just needed something to eat," Jae said flatly, picking at the noodles then dropping them back into the cup. Sucking his fingers clean, he put the ramen container on the table. "I'll turn off the light. I didn't mean to wake you."

"You didn't wake me," Yunho said. "Why didn't you come back with the rest of us?"

Jaejoong tried to read Yunho's face but the leader was a mask of shadows and calm, giving the singer no hint to his mood. His body heat ignited the smouldering fire Jaejoong thought he'd banked into embers, the love he had for Yunho flaring at the other man's closeness. His imagination ran with the image, recalling softer times when they'd shared a shower or the soft comfort of worn sheets, their bodies intertwined and joined.

I would give anything for a kiss, Jaejoong thought. I would die to have him smile at me again.

"Kimura-san...wanted to talk to me," He stuttered, trying to mask the uneasiness he felt when he spoke of their manager. "He is worried about my singing."

"Your singing is fine," Yunho replied. "And your Japanese is better than any of ours is."

The tension thickened, so many past arguments wearing down the connection they'd once had. Even the brush of Yunho's breath on his arms gave Jaejoong a shiver, plunging him into a maelstrom of emotion.

He knew the taste of the man hunkered down before him but Jae wanted to dip down into that mouth and savour Yunho's strength and passion anew. He needed to explore everything the leader hid inside of himself, even to bask in the hot tempestuous anger that often rocked Yunho's fiery soul.

The cold in Yunho's eyes stopped him before Jaejoong could cup the other man's face. There was no welcome in the man's set mouth or the squaring of his broad shoulders.

"I want to talk to you... about this," Yunho said, waving his hand.

"This?"

"This thing between us," The man clarified, dropping his head down so Jaejoong couldn't see his eyes. "It has to stop. I have to put a stop to it."

In that moment, Jaejoong's heart stilled, falling dead in his chest. He opened his mouth, searching for words to beg with. If he could find what he needed to say in the rush of confusion flooding his mind, Jae panicked, he could stop Yunho from saying what was on his mind or worse, voicing some of Jaejoong's greatest fears.

"I'll be better," Jae whispered, reaching out to touch the other man's bare shoulders. He stopped short, holding himself back from skimming his fingers across Yunho's warm, tanned skin or hooking his hands around the man's tank top to pull him into a kiss. "I promise, Yunho. I'll work harder. I'll..."

"That's not what's needed, Joongie-ah," Yunho sighed, lifting his head and the light glistened over the tear drops in his wet, teak-hued eyes. "I can't go on like this. I miss you, baby and I...I can't do *this* any more without you. "

Five

“Come,” Yunho said, holding his hand out to Jaejoong.

The gesture held so much, a complication to their lives that Jaejoong wasn't sure Yunho understood. Warmth. Companionship. Restoration. If he took Yunho's hand, things would veer away from the nearly dangerous to the deadly. The fragile house of cards they live in could tumble to the ground, dealing a death blow to everything that the members worked so hard for.

His life hovered before him, an open palm waiting for him.

A hand that wore a familiar, beloved ring on one finger.

Yellow gold peeked out from under the white, the English word for love in an elegant script around the band's girth. Rivets pierced the outer ring, holding tight and snug against the band. Jaejoong's mouth laved both bands when they'd first been placed on Yunho's finger, his teeth scraping the other man's skin as his tongue played with the shifting rings.

They'd made love dressed only in their rings, no other jewelry or piercings. Just the simple, expensive bands they shared.

Jaejoong flung his rings at Yunho when the other man turned his back on them after Kimura cleaved their relationship. He didn't know that his lover still wore his, too enraptured in his anger and pain to take notice of the world around him.

Now shame clouded his eyes as he stared at the symbol of Yunho's devotion winking silver and gold at him.

“Take my hand, baby,” Yunho said, his tears slick and shining across his brown eyes.

“Too much...” Jaejoong stumbled. “I've done too much. So much has changed.”

“The stars haven't fallen from the sky,” Yunho replied, his fingers trembling with the effort of not touching his lover's beautiful face. “There's still time. For anything we want.”

Jaejoong took his once-lover's hand and let himself be led out of the darkness and into the shining light.



Yunho's bed was wider than his, a broad expanse of mattress and sheets that made Jaejoong nervous. His stomach fluttered, fear creeping over his limbs and rendering them nearly useless. He stumbled, hitting his bare toes on the bed's frame. Yunho was there to catch him, strong arms wrapped around his waist, holding him up easily.

It was somewhere Jaejoong longed to be. And somewhere he didn't think he had the right to anymore.

“I...” Jaejoong sighed, wondering where to start and what to say.

“No, baby, I need to talk to you first.” Yunho guided Jae to the edge of the bed, using his hands to move the other man's hips.

He spanned the other man's waist with his palms, riding down Jae's body until he felt the jut of his lover's bones on his fingers. He itched to strip Jaejoong and lay him back into the sheets, feeling the man's lean, long body underneath him but they had words between them, festering pockets of anger rising on each tide of their emotions.

Studying Yunho's serious face, Jaejoong slid back, crossing his legs to pull his knees up. The barrier of his bone and muscle made him feel safer, as if he could somehow keep his heart from being broken if

Yunho couldn't see where it beat in his chest. The singer didn't trust his voice, too often his wandering mind took over his tongue and the secrets he held in his heart were burning through his shaky control. Biting at his cheek, Jaejoong rested his chin on his knee, staring at the silver band on his toe.

"It seems so long ago, doesn't it?" Yunho sat down on the bed, daring himself to touch the ring Jae wore on his toe. They were so young then, naïve in believing they could withstand anything that the world would throw at them as long as they had one another. The ring he'd given his young lover, embellished with symbols of the night sky, was a paltry silver thing he'd picked up on a whim. They'd since both replaced their original bands with other more expensive bands but Jae had a fondness for the simple, a sentimental longing for the innocent times when Yunho struggled only with how his family viewed their love.

Now they truly hidden from the world and the battered silver ring was all they had joining them to that small apartment where Jaejoong opened his heart to a headstrong Yunho.

"The rooftop?" Jae whispered from behind his shield of bone and hurt.

It was no surprise to Yunho that his lover... the angelic half of his soul... knew what he was thinking just by a glance and a few words. Grinning, he looked up, capturing Jaejoong's eyes as he moved. "Do you remember Junsu trying to teach the other two about constellations?"

"Heh, he almost had Changmin convinced there was a giraffe in the stars," Jae smiled at the memory, a piqued youngest stomping down the stairs to look for reference material, no longer trusting the bubbly voiced tenor. "Minne-ah was so disturbed at the thought of a frivolous constellation. He'd take it better now. The teasing. It's easier for him to accept."

"It is," Yunho agreed. "But now..."

"Now he'd hit Junsu with the book instead of looking things up in it," Jaejoong's laughter lifted Yunho's heart, despite the bitter thread running through it. Saddened, the singer's brightness soured, a trickle of over-aged wine turned from a rotting wooden cask. "We were so young."

"We're not so old now, BooJae," Yunho teased.

Risking the other man's ire, he tucked his fingers under Jae's chin, lifting the singer's face up until he could stare directly into the cedar gaze that he'd fallen in love with. It was rare to see Jaejoong's true eye colour. He hid them, masking himself off from the world with a splash of mystery and hue. The change had been subtle, a slow migration away from the young cast-off to the sleek bodied singer Yunho saw sitting on the bed. But the insecure, rough-voiced, throw-away youth was still there under everything. When the accessories and masks were stripped away, Yunho found the rawness of Jaejoong's soul still bleeding with pain.

"Can we ever go back to that?" Jae asked, his breath whispering a kiss over Yunho's fingers. "Do you even want to?"

"No." Yunho shook his head, thumbing away the trickle of a tear starting at the corner of Jaejoong's eye. "We're different people. I want the man who grew with me. Who suffered with me through all of us. That's the man I want next to me. That boy I fell in love with, the one who taught me how to love with my heart and soul, he's stronger and has been loved. Is still loved. I've never stopped loving that boy but I love the man, Jaejoong, more."

"I've been..." He turned away, breaking the contact of Yunho's fingers. Swallowing, Jaejoong bit at the corners of his lips, unable to open up his heart. "There are things that have happened..."

"Anything that you've done... or been, I can forgive or even not know. I don't care, Joongie-ah." Yunho shifted, the mattress dimpling under his weight. Moving his knees until he could stretch his legs around Jae's shins, Yunho gripped Jae's shoulders, hurting when the other man winced at the touch. "Is it that bad? That you can't stand for me to touch you?"

"No." Horror coloured Jaejoong's voice, darkening its richness. "Never. Yunnie-ah... I never wanted to... I don't..."

“Then what is it? Do you need time to ... do we need more time?” Yunho tried to catch Jae’s eyes, unable to get the other man to look at him. “God, Joongie, what have you done?”



“Where are you?” Se7en rumbled, wiping away the rain from his face.

Tokyo wept, drenching itself in tears run filthy with dirt. Despite the constant storm, the skies couldn’t seem to cleanse itself of the city’s muck and the gutters ran thick with mud drawn from the clouds. Around him, lights were flickering on and off, the power grid struggling to maintain its integrity as lightning struck from above.

“I’m at a tea shop,” Min responded, a crackle spreading his words apart. “Right near our apartment. I couldn’t sleep so I came downstairs. Jaejoong was heading up but I don’t think he saw me. I thought maybe Yunho would want to talk to him so I left the apartment.”

“And the hyenas? Where are they?”

“Aish, don’t call them that. They aren’t that bad,” Min scolded. An image of Yoochun and Junsu fallen in on themselves as they giggled over something the other three members didn’t catch changed his mind. “Never mind. That’s the perfect nickname for them. They are hyenas. Did you know the female hyena is the dominant in the pack? That’s probably why the two of them have to keep track of who’s doing what. Both of them want to be the woman.”

“First, I don’t want to know about Yoochun and Junsu tracking anything in their sex life,” Se7en growled into the phone. “And secondly, I don’t...”

“What?” Min tapped the phone. “Are you there?”

“I’m here,” Se7en said. “Hold on a second. I want to show you something.”

A beep and a click later, Min sat in awe as Se7en’s photo arrived. The lights of the music district were bright, despite the late hour, and the rain added sparkling dots to frame the billboards going up as the city slept. Only partially done, Se7en zoomed in on one in particular, one with Yunho and most of Changmin’s face plastered up. Two men worked furiously in the rain, fighting the elements to raise the wide announcement of Tohoshinki’s first single, their bodies frozen in the moment of sweeping squeegees across Min’s chin.

“Oh...” Min bit back a squeal, cursing the sounds he made into the phone. “Oh...oh.... Oh....”

“Minku, I just cannot wait until I’m the one getting you to make those sounds,” Se7en sighed. “God, you’re making me hard just listening to you. Stop it. You’re driving me crazy and I can’t even have you near me right now.”

“I know,” Min sighed. He was torn between staring at the photo or talking to Se7en. Hitting save, he put the phone back to his ear. “I wish we could at least meet up while you are here in Japan. At least if I saw you...”

“You’d what?” The growl in his voice was back, seductive and promising. “I can tell you that if I saw you right now, I’d probably be dragged off by your company’s watchdogs for spreading you over the table you’re sitting at and ravaging your mouth.”

“You’re silly,” Min glanced about him, noting how sparsely populated the tea shop was. “But I do wish you were nearer.”

“You are a cruel and evil thing, Shim Changmin,” Se7en replied. “You’d have me sit across of you without being able to touch you? That’s mean.”

“I couldn’t touch you either,” Min protested.

Not like you’d have the guts to touch him, his inner voice grumbled. We are going to die a virgin. Wasted away like an inflated balloon leaking air until finally, it falls... limp and stretched out with nothing inside of it.

“I am going to take a fork and poke it into my ear until I can stab at you,” Changmin grumbled, rubbing at his forehead. “I said that out loud again, huh?”

“Yes, but it’s...”

“If you say cute, you shall not only never kiss me but I’ll rip your lips off your face. I am not cute. I do not do cute.”

“Honey, you’re cute,” Se7en laughed heartily. “And I fully intend to do cute.”

“Aish, what you say.” Changmin swallowed, hoping he could hide his blushing cheeks from the waitress dropping off his refill of tea. “You have a filthy mouth.”

“Not as filthy as I’d like it to be with you inside of it.” He laughed again at Changmin’s irritated hiss. “Okay, I’ll behave. Besides, I think I’m a little awed about having a boyfriend who’s on a billboard in the middle of a Tokyo walkway.”

The silence on the phone startled Se7en and he stepped back, causing a jam in the foot traffic around him. Fighting through the crowd, he reached the edge of the sidewalk, ducking to fit his tall frame under a store’s low awning.

“Minku?” Se7en checked his phone, confused at the full signal but lack of sound. “Are you there? Did you faint?”

“No,” Min mumbled. Grabbing his tea, he gulped down a mouthful, scorching his tongue on the hot brew. Bitter, the green tea froth seeped down his throat, meeting the rise of his nervous stomach. “I’m here.”

“You okay, baby?” Se7en winked at an elderly woman who eyed him as she passed, sharing the secret smile of people who loved another deeply. Her husband ambled next to her, his thin arm quivering as he held a wide umbrella up over her head, his other hand on the small of her back. Se7en watched as the old man stepped off the curb face and held his hand out for his diminutive wife, helping her step over the growing puddle creeping over the asphalt. He turned his attention back to his call. “Did you see someone hotter than me? Do I have to go over there and kick someone’s ass for stealing my Minku? Or did the billboard shake you up that much?”

“You... called me your boyfriend,” Changmin replied slowly, cupping his hand over the phone. No one was near but he wasn’t going to take any chances, especially not on such a sensitive subject.

“Well, that’s kind of what you are, Minku.” Se7en chuckled, the sound setting off another fire storm in Min’s belly.

“But you’ve not... I mean, we’ve not...”

“You don’t have to have sex to be in a relationship, Changmin,” The older man said, growing serious. “You and I... we’re doing this with our voices and our minds for right now and that’s more than enough to be called... at least boyfriend. Sure, the physical is nice. It is. Don’t get me wrong but really, I can get fucked anywhere from anybody. I want more from you. I want more *with* you.”

“Oh,” Changmin exhaled, trying to steady his rattled nerves. “Um, the billboard is nice too.”

“Nice?” Se7en glanced up at the sign, his soon-to-be lover’s face now completed. “It’s awesome. Rocking even. You guys are breaking in.”

“It doesn’t seem like that,” Min replied. “The last thing we did...tonight? There were only a few hundred people and no one clapped during it. There wasn’t a sound from the audience. And no one stood up or anything.”

“Aish, did they clap afterwards?” He asked.

“Yes. It was loud then.”

“Did you see people leaning forward? I know it’s hard with the lights but the people up front but did you see people leaning towards the stage?”

“Yes. Junsu thought it was weird.”

“That’s because Junsu isn’t Japanese,” Se7en replied. “They don’t clap during performances. Well sometimes but it’s rare. Usually only for really big arenas but really for smaller venues, they listen. You don’t hear noise because they’re listening to you. They clap afterwards. If you hear anything during a performance, then no one likes you. Silence is good. Leaning forward is even better because they are giving you their full attention.”

“That’s... odd,” Changmin said, taking another sip of his tea. It tasted better cooled and he lifted the cup lid off, blowing off some of the steam. “I think I’m too used to hearing the audience... talk back to us.”

“It’ll change. The bigger places you play, the louder the audience will get but yeah, they liked you,” Se7en reassured him. “Didn’t anyone tell you that? Like your manager?”

“Kimura-san said we were... disappointing,” The young man said, leaning back in his chair. “He told Jae to meet him at his hotel room later. He wanted to go over how Jae sings his part.”

“Kimura.” The man’s name sounded like a curse as Se7en uttered it. “Minku, do me a favour and stay away from him.”

“But he’s our manager.” Min set the cup down, confused. “I can’t stay away from him. He shares our apartment.”

“God, and *whatever* you do, don’t be alone in a bedroom with him,” Se7en exhaled sharply. “Shit, please. Just do me that favour.”

“Okay,” Min agreed. “But I don’t understand.”

“Don’t worry about it, okay?” Se7en checked the sky, sighing as the downpour slackened. “I have to go pack still. I’ll call you from Korea but please, listen to me, okay? And if you can, don’t let him be alone with Jaejoong either.”

Cross, Min pursed his mouth. “Are you ever going to explain this?”

“Yeah,” Se7en replied. “Probably. Maybe. I just want you to be careful about Kimura. The man’s an predator and from where he’s standing, you, my little Minku, are the best kind of prey.”



“I haven’t done anything,” Jaejoong replied, shaking his head at Yunho’s concern. “Not really. There were things that happened. Things I can’t talk about because if I do, I think it would tear us apart. Tear the members apart. I just don’t know...”

“Don’t know what?” Yunho asked, softly stroking at the young man’s hair. “You know you can tell me anything. Didn’t we all agree that we’d not have secrets from each other? Didn’t you tell me once that we needed to say when we hurt?”

“No, I can’t. And I want to. I miss having you with me. On me. I miss...having you in me.” Pulling away seemed like the smartest thing to do but Jaejoong couldn’t bring himself to place any distance between them. Yunho’s hands on him felt good, so unlike the last man who stroked at his body. “When you touch me, I feel better but I can’t help but think you’re getting my filth on you.”

“Baby, you’re not dirty. Why do you say those things? I thought we’d talked that through? Has something happened?” Alarmed, Yunho lightly gripped Jae’s shoulders, pulling him out of his fetal curl. “Did your father get a hold of you? Or my father? Did he say something to you?”

“No, none of that,” Jae admitted. “I’d tell you if your father called me. Or your mother.”

“Then what?” He pushed. “I want to get through this. I want you back in my bed. I want us to be in a room together again. Did you see what I did to Yoochun’s lip? I’m jealous of your brother now! Because he talks to you and can get a smile.”

“You punched Yoochun? When?” Jae pulled back, working free of Yunho’s hands. The contact was missed but the pain radiating out of his shoulders hurt too much to stand. Edging close, he sat until he touched Yunho’s side, hoping the other man would take that as a substitute. “Why?”

“I don’t know. Because I’m stupid,” Yunho admitted. “That night when you came back late. I went in to ask him where you were... I really wanted to talk to you then but he and Junsu were cuddling and...”

“You were mad because Yoochun had something you didn’t.” Jaejoong’s smile was admonishing and Yunho blushed darkly. “You are such an ox, sometimes.”

“You are one to talk, Boo.” Frowning with a mock grimace, Yunho poked at Jaejoong’s side, unwittingly hitting a bruise as he struck one of the other man’s ticklish spots. The hiss went unnoticed and the leader tilted his head to one side. “But I do know you’ll...we’ll need to fix this. I need to fix this. I know that.”

“Not only you, Yunnie-ah.”

“Let’s start with me. Like talking to Kimura,” The leader said, making a face. “I should have told him no about the rooms. You should be in here with me. Junsu should be with Yoochun and Min...well, Min could share Kimura’s room, maybe? I can fix this, Boo. I can. Just give me the chance to fix things. That’s all I ask.”

“No!” Biting back his alarm, Jae’s heart pounded unevenly, fear freezing the blood in his veins. “Min can’t be with him. Never. Not in a room. Not in the house. Please, Yunnie, don’t ask him for that.”

“Jae...he’s our manager. Min’s shared rooms with our managers before. It’s no different.”

“It’s very different,” Jaejoong replied.

Hooking his shirt up, Jae peeled his shirt off, balling the fabric up in his hands to give himself something to hold onto...anything to cling to when Yunho saw the mottled pattern of black and purple worked over his pale skin. The horror he’d expected to see was there along with something indefinable...something Jaejoong feared was disgust and repulsion towards what his lover had fallen into.

“You see, Yunnie-ah, I need to talk to you about why Min can’t... he can’t be in there with him.” Unable to look at the man he loved, Jaejoong dropped his head, too ashamed at what he’d become. “I need to talk to you about Kimura.”

Six

Cold.

Numb.

Nothing.

No, Yunho corrected himself, there was something inside of him. Amid the vast icy wasteland of cold nothingness, something glittered — a broken, fallen angel with wide black wings torn and bloody, his body bruised and darkened blue from another man's fists.

He'd refused to cry, shutting down his tears as he rocked Jaejoong to sleep, stroking at the other man's soft hair until his lover collapsed from sheer exhaustion. Even then, Yunho couldn't bring himself to crack. There was too much to absorb — too much anguish — too many tears to soak into his soul.

A soul swollen with Jaejoong's crying.

Jae lay on the bed, curled in on himself and the sight of him made Yunho ache. A rainbow of marks ran blush, indigo and midnight over swells of muscles, Jae's lean body thinner from long days of practice and lack of food. The tattoo between his shoulder blades, once the darkest spot on his back, faded back against the fist-sized circles patterning rosettes down his spine. A few were running yellow, time taking away the most of the colour but the scar of the impact remained in Jae's mind, the echoing refrain of smacking flesh against his body. Along his upper arms, red thick spiders crawled over his porcelain skin, remainders of fingers digging into the tender area. A large mottle teased Yunho at the base of Jae's spine, half hidden by the loose sweatpants Jaejoong wore low on his hips.

Yunho never imagined there could be so many shades of blue and black but his lover's body proved him wrong. There were entire spectrums of dark rainbows that the human flesh could produce and Kimura seemed determined to bring up every shade he could on Jae's body.

"Yunnie?" Yoochun cracked the door open, his body framed in a corona by the hallway light. "Is Jaejoong in here? He's not in the..."

The leader didn't need to say anything, not to the young man Jaejoong called soulmate, brother and twin. If anyone in the world would feel each bruise on Jae's flesh, it would be the tender-hearted Yoochun. The strangled sound coming from Chun's tight throat told Yunho he'd spotted the marks and then the tightening of the baritone's face, coupled with accusing eyes stopped Yunho's heart in midbeat.

"Oh... God, Yunho," The baritone stuttered, edging closer to the bed. "How... did you?"

It was horrific. Yunho knew that. They'd both seen Jae at his worst — vomiting the remains of his last meal; crumpled on the floor in pain from a snapped knee and worse, struggling to maintain his composure when faced with his own failures — but the sight of the slender young man twisted into a ball, arms hugging his legs to his chest, tore their hearts into thin shreds.

Yoochun thinking he'd actually been the one to harm Jaejoong stabbed the knife even deeper.

"I didn't do this to him," Yunho said flatly. "Kimura. He...beat Jaejoong. He corners him and beats him. Sometimes with his hands. Sometimes with whatever is around. These are from our manager, Chunnie-ah. Our *manager*."

"Manager-san?" Yoochun stepped forward, his knees buckling as he attempted to reach the bed. Yunho leaned forward, catching the other man under his arms and pulled him to the edge of Min's bed. "But... why? Yunho, why? Why would he?"

“He’s been...pressuring Jaejoong.” Amazed he could find his own voice, Yunho turned back to Jae’s sleeping form, running his palm over the young man’s shoulder, carefully avoiding a wicked black spot near Jae’s collarbone.

“Pressuring how and...why?”

“He wants Jaejoong. In his bed.” The thought of his lover with someone else sickened Yunho and he swallowed, ignoring the sick taste.

“Joongie-ah is yours,” Yoochun breathed out hard. “You should have told Kimura that! You should have told him you would only share a room with Jaejoong!”

The blame hurt and Yunho took it, shouldering the responsibility for every mark on his lover’s body. “It is my fault. I should have said something. Anything. Forced it but...” He shrugged, helpless and unwilling to stave off the censure. “Apparently Kimura knows that Jaejoong and I ... were... are lovers. I’m going to say are. We will survive this, he and I. I’m going to make sure we survive this. I have to make sure... Jaejoong survives this.”

“But if he knew, then he separated all of us for nothing?” Hissing, Yoochun dropped down on his knees between the beds, pressing in on the leader. “Why do this to Joongie? Did he think that somehow breaking you two apart would make Jaejoong want him?”

“Not for nothing,” Yunho replied. “He started first with me and Changmin. Even Min’s been distanced from Jae, Kimura always schedules their practices apart so they don’t have a lot of time together and he told Jaejoong that we weren’t happy with him, with his singing; that we were mad because he couldn’t learn the dance steps fast enough. I guess he was going to work to break you two apart next. Kimura wants to isolate Jaejoong. Make Jae dependent on him for everything, including any affection.”

“That’s sick,” Yoochun spat. “Why would someone do that?”

“Because they can. Because *he* can,” The older man said. “You know how some people are, even some of the sunbae. They force the younger ones to do things for them. I’d heard some of the older trainees watch for the ones who are weaker, more likely to want to please someone older. I just didn’t know it would... I didn’t think someone would take it this far.”

“I heard of that but I never saw it. No one ever approached me to do something for them.”

“Yoochun, I need you to answer me honestly. Are you telling me you didn’t know? Any of this?” There should have been rage, Yunho thought. Some kind of anger bubbling up inside of him but nothing escaped the icy depths of his numbness. His thoughts fragmented, splintered icy shards against the hard thoughts surfacing in his mind. Yunho knew he had to ask even though every part of his brain screamed to defend Yoochun. “Not the... not Kimura wanting Jae — I don’t think you knew that. Jaejoong wouldn’t...he didn’t want to tell anyone but the bruises — you never saw any of this?”

“No.” Yoochun stared up at his leader. “You think I kept this from you? I would never...oh God, Yunho. I saw a bruise on his back and thought it was from when he fell down the stairs but... I only saw a little bit of it. I didn’t know. I swear to you.”

“I... don’t know what to believe,” He admitted softly. “I don’t know what to say to him. I don’t know how to make him better. I’ve worked so hard to fix the pieces of Jae’s spirit that other people broke off and now... this? How do I fight this?”

“We can fix this. All of us together. We can.”

“Don’t forget, he’s been working to divide us, Chunnie-ah. How can we fix what we didn’t even see?” Yunho continued. “I think back of everything hyung has... Kimura’s... said to me. The harshness of his words. The tearing apart of our abilities. He had me convinced that Changmin and I were considered worthless to the Japanese market. That you three, everyone to the right of Min, was worth more than ...”

“That’s not how it is!” Yoochun reached for Yunho, clasping his trembling fingers over the man’s knee. “We would be nothing without the two of you. None of us are better than the rest.”

“He is.” Tears lurked in Yunho’s chest, unwilling to be shed in front of another member. “Jaejoong is worth more than any of us. He is to me. And if you were truthful with yourself, you’d admit it too.”

Yoochun turned his face, unwilling to stare down the honesty in Yunho’s face. “Jaejoong would never let you say that if he were awake. He’d be the first one to tell you that you’re full of shit.”

“He shouldn’t have had this life. He shouldn’t be lying here wearing someone else’s anger,” Yunho bit at his words, scraping at the disgust in his belly. “His family threw him out and still he tries to speak to them. Mine refuse to talk to me as long as I love him but my mother sends small notes, telling me news of my family. He’s sold his blood and eaten food leftover from others’ meals so he had money to train.”

“How much more does Jaejoong have to give? How much harder does he have to work to get some peace? Even loving me brings him to this. Loving us brought this pain to him.” The tears finally came, glittering and hard. They hovered on Yunho’s lashes, not heavy enough to fall but plump enough to sting. “Those are our names under those bruises! Are we worth that? Tell me that, Yoochun? Are we fucking worth this pain?”

“What are we going to do then?” Yoochun asked. “How do we... what *can* we do? Kimura’s not even our company and who do we tell?”

“I don’t know,” Yunho admitted. He wouldn’t share with Yoochun about Kimura’s plans for Min. Yunho had no intention of burdening the sensitive singer with the details of their manager’s perversions.

“We can’t let him do this to Jaejoong. Not our Jaejoong.”

“Can you watch him?” Yunho asked, pulling a sheet up over Jae’s bare shoulders. He didn’t want Yoochun to stare at the other man’s broken body. That vigil was his alone. “I don’t want him to wake up and be alone.”

“What do I tell him if he wakes up? Do I tell him you went out? Should I tell him that I know?”

“Tell him you know.” The leader nodded and rubbed Yoochun’s shoulders. “I just need to step outside for some air. I won’t be far. Just out on Changmin’s balcony. If the baby comes in, I’ll tell him to come here or your room but keep Jae covered. I don’t want Min to see Jaejoong like this. It would break Jae if Min saw him. Okay?”

“Okay,” Yoochun agreed. Climbing up onto the bed, Chunnie curled up around his friend, cuddling Jae close. Resting his cheek on Jae’s shoulder, he blinked away the fearful tears welling up, whispering to himself to be strong. “I’ll be here, Yunho. I won’t leave him.”



The balcony was cool, a mist of rain clinging to the air. Yunho glanced over his shoulder into the living room where Min lay sprawled over the larger couch, its soft red cushions cradling the lanky singer’s body. He’d tossed a sheet over their youngest before he opened the balcony door but the linens were already on the floor, peeled off by Changmin’s restless long legs.

Straddling one of the straight back chairs Yoochun and Jaejoong dragged out onto the patio, Yunho stared at the sky, watching it lighten as the sun climbed up through the city’s spires. The clouds trapped most of the light, a jealous lover unwilling to give up Tokyo to its more brilliant suitor. Drenched through, the city moved slowly, the sounds of early morning businesses waking in a rush of trucks and men calling out in coarse Japanese to hurry before the world began its rush.

Any other time, Yunho would revel in the solitude. Sitting in the dampness of the night’s tears, he despaired at the emptiness he found in himself.

“There’s no one to turn to,” He murmured, resting his cheek on the chair’s crossbar. A lone sparrow flitted out from its nest on a nearby roof, its brown tail slashed with white chevrons. It stopped on the balcony rail in front of Yunho, cocking its head as it studied the human. Braving the looming presence, the bird darted down, heading for the scraps of bread Min left out before they’d gone to perform.

It seemed like a lifetime ago, a few hours suddenly stretched out into an eternity. If he'd known the damage Jaejoong bore on his body — Yunho swore. He'd pushed the singer hard, railing at him to try harder, to dance harder. Resting his forehead on the wooden back, Yunho strained to let his sorrow fall but the tears still refused to come.

"No one at the company. Not the company here," Yunho spoke, startling the sparrow.

It flew, carrying the burden of its food through the damp air. It wove, ducking and twirling as it fought the wind, valiantly struggling against the elements until it reached the cement outcropping where it made its nest. A smaller brown bird, the sparrow's female, poked its head out, pecking at the offering. They disappeared into the shadows within seconds, the crust sliding into the sliver of dark.

"Our company — they'd think we were complaining. Or if they believed something was up, they'd not act right away. That would take too long." He cursed, flinging out the Japanese he'd learned from listening to the dockworkers. It felt more satisfying than the Korean he'd been born to as if cursing the monster who stalked his lover in his own language made Yunho's hatred more real — more satisfying. "There is no one."

"God, we are so alone." Yunho tilted his head back, willing his tears to break.

The sun tried to pierce the gloom but the clouds proved too strong, refusing to part. Growling, Yunho rubbed at his eyes, his fatigue wearing at the edges of his thought. He wasn't able to form a coherent idea, not with the lack of sleep and also — he suddenly realized — the lack of food in his belly. Yunho couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten, or even the last night he'd spent sleeping for more than twenty minutes.

A cawing crow broke the shell forming over his mind, its raucous cry echoing between the building. Far away, another crow screamed back, challenging the newcomer's right to the air. Hearing the two birds battle for dominance, Yunho cocked his head and gritted his teeth.

He'd transferred all of his stored numbers to his new phone and at the time, he'd wondered at the wisdom of keeping one. Yunho often stared at the glowing display in the middle of the night, his heart clenching at the thought of hearing the voice at the other end — or worse — hearing a dial tone after he said hello.

Still, the number remained on his phone and Yunho's finger trembled as he hit the dial button, waiting as the connection chirruped through and the line started ringing.

"Hello," He said in return. Listening for a moment, Yunho closed his eyes, willing himself not to cry now; not now when he lay open and vulnerable. "Yes, it's early. I was still up." Another pause and then, "I was hoping you'd be awake. I know that you have early mornings sometimes."

"No, I'm..." Yunho stopped himself before he could utter a lie. "No, I need... I need help."

Gulping the lump in his throat, Yunho let his tears fall, running down his face freely as the sky's fury opened up once again and Tokyo trembled under the fury of the waking storm.

"I need you. I need your help," He wept, struggling to keep himself together long enough to humble himself before the man he swore he'd never bow to again. Openly sobbing, he swallowed his cries and asked softly, "I need to know, Father — who do you know in Japan? Who do you know that can help me?"

Se7en

The room was cool, air from the open window playing over Yoochun's face. His tears were gone, leaving the crackle feel of dried salt on his face. He sniffed, disliking the drowned sensation in his lungs, feeling as if his tears had fallen straight to his chest, filling every breath he took with soured ocean water.

"A sea of tears, Joongie-ah," Yoochun whispered, tightening his body around his best friend. "That's what we're swimming in right now. That's what you were floundering in, too tired and beaten to call for help. Why didn't you tell us, Je Je? Why didn't you at least tell me?"

Yoochun knew the answer to that. Jaejoong spent too many years nursing his own hurts, licking at wounds that never healed, never scabbed over and ran pink with old, spoiled blood. This time was no different. Until Jaejoong had faith in the other members — full faith — he would never reach out.

It was something Yoochun despaired over. It was also something that left him helpless and impotent.

"Yunho?" Jaejoong murmured, his velvet voice rough with sleep.

A tingle ran through Yoochun's body. No matter how much in love he was with Junsu, there was something primal and sensual about Jaejoong's voice. The man's feline movements sometimes drove the members insane, overly sexual and kitten-clumsy. More than once a director instructed an oblivious Jae to tone it down, leaving the singer confused about what the other man was talking about.

Stretching against Yoochun, Jaejoong mumbled, his hands reaching down to cup the back of Chun's thighs. Startled, the baritone shifted, pulling Jae's fingers away from their exploration of his body. In his sleep, Jaejoong's rawness surfaced, the coldness of his beauty blanking out any of the teasing, maternal expressions Jae was known for.

"Joongie, I'm here," Yoochun cradled his friend, mumbling in the other man's pierced ear. "It's Chunnie."

Hoping hearing his voice would bring Jaejoong out of his desire for Yunho and fixing in his mind that he was sharing his bed with his best friend and not his lover, Yoochun slid his body closer, working his knee between Jae's legs. Cradled too close for Jae's hands to roam over his stomach and lower, Yoochun kept the space between them tight to avoid increasing the thickening of his own sex.

In the dim light, Yoochun ended up staring at the shadowed roses on Jae's body, quilted pain worked over his upper arms and partially down his chest. Unable to do anything but stare at a ripe bloom of purple and yellow on the curve of his friend's shoulder, Chun blinked away the staining water from his eyes. He was cried out but there seemed to be an endless supply of grit and scraping pain in his heart. Sighing, he rested his cheek on Jae's temple, keeping his voice low.

"I wish I could kiss this away for you, Joongie-ah," He said, finding daylight leaking into the room from the wide windows overlooking the alley between their building and the next. The sky promised another grey rainy morning as if the city was weeping for Yoochun now that he'd run out of tears. "I wish I could make this go away, like you did for me when I first came to Korea. How do you do this? How do you take in our pain and ease our hearts? Do you hurt like this when we hurt? How do you stand this?"

"Where's Yunho?" Jae blinked, coming up out of his sleep. Fatigue dragged a dark puffiness under his eyes and without the chill of grey contacts, his dark brown eyes seemed huge, luminous port moons for Yoochun to fall into. "Did I dream him?"

"No," Yoochun replied, brushing a gentle kiss on his friend's forehead. "He is always your Yunho."

"I was scared. So scared, Chunnie-ah." With his head tucked down, Yoochun couldn't see Jae's face but he could feel the break in the singer's heart, splintered fear cutting into the tear of his voice. "Suppose all of this is a dream?"

"I wish this were, Joongie-ah," The baritone replied, lightly palming one of the bruises. "These should be a dream but you and Yunho together again — I'd rather that be real."

"I don't know if we are, Chunnie. I hope so. I ache with missing him. It hurts too much not to fall asleep with him around me," He said, curling into himself further. Yoochun held Jae, sliding his hands over the small of the singer's back, rocking him close. "I didn't know what to do, Chunnie. I... I don't know what to do now."

"Now, we... I don't know," Yoochun admitted. "But we will figure something out. We will."

"I'm sorry, Yoochun."

"For what, Joongie?" He petted the singer, stroking at the skin unmarred by Kimura's fists. Jae's back was a mess, blotched and stained. "This isn't your fault."

"I... led him on. He said..." Jae gulped, his tongue fighting to find the words muddying his mind. "Kimura-san said I would entice him and then turn him away. He would see me change my clothes and flaunt myself until he couldn't stand the sin I offered him. That I was sin. That I made him cross over into something he didn't want. That's why he hit me. To try to get me to stop. And then when I refused him, he hit me to make me..."

"He hit you because he's sick. Because he's ..." Yoochun pulled back, staring into the depths of Jae's pained gaze. "You did not do anything wrong. You didn't lead him to anything he didn't want to be led to. Kimura chose this. He chose to do this. Don't give him the respect of -san. He doesn't deserve it. He doesn't deserve your spit in his face."

"I wanted him... to like me." Admitting it was hard. Hearing himself speak of his need for approval broke the thin, cracked wall holding back Jaejoong's tears. "I was... so lonely and I thought... he reminded me of maybe an older brother. Someone I could talk to about being here in Japan and would understand how I felt. I miss having family. It's been so long since I've had family to talk to. Even Scarlet is so far. And Yunho — I lost him, Chunnie."

"You didn't lose Yunho," Yoochun said. "Kimura told him things too. We all listened to him because he is our manager. We did what he said because we want to succeed here. All of us want so much for each other that we'll do anything for one another. It makes us stupid sometimes, I think."

"He started telling me about... being not good enough to be in the group," Jae murmured, shaking his head when Yoochun's fingers brushed over his mouth. "You have to understand how scared I was at first."

"I know," He agreed. "I know how that feels. Remember when the rumours started about replacing me with a Chinese singer? I was scared then. You helped me through that."

"Kimura said he would help me become more Japanese... help me be more likeable."

"If he did that, no one would see any of the rest of us," Yoochun tried teasing a smile from his friend's mouth. Kissing Jae's nose, his heart lifted when the other man let out a small laugh. "I think Junsu and I could start making out in front of the crowd and no one would see us if you started smiling. It's very humbling. We disappear whenever you even go near Yunho."

"*Bakatare.*"

"You're not supposed to call me that," Yoochun sniffed. "I'm silly or absurd. That means stupid or something else."

"Did Yunho really... was he mad?" Jae shifted, sniffing as he snuggled down into the sheets. Wrapping himself tight in the linens, the singer swaddled their bodies together, tucking his palm under his chin. The sheets' deep colour warmed Jaejoong's pale skin, leaving a gloaming reflection on his face.

“He... said he needed air but he wanted me to watch you.” He left out the fact that Yunho left nearly two hours ago and he’d not heard any sound from the rest of the apartment. “Our leader didn’t want to leave you alone. Your lover didn’t want you to be alone so of course, he asked me to stay because next to him, I am the best thing for you.”

“Chunnie-ah?” Junsu pushed at the cracked open door, sticking his head into the room. “Hyung?”

“Junsu-ah, wait,” Yoochun tried to slither out of the sheets but the linens held him in a tight hug. “Aish, Jae, I’m trapped.”

“What are you...” Junsu turned and Yoochun saw Changmin standing bleary eyed behind the shorter man. The young singer looked tired and his hair stood up in all directions like a silken hedgehog shambling out of its nest.

“Shit,” He swore. Unable to slither out of the swaddle without exposing Jaejoong’s bare back, Yoochun sighed and spoke up. “Hold on, I’ll be right out.”

“No,” Yunho said, lightly pushing the younger men inside of the room. “We’re coming in. They need to know what’s going on and I need their help in making sure that we don’t have this happen to Jaejoong any more — that it doesn’t happen to any of us any more. Go inside, dongsaeng. It’s time we all knew the truth of things.”



Min was the most silent, listening to Yunho’s flat recitation of the past months events. He reacted in minute displays of emotion, either fisting his fingers into the sheets or tightening his mouth into a stern line but he kept silent through the story. Junsu responded differently, first with horrified tears and then with recriminations, flailing his words about like daggers. Some found their marks, scoring hits on Yunho’s pride and sense of obligation when he accused the older man of turning his back on his lover.

Jaejoong quieted the expressive tenor, soothing Junsu with soft words and even softer pets. Yoochun reached for his boyfriend, sliding Junsu’s hips over until the smaller man rested in his lap, his legs draped on Jae’s thighs. They held him there, comforting and quiet as Yunho continued talking to his friends and lover, taking the blame for Jae’s bruises and fallen confidence.

“No,” Min said finally. “It’s on all of us and most of all, Jaejoong.”

“What?” Junsu started forward, held back by Yoochun’s strong arms. “This isn’t Jae’s fault. He did nothing wrong.”

“He did one very large thing wrong,” Changmin replied coldly, meeting Junsu’s angry tone with a brush of ice. “Joongie-ah didn’t tell us what was happening. That was wrong. If one of us had done that, he’d be angry at us. We know better. He knows better. The five of us... we are all we have here. If we don’t trust one another here, in our lives, how can we trust one another anywhere else.”

Jaejoong spoke up before the others could turn on Min, stopping Yunho before he could fall into a fit of temper. “He’s right, Yunnie-ah. I should have... said something. I should have been strong enough to have faith in you and the others. I was wrong for not speaking up.”

“Kimura’s to blame for this. Jae didn’t do anything to draw his attention,” Yoochun asserted.

“*That* is true. Kimura is to blame for the damage he’s done. We need to excise him from our lives somehow,” Min nodded. “It’s not that I don’t love Joongie-ah. I just want him to love and trust me as much as he wants me to love and trust him. It’s not fair to me to give my affection openly and to have secrets kept because someone’s trying to protect me. If Kimura came after me, I would find one of you to talk to and then we could all figure something out. Divided we are weak. Only together can we stand against anything. Remember? Five minus one is zero. Well, one without five is zero too. You cannot subtract one way and not the other without getting the same result.”

“I was trying to... protect you, Minnie-ah,” Jae said.

“How can I stay out of the rain if I don’t know it’s falling on my head?” Min cocked his head, shaking off Yoochun’s censuring hand. “I’m not a child in this. I know how things are. I am the eldest in my family, just like you, Chunnie and you, Yunho. You might not respect me for that as the youngest member but I know how to be responsible for others. You shame me by not telling me. You shame me because you are saying that I fail at being a brother to you... as if I would also fail at being a brother to my sisters. That is shameful to me.”

The older men collectively took a breath. When faced with Min’s accusation, Yunho nodded slowly and exhaled. “I can’t tell you that I don’t feel protective over you, Min. I can’t say that I wouldn’t punch out someone who touched you or took advantage of you. I can’t. Don’t ask me to.”

“I know,” Min conceded with a cock of his head, his eyes growing uneven with the deep fondness he had for the older man. “But you have to expect that I’ll be mad about it.”

“Okay, I can agree to that.” Yunho stood up, pacing off the room. “Jaejoong has ghosts that lurk in his soul. He wants to keep that from you...from all of us.”

“Jaejoong is right here,” The singer mumbled, more to himself than the other members. Pushing his hair out of his face, he pulled himself up, keeping the sheets around his shoulders. Yunho gave him a tight smile, running his hand over the back of his lover’s head.

“Sorry, baby,” Yunho said. “I just think we need to all be aware of Kimura and work to keep him... contained. This means that none of us are alone with him. Even if you think you’re safe... don’t let yourself be caught in a room without at least one of the others or staff.”

“We’ll have to work on getting him replaced,” Yoochun fretted.

“Leave that to me.” Yunho shook his head, fending off the others’ protests. “If I need help, I’ll let you know but right now, let me at least see what I can do. If it needs more than me, I’ll say.”

“Suppose he wants to talk to one of us?” Junsu asked. “Alone? He asks for that sometimes. How do we get out of that?”

“We turn on our cell phones. Call one of the other members so one of us can overhear. We can try to be nearby in case he tries something like...” Min looked at Jae, his eyes traveling over the purple marks visible near the edge of the sheet’s hem. Jerking his chin towards the older singer, Min said, “Like that. Like what he did to Jaejoong.”

“Chunnie, pass me a shirt,” Jae pleaded. “I don’t feel comfortable with everyone staring at me. I’m as much to blame for these as Kimura.”

“You are never to blame for this,” Yunho kept his tone down but the anger simmered, hot with the thought of Kimura’s words and fists cutting into Jae’s ego. “No one hits you, Jaejoong. Not anyone who wants you. Not anyone who loves you. Those days are over, Joongie-ah. You have to step out of the past if we’re to help you with the future. We need you to be that strong for us. I — we — need you to be strong enough to stop thinking you brought this on yourself.”

“You have to promise us that you’ll try, Joongie-ah,” Junsu worked his fingers through Jae’s, stroking at the other man’s hand. “Please, hyung. Please say that you’ll try.”

“I care too for you to...” Yunho cupped Jaejoong’s face. The tears matted the singer’s black lashes but the glitter of his dark eyes were clear for the first time in months, shining with something the leader hoped was still affection for him. “I love you too much, Kim Jaejoong. I’d rather lose everything I have ever worked for to have you safe. Even if it means losing you, I would do anything to keep you safe. I want to die knowing that you felt loved. If my last breath is spent kissing you, then I’d withstand the pain to die a thousand times.”

Yunho bend forward, kissing his lover’s mouth until they both needed air. Whispering, Yunho brushed lips over Jae’s fullness, wishing he’d been a better man for the one he’d fallen in love with. “You are worth that death — those deaths — you matter that much to me, baby. You have *that* much of my heart.”

Eight

“It’s going fine,” Min assured Se7en as he stirred sugar into his cranberry spice tea.

Set up in his favourite coffee shop, Changmin stretched his long legs out over the davenport, tucking his phone under his jaw to hold it in place as he unwrapped the package of oatmeal cookies he’d purchased. The scent of baked sweet cinnamon-sugar and raisins seduced him first, followed by a hearty shake of earthiness from the slightly over cooked oatmeal. It had taken some convincing on his part to get the counter woman to sell him the nearly burnt cookies but the coaxing had been worth it. The cookies’ bottoms were a delicious brown, nearly the colour of Se7en’s eyes and once plump raisins along the edges were caramelized and crisp.

His iPod lay on the table, its white earbuds curled around a book in simple Japanese. The words were difficult at time but Min struggled through the manga, noting the characters he couldn’t read in a notebook. His lazy scrawl filled the page, pencil scribbles of the kanji *nana* cribbed into the margins.

“And Kimura?” Se7en broached.

“Why do you ask about *maneejaa*?” Min sipped at his tea, wrinkling his nose at the underlying bitterness of the black tea under notes. More sugar went into the cup with a vigorous stir, a tap of his spoon against the rim to knock off stray drops of the deep magenta steep.

Maneejaa. Se7en mused. *Not the formal choumoto or even the more respectful chishou but maneejaa, a coarser slang for a drudge work admin.*

The Gang of Five had closed its ranks, the Korean singer thought with a twist in his heart. Changmin had stepped away from being his Minku and wore the Dong Bang mask with ease. There would be no teasing the information out of him, the casual inquiry about Se7en’s interest bristled with warning. The matter was clearly not the older man’s business, solely resting in the hands of SM’s pretty boy thugs. Se7en debated for a moment on pushing his young boyfriend on the topic but couldn’t find an angle to approach without bringing up mention of Jaejoong.

“I was just asking how you guys were doing,” Se7en kept his tone pleasant and light, wondering how much Min would tell him.

“We’re alright. The company is hoping to get us on some shows. Jaejoong’s Japanese is good enough. I’m working on mine. Junsu and Yoochun are worthless and Yunho is only learning words that have to do with sex and kissing,” Changmin muttered then blushed, remembering who he was talking to. “Forget I said that.”

“If I listened to you every time you tell me to forget what you said,” Se7en teased. “I would have very very short conversations to remember.”

“You might be better off that way,” Min replied. “Now, tell me about your music. What have you written?”

Across the tea room, Yoochun lay back in a settee, looking around while Junsu retrieved their drinks. Set up like a poet’s living room, the tea room gave customers privacy with tall wooden bookshelves and screens blocking off smaller areas. He could see Changmin at the far end of the shop, diligently reading a manga while speaking on the phone but the younger man’s face was hidden behind a fall of his chestnut hair. Disgruntled, Yoochun swung his legs up and crossed his ankles, staring at Junsu’s shoulders over an oak highboy.

The tenor giggled at something the counter woman said, either sharing a bad pun or laughing off his bad Japanese. With only a few words, the elegant faced Korean struggled to find a common ground with most people, searching among the tidbits he'd picked up from Jaejoong and Min. Yoochun was doing no better, often answering in a blend of Korean and English before Japanese. They'd had a spot of embarrassment when Yoochun ordered, not able to explain he'd wanted a cup of cocoa. Understanding finally came after he sang a jingle for a popular chocolate bar, making Junsu burst into hysterical laughter.

After that, Yoochun decided Junsu could go get the drinks.

"Here, boyo," Junsu said, handing his lover a steaming cup topped high with whipped cream and a drizzle of chocolate. "Your cocoa."

"Boyo?" Yoochun repeated the English word. "You're supposed to be learning Japanese. What's that?"

"Australian," He replied. "The girl at the counter is from Sydney. She says that's a word they use."

"She looks Japanese," Yoochun snuck a peek around Junsu's head, slightly confused.

"She is. Japanese in blood but born and raised in Australia," The tenor sipped carefully at his own cocoa, leaving a creamy mustache on his upper lip. He ran his tongue up, scraping away the white foam, letting loose a soft moan at the taste.

Staring, Yoochun picked up his mug and gulped down a mouthful, nearly screaming when the hot liquid seared his tongue. "Oh... hot. HOT!"

"Aish, stupid," Junsu slid off the settee and headed to the counter, begging for a glass of ice. Returning, he scooped a few cubes into his fingers and slid them into Yoochun's open, panting mouth. "Here, suck on these."

Mischievously, the baritone suckled at Junsu's fingertips, drawing them deeper into his throat until the other man's eyes darkened and he peeked about the tea room with a nervous glance. Yoochun slid his tongue out, licking at Junsu's palm and grinned despite the prickly feeling growing over his tongue. The disturbed ruffle of Junsu's elegant face always made Yoochun smile and the delirious flutter of his eyelashes were always a sign that Yoochun's ministrations were rattling his self-control.

"If you keep doing that, Chunnie-ah, we are going to get kicked out of this tea room. And Changmin will pretend that he doesn't know us."

"He can pretend all he likes," Yoochun replied, scraping his teeth against Junsu's fingers, reluctantly drawing away. "We know better. If he snubs us, we shall go over there and molest him with everyone watching. He can't ignore us then."

"You might have to wait until there are more people in the shop," The tenor slid over the cushions, giving himself some breathing space away from the other man's wicked teasing. "It's late. There's only a few people here and most of them sing for Dong Bang Shin Ki."

They both looked over at Jaejoong, the singer tucked into a corner as far away from the counter as possible. Pale, the young man looked fragile, nearly as breakable as the orchid embellished tea cup he drank from. Although staring intently at the door, he appeared to be immersed in thought, an open book set face side down on the table in front of him.

Jaejoong's long fingers played with his cell phone, the soft rattle of charms keeping him company as he watched the rain fall outside. Water dotted the glass, round cabochon diamonds reflecting the lights, turning red then green with the traffic flow. Resting his temple on the glass, Jaejoong gave up all pretense of reading and lost himself in the flush of cars and people bustling by, waiting for Yunho to join him.

"He looks lonely," Junsu whispered to Yoochun. "We should go over there."

"No, we should maybe go home," Yoochun winked, his full mouth crooked with naughty intent. "Min's on one of his long phone calls and Jaejoong's mooning over Yunnie-ah. We could go home and be alone."

“Being alone would be nice,” The other man drawled, ducking his head to risk a nip at Yoochun’s earlobe. “We haven’t been alone for a while.”

“Kimura isn’t there,” Yoochun made a face, his grimace echoed by Junsu’s wrinkled nose. “He said he had work to do for the company but do you think he called Jaejoong to a hotel room? And Jae’s ignoring him.”

“Nah,” Junsu shook his head, drinking from his mug. “Joongie-ah would have told us. Remember his face when we all showed up for that one time?”

“Ke ke,” The baritone chuckled, a deep velvet purr. “I thought he was going to stab us. He looked so scary.”

“Oh, he was mad.”

“Spitting.” Yoochun flung his arm over the back of the settee, rubbing his fingers over Junsu’s shoulder. “It was worth having dance rehearsals every day for that.”

“Hah!” Junsu poked his lover’s ribs, digging in deep. “That’s because you didn’t have to stand near Min the Windmill. He needs to either stop growing or learn where his arms end. I think I had more bruises from his hands than Jaejoong did from...”

Junsu trailed off, growing serious and quiet. With a quick peek at the singer, he was tempted to snuggle up against Yoochun, begging to be forgiven for speaking thoughtlessly. Responding with a soft smile, Yoochun lightly bumped shoulders with the other man, a silent and nearly invisible kiss.

“I didn’t mean...” Sighing, he collapsed, draping himself over Yoochun’s body. “I should go home and ...”

“Be punished,” Chunnie grinned. “I like that idea.”

“Aish, you’re bad. No, we should go keep Jaejoong company,” He said, gathering up his mug and napkin. “Come on, it is the right thing to do.”

“But I don’t want to do the right thing,” Yoochun muttered, flaring his nostrils in frustration. “I want to do the naughty thing. With you. On the couch.” Finding himself talking to the air, he stood, tucking his napkins under one arm. “Fine. We’ll go keep Jaejoong company but you’re going to owe me at least *one* naughty thing. And I’m going to get to choose where.”



Yunho checked the address again, doubling back to recount the numbers. No, he thought, taking a few steps forward, it definitely is in an alleyway. Frowning, the young man darted across the street, dodging a careening taxi intent on making the green light. Its tires hit a puddle, splashing Yunho and soaking his jeans through to the skin. He stopped to wring out the worst of it but the falling rain grew heavy and he was fighting a losing battle.

The area was cramped, more so than the parts of Tokyo he’d seen and a lingering sense of fatigue lay on the buildings. They drooped as if too tired to hold up their own roofs and the night air kicked up enough of a breeze to grab at the tattered cloth banners that hung from a nearby restaurant’s wooden pole.

A fat man stood in the restaurant doorway, his eyes thin and fixed on Yunho as he walked by. Dressed in soiled white pants and a dirty wife beater, he smelled like rotten food and cigarettes, pungent and foul. Rain beaded on his bald head, running down the curve of his skull and collecting in the folds above his neck. The suspicion in his face told Yunho to move along and the singer hurried past, ducking his head in a short respectful nod.

Most of the shops in the area were closed and the few that Yunho could see through the rain seemed to be sparsely populated with goods. After passing by the third pawnshop on his way down to the alley, the Korean began to wonder at the neighbourhood. His disquieting thoughts were confirmed as he passed by a

man closing the doors to his cigarette shop and the store owner called out to ask Yunho how much he wanted to sell his sneakers for.

Giving one last longing look at the relative safety of the rainy street, Yunho walked into the alley, stepping around the scattered garbage on the ground.

Something large and furry rustled up from a bin, its long naked tail draped over the metal edge. Ambient light hit its long face and it glared at the singer, chittering at the man with a snap of its elongated hooked teeth. Leaving the rat to its dinner, he continued out, trying to decipher the numbers painted above each doorway. Several were open, lights and the sound of loud television coming from the inside of what looked like to be single room apartments but Yunho saw no one, only encountering the smell of cabbage and stale smoke.

"Number five-seven-three," Yunho stopped in front of a red door, its paint cracked and lifting from age. Two sets of metal numbers announced the address, one in common Anglo form and the other in old style Japanese script that Yunho could barely read. Clearing his throat, he adjusted his shirt and shook off most of the rain from his hair, hoping he looked at least marginally presentable.

Raising his fist up to knock, Yunho stepped back when the door opened before he could strike it and he swallowed hard at the woman standing in front of him.

In another lifetime... or even another neighbourhood... she would have been considered a beauty. Even in the harshness of her surroundings, the woman resonated with an unearthly elegance, out of sorts with the drab greyness of the room behind her. Standing in the doorway, she tilted her head and stared at the young Korean on her doorstep, a curious look on her cold, hard face.

Nature had given her a face and a body to distract most red-blooded men and even with his love for Jaejoong beating in his heart, Yunho was affected by the woman's beauty. Her hair hung in an inverted bob, cut short to the nape in the back and swinging down along her jaw in the front. The pink streaked black curtain moved as she stood, still shivering with the swing of her walk.

Yunho had to admit that the dangerous, sleek woman gave him pause. Her confidence shone in the self-assured way she stood, ripe lush hips cocked to one side with her weight resting on one foot. Nearly as tall as Yunho, she would tower over most men, and the competent way she held her shoulders meant that those men would also be intimidated by a woman who could break them in two.

"Jaejoong," Yunho reminded himself. "Prettier, and at least less likely to break me in two."

Not unless you touch this woman, he laughed to himself. *And then Jaejoong would skin him alive and leave him rolled up in a vat of shoyu.*

"Hello," She sauntered back into the room. As she turned, Yunho spotted a tear in her jeans and a small peek at her pale backside, barely enough of a glance of skin to be bothered by but she wielded her sex appeal like a skilled swordsman.

"Hello," He replied, clearing his throat. "Are you..."

"Netsuke." Her smile seemed generous, like a black panther's would as it contemplated which side of the mouse to begin its meal at. "What can I do for you?"

"My father, Jung, sent me," Yunho replied, pulling a thick envelope from his jacket pocket. "He said you can help me."

She took the envelope, cracking open its flap and inspected its contents. Satisfied, she nodded and motioned towards a rattan chair, settling down on a bench nearby. "What do you need?"

"I need him stopped." Yunho looked up, his face hard and as cold as hers. "And I don't care what has to be done to make that happen."

Nine

Men were in the shadows, circling around the floor where colourful lights played over sweaty, pretty boys. The dance floor stretched over most of the lower area, spilling up into low platforms rising up a few feet. The more exhibitionist minded dancers lingered there, their supple bodies dripping with come-hither movements and flashing eyes. The once-lovers avoided the spotlights and platforms, keeping themselves to the corner and hugging to the darkness. Music pounded their bodies, the beat of the speakers creating a soft wind to ruffle their hair and clothes.

A few inches separated them but to Yunho, it might as well have been several miles.

Jae's head was down, his hair fallen forward to veil his cheekbones but Yunho knew the expression the other man's face — a lost sensual angel mask he wore when he fell into the music playing around him. There were times when only Jaejoong could hear the melody in his mind, enraptured by the sounds blending around him but now in the flood of sensation, lights and sound, Yunho shared the singer's ethereal experience and wanted more.

Two weeks then another two passed since he'd visited Netsuke and he'd heard not even a whisper of a call on his cell phone. Every few days he fought the urge to call his father and complain but Jae's haunted eyes when Kimura walked through their apartment kept him silent. He had to focus on keeping Jaejoong safe and away from the cruelties their manager would visit upon him. Yunho had his job to do and he needed to keep that in mind.

Knowing that didn't make the wait any easier. And seeing Kimura's smirking sneer when his eyes fell on Jae's slender body made Yunho's fists itch. A splash of blood on his knuckles, the leader growled to himself. That's all Yunho wanted. And to see Kimura bleeding out and as bruised as Jaejoong's heart had been.

The light caught on Jaejoong's shoulders and Yunho suddenly found himself staring into the young man's face, his amber whiskey eyes were dark with pleasure and his full mouth wore the imprints of Jae's teeth, his tongue dabbing at the spots where he'd chewed on his lip while dancing. The dart of tongue made Yunho hard and despite years of watching Jaejoong taste at the air or his mouth, the leader couldn't help but react to the sight of his sensual mouth partially open and panting, begging to be filled.

Unable to do something about the stiffness in his body, Yunho pulled Jaejoong closer, guiding the young man into the curve of his body until they fit against one another. They moved easily, Jaejoong's back against Yunho's chest. Dark ink played peek-a-boo with Yunho around Jae's t-shirt collar, the top of their group's name sliding in and out of view. Daringly, the man leaned forward, smiling as Jae dropped his head back to rest on his shoulder.

Keeping his eyes on the crowd, Yunho waited until the lights dipped away from them and let his tongue wander, tasting at the tattoo Jaejoong wore so proudly on his back.

The singer stiffened, either from shock or his body reacting to Yunho's wet caress but then a moment later, Jaejoong relaxed, draping back against the other's open arms. With his head bent back, his throat exposed and his mouth open, Jaejoong lay surrendered to Yunho's touch and mouth, his hips moving against the other man's hips in time with the slow groove settling over them.

Li hing mui, Yunho thought, that's what Jaejoong tastes like when dancing. They'd tried the odd preserved plum a month or so ago and the delicate but strong flavour fused to Yunho's mind. He'd struggled to remember where he'd tasted it before, if only to satisfy his own curiosity and with the lithe bodied singer undulating against him and a lick of Jae's body on his tongue, Yunho finally got his answer. *Traveling plum*

was what the name translated to and Yunho couldn't think of anything better to describe his estranged boyfriend.

A succulent plum pulled dry from a hard life but then rolled in sugar, salt and a spicy licorice, the flavours had battled for dominance in Yunho's mouth as Jae's tang now confused his mind. A hint of black sweet lingered as an aftertaste, either from a dash of cologne or more likely from the complex scent of the singer's favoured soap.

Yunho resisted another taste. A man's eyes were on them, piercing and dark as if he could peel back their clothes and watch the couple's most intimate moves. Apprehensive curls started in Yunho's stomach, creeping and winding through his nerves until he felt himself begin to move away from Jaejoong, his emotions shuttered back by the damning thoughts of his own upbringing.

"Look at those men," His uncle once said as they passed two older men holding hands in the park. "It's disgusting what they do."

Yunho had only seen two men holding hands, their shoulders brushing and laughter in their voices but the dripping hatred in his relative's voice was evident. Their actions were abhorrent, damaging to society and a perversion. A Korean man could casually touch a friend but couldn't linger. To hold onto another man for longer than a moment meant a deviance no one would abide for.

And yet as the group slowly drew together, Yunho found himself holding onto Dong Bang Shin Ki's slender vocalist for longer and longer moments. Then Yunho found himself unwilling to let go.

The distance between his and Jaejoong had grown. If he tried, Yunho could put his fist between their bodies and the space hurt. Jae danced on, not feeling or not caring about the span of air lingering hot between them but Yunho felt it, long threads snapping as he moved and shifted.

Every thread was a memory, shared and remembered, hooking into Yunho's soul. They tugged, sometimes leaving starbursts of pain while others were warm points spreading through him but the connection was there, drawing Jae to him. Reaching out, Yunho placed his hands on Jaejoong's belly, wrapping his arms around his lithe boyfriend. Raising his head, the leader met the man's eyes, challenging him to speak up against their touching... to say anything about Yunho's running his palms over Jae's chest, circling around the pebbled nubs now visible through the singer's thin t-shirt.

He wanted to bend Jae's head back, holding the other's hair in his clenched fist until the singer was arched against him. With his throat exposed and hips canted out, Yunho could spend his time exploring the sensitive skin below Jae's earlobe, nuzzling and nipping as the young singer moaned his little kittenish mews. In the darkness, Yunho was tempted to pull the shirt free of Jae's body or even, more daringly, tear it down the front so the young man's chest was exposed and he could reach in to explore Jae's long torso or wet his fingers and play with the diamond embellished gold ring piercing Jae's navel.

As if hearing Yunho's thoughts, Jae slithered back, his hips rolling into with an erotic allure. Too ethereal-minded to recall the intricate steps of their choreography without excess repetitions, Jaejoong's graceful sensuality emerged only in the driving pound of a freeform dance, his supple and seemingly boneless body wrapped around the music in ways that bent Yunho's imagination.

The music shifted, changing over to a faster beat and Jae followed, led by the bass. Continuing to watch, the man's eyes glazed over, his thoughts moving to places and things other than what was in front of him. With a lift of his lip, Yunho dismissed him, turning his attention to the pale column of Jae's throat.

A pulse fluttered blue under Jae's skin, the singer's collarbone dewed with small dots of sweat. With the lights flashing in time to the music, the drops sparkled on the singer's skin, jewels on white velvet. Unable to resist the temptation, Yunho licked the ridge clean, running his tongue over the length of Jae's chest to savour the licorice scented flesh under his lips.

Buzzing interrupted Yunho's playful fondling of Jae's body and he frowned, debating if he should leave his phone in his pocket but the vibrations stilled only for a second before starting up again. First one incoming text then another, rapidly following one another drew Yunho away but not before he sank his teeth

into Jae's throat, pulling up a mouthful of the singer's skin between his teeth. He would leave a mark, Yunho thought as he rolled the mouthful back and forth. He would leave it and be proud of Jaejoong wearing the imprint of his biting kiss when they tumbled out of the club and into the night.

Jaejoong glanced back when Yunho pulled away. Holding up his lit up phone, Yunho wrinkled his nose and held up his fingers, asking Jae to wait for him. Nodding, the singer closed his eyes and started dancing, shifting away from the crowd as he lifted his arms over his shoulders and bent his head, rolling his shoulders in time to the music.

Keeping one eye on his lover, Yunho checked his messages with a quick flick of his fingers. He didn't care for the glances Jae was gathering from the dancers on the main floor and from the interested quirk of one young man's eyebrow, Yunho was fairly certain he'd have to either back Jaejoong up when he said *no* or end up punching out another club-goer.

Have something for you. Want to give to K yourself or want me to? Netsuke used a simple form of Japanese but the intent was clear. She wanted him to respond quickly and he'd ignored her, or so he imagined considering she'd left four messages with basically the same message. *Come by and get package. Or I'll go. Let me know.*

I will come get. Yunho struggled with the words. Sighing at his lingual skills, he checked the time and sighed again. Part of him hated cutting his time with Jaejoong short, especially since the singer often felt amorous following a night out but Netsuke was clear. She was short on time and doing Yunho a favour. He'd have to dance attendance to her when she wanted him to.

"Baby," Yunho shouted into Jae's ear. "Gotta go"

Jaejoong frowned, grabbing Yunho's wrist to check his watch. It was early, his face clearly said but when Yunho shouted their manager's name so he could hear, the singer went pale and nodded. Holding Jaejoong's hand, Yunho brushed past the man who'd been staring, jostling his shoulder as they went by. Regardless if he shared Jaejoong's bed, Yunho would make it clear the young man was leaving with him.



The alleyway was even darker than Yunho remembered and rats scattered in all directions when he walked past the garbage bin. Having dropped Jaejoong off at the apartment, Yunho made certain the others were there before he left. Unwilling to leave Jae and Min with Kimura, the leader woke Yoochun up with a violent shake, pulling him out of bed as Jae mumbled about needing a shower.

Kimura lingered in the kitchen, watching with narrowed eyes as the baritone stumbled out of the hallway. He'd long caught on to the members' unwillingness to leave Jae with him but they'd been circumspect before. In dragging Yoochun out, Yunho was flagrantly throwing down the gauntlet for Kimura to pick up.

"You can't be here all the time, shonen," Kimura said, sipping at hot cup of tea. His eyes lingered on Jae's chest before moving on to the length of his legs, tiny spots of skin showing through the singer's torn jeans.

"You shouldn't be here at all," Yunho snarled back, keeping his voice low so the others didn't hear him.

"I can arrange it so you aren't," The man took another sip, casually smiling wickedly over the mug's rim. "There are ways for someone on the end to get hurt...badly hurt even. Perhaps even ending their career."

"Funny," Yunho grabbed the keys to one of the group's rented cars. He was willing to risk driving in Tokyo, especially late at night. He didn't want to leave Jae alone for too long and from her text messages, Netsuke wasn't willing to wait very long. "I was thinking the same thing about you."

The conversation with Kimura left a bad taste in his mouth and an uneasy feeling in his stomach but Yunho hurried, watching the lights change from red to green, impatient to go on his way. He'd made a wrong turn and then another before finding himself on the right street quite by accident. Parking in front of the restaurant, he nodded hurriedly at the same fat man in white he'd seen before. If anything the man's

clothes were even dirtier and the length of ash on his cigarette appeared to be nearly three inches long but Yunho didn't stop to marvel at the balancing act.

A knock on the red door opened it and Netsuke stood in front of him, her lush form tightly dressed in black leather pants and a pale pink tank top. He could see she wore no bra, the dark rose of her nipples showing through the fabric and their peaks ripened at the brush of cold air from outside. Her hair was swept back from one ear and sparkling diamonds ran up the length of her helix, stars captured in stone on her peach skin. A red cherry died to make the colour of her lipstick and Netsuke smiled, her sharp white teeth reminding Yunho that she was as much a predator as Kimura, if not worse.

"Come in, pretty," She hooked her fingers into Yunho's shirt collar, leading him further into the single room. The rattan chair had been replaced by a wide couch, its low wooden back bare of cushions. A large padded envelope lay on the coffee table, keeping a couple of open cold beers company. Picking one up, she handed it to Yunho before snagging the second, sipping at the brew. "Envelope's yours."

"What's in it?" Yunho said, holding the beer awkwardly as he juggled the envelope. Putting the bottle down, he wiped his hands on his jeans and cracked open the metal tab.

"Your way to get Kimura out of your life." Netsuke rested her arm along the back of the couch. Her fingers stroked at the line of Yunho's spine, starting a lingering heat on his skin. "Now, have a good look and we can talk about the rest of my payment."

"Payment?" Yunho cocked his head to look at her. "My father sent enough money to cover..."

"Cover what you're holding in your hand, yes," Netsuke purred. "But I was thinking more along the lines of time and expenses. You know, incidentals. I ended up with a lot of incidentals, Jung Yunho. Look in the package first and see if it's worth your...time."

The envelope disgorged its contents with an indelicate flush. A couple of unmarked DVDs mingled with photographs, startling images of young men and boys stretched out on a very familiar looking bed. His throat closed up, recognizing the jigsaw patterned quilt on Kimura's bed in their apartment. Mostly nude, the photos' subjects were in various throes of pain without a shred of pleasure in their faces. In some, Kimura was clearly seen, his face twisted into an evil grimace or exultation, enjoying the humiliation of his victims. Sickened, Yunho tried to look away but he forced himself to go through the photos, searching for familiar features — hoping in his soul that he'd not find Jaejoong among the faces.

"How did you get these?" Yunho asked, his stomach roiling. Kimura's perversions ran beyond just Jaejoong. They stretched out behind him, fluttering demon wings soiling every life he'd ever touched. Jae wasn't among the images, much to Yunho's relief but he knew it would have been only a matter of time if Jae hadn't spoken up.

"He keeps a small office at another apartment. A smaller place that I guess he brings only special guests to." Tapping out a cigarette from a wrinkled pack, Netsuke lit the end with a stainless steel lighter, exhaling a smoke ring into the air. "He keeps this kind of stuff in a safe under the bed. It took me three times to find it. I checked out the DVDS. Pretty sick stuff."

"What am I supposed to with these?" Yunho asked. His lungs were sticky, the breath he'd just taken lodged somewhere in his throat. "How..."

"You do what your father did to you when he got those pictures of your pretty boy and his friend. And yes, I was the one who took those," Netsuke replied. "You take them to him, shove them under his nose and tell him to get lost. Or you'll spread them around. Trust me, Jung, no one likes their dirty little secrets out in the open. Especially dirty little secrets like this. How long do you think a piece of shit like this would last if one of these boys' fathers found him? Japan's more open minded than your Korea but this..." She tapped the photos with one scarlet fingertip. "This is still sick."

"If I do that," Yunho said, the images blurring with the hint of tears in his eye. "I become..."

“Your father?” She laughed, a harsh sound as bitter as the cigarette smoke she breathed out. “You became your father the moment you knocked on that door, Jung Yunho. You might as well take that final step. There’s no going back now. Not if you want to protect that sweet faced little angel of yours.”

Ten

“You want me to...threaten him with these?” Yunho exhaled, puffing his cheeks out. Laying the packet on the table, he stared down at Kimura’s sickness. The images were obscene, perversions of something he once shared with Jaejoong — and hoped to share again.

“Is the water too hot for you, baby boy?” Netsuke made an ugly face, tugging at one of her earrings. “You wanted something deep to stab him with. Here you go. How much more do you need?”

“Suppose he doesn’t back down? Then I have to release these to his company,” He replied. “What about the men in these photos? What happens to them? What happens when his company goes after them?”

“Who cares what happens to them?” A flick of her hand in the air dismissed Kimura’s victims. Her hand snaked out, clasping over Yunho’s thigh. She squeezed and massaged his leg, drawing her fingers up under his zipper and smiled as his body instinctively responded. “They probably were asking for this to happen to them.”

“You’d say that?” Yunho stood, pulling away from her touch. “You think these men would want their families to know about what happened to them? You don’t think that this would shame them?”

She turned, hooking her arms over the wood back and stared at Yunho, her succulent mouth parted in disgusted surprise. “Look, the way this is probably going to work is that you go to the company and they remove him from your apartment. He goes to manage someone else and you go to someone else. They’re not going to fire him. He makes them money. I’ve done some digging. You’ll be lucky if they don’t decide to leave him there to move you up. Like I said, Kimura makes them a *lot* of money.”

“So it’s not even a sure thing.” The air suddenly was too thick to breathe in and Yunho took a short sip of beer, hoping the cold alcohol would clear his throat. “I could go to Kimura and he could laugh it off. He could be untouchable.”

“You have to make it sound real, Jung,” Netsuke growled, tipping her beer back. “Don’t tell me there isn’t a little bit of your Daddy in you.”

“Not like this,” He shook his head. Gathering up the photos, he shoved them into the envelope along with the DVDs. “I have to come up with something that will make Kimura back down. Just having him go away isn’t going to do it. He’ll just... do this to someone else.”

“Someone you don’t know,” Netsuke said, rubbing her index finger along her forehead. “Look, I thought you were hot when it looked like you had some spine but now, not as much. You have everything in your hand that I got on Kimura and now you’re going back and forth like you’re washing clothes on a rock? Get out, Jung Yunho. I don’t go to bed with weak sniveling men. Come back when you grow something between your legs.”



The apartment was quiet when Yunho returned. The first door off of the main hallway — Kimura’s door — was closed but a sliver of light shone out from under his bedroom door. Creeping softly down the hall on his bare feet, he briefly stuck his head into the room across the hall, smiling to himself when he saw Yoochun and Junsu curled up together on a single bed. Crossing back over to his bedroom, Yunho softly knocked on the door, pushing it open when he heard Min sleepily mumble for him to come in.

Jaejoong was asleep, sprawled out on Yunho’s queen-sized bed. His legs were at odd angles, sprawled out as if he were trying to sleep around something lying diagonally across the mattress. Even with

the heaviness in his heart, Yunho grinned. The something Jae'd grown used to sleeping around was a lover who'd not shared his bed in a few months but the habit remained. There was hope for him yet.

Sitting on his own bed, Changmin nodded a hello before putting down his book. Taking off a pair of wire rimmed glasses, he rubbed at his eyes, blinking owlishly. Stifling a yawn, he leaned over to pop open the mini-fridge between the bed Junsu once slept in — one now occupied by Yunho — and pulled out a cucumber dry soda, offering it to the older man.

"Thank you," Yunho gratefully took the bottle, holding the cap tightly and opening it slowly to keep the hiss and pop as quiet as he could. "When did he fall asleep?"

"A little while ago," Changmin held out a box of Pocky and grimaced at Yunho's censuring look. "I know. Don't eat in the bedroom but I was hungry and I didn't want to leave him here. So what was I going to do?"

"Go without food for more than ten minutes?" Despite the rules, Yunho took a couple of sticks, chewing off bits of almonds before he ate the chocolate dipped cookie.

"I'd die," Min declared dramatically. "And Jaejoong kept talking. I think he was nervous. It gave him something to chew on. He wanted to go outside and have a cigarette but I told him it would be a bad idea."

"It would have calmed him down."

"But then he would have had to take a shower. I'm not sleeping with him in the same room smelling of smoke." The younger man pointed out. "And that meant I would have to sit with him in the bathroom while he was naked. Aren't I traumatized enough by seeing the two of you have sex under the sheets? I have to stare at his naked body too?"

"You've seen everything before," Yunho playfully smacked at Min's leg, knocking the younger man's foot off the bed. "But thanks. I know it was hard to stay up."

"Did you get what you needed on Kimura?"

"I think so but — I don't know..."

"Can I see?" Min held his hand out for the packet Yunho carried in with him.

"Minnie-ah, I don't want you to. I don't." The leader tightened his grip on the envelope. "It's not...pretty."

"Nothing's pretty, Yunnie-ah," Changmin replied. "Certainly not this. You can't share this with anyone but me. Jaejoong is too fragile where Yoochun and Junsu are too emotional. It's stupid for you to think you should carry this by yourself. Isn't that what we were yelling at Jaejoong about?"

"You were yelling. I was consoling."

"You always console," Min rolled his eyes. "It's why he's spoiled and thinks he can do anything he wants. Give me the package, Yunho."

"You don't know what you're asking to see, Min," Yunho explained. "You don't."

"I need to know, Yunho," Changmin said. "I need to know what would have happened to me if Jaejoong hadn't taken those bruises. I need to see the truth, Yunnie-ah. The whole truth of this."

It was hard to look at the long-legged boy — no, Yunho corrected himself — the young man that sat across of him. In a few short years, he'd grown from the innocent, too-shy city kid to a mostly confident world traveler. His face changed, maturing until they matched the wise, sometimes too cunning eyes in Min's face and now, somber and demanding, Yunho knew he could no longer always treat Changmin like a delicate younger brother he needed to protect from the world.

"Please, don't... tell the others," He said, passing over the envelope.

Yunho stood, needing to distance himself from the horrors contained within the manila slip. A few steps over and he reached his bed, or what was once his bed now that the singer appeared to have appropriated it. Jaejoong slept on, straddling his dreams and murmuring. After years of watching Jae sleep, he knew it

would be hours before the singer woke up, steeped heavily into slumber. An alarm clock might rouse him but conversations or even movies could go on full volume near him and he wouldn't twitch an eyelid.

It had been different when they'd first moved in together. Then the sounds of the night or someone passing by the door startled Jaejoong into a panicked awakened state. After seeing the reality of Jae's past captured on others' bodies... under Kimura's hands... Yunho now understood why the unknown sounds once held terrors for the lithe singer.

Changmin shuffled through the photos, slowly turning them and staring at the images. His face never turned away, although his eyes moistened and his mouth, usually quirked into a careful secretive smile lay placid and serious. He reached the end after a long time, then began again, studying the faces of Kimura's victims as if somehow burning them to memory would make them recognizable.

"I don't know any of them," Yunho finally said. "I wonder if they are trainees or..."

"Men he lured in, promising he could make them stars," Min replied flatly. It was odd to hear the so-adult voice coming from their youngest. Even harder seeing his hands touching the filth of Kimura's mind and body. "I don't know any either. I was hoping I did but I don't."

He put them carefully back into the envelope, letting it slide onto the bed before wiping his face. Yunho retrieved the packet, looking for someplace to tuck it away where none of the others would see it. He finally resorted to stuffing it between the portfolio pockets of Min's sketch binder.

"The others won't go there," Min agreed. "And I'll leave it alone."

"I'd rather you hadn't seen it to begin with."

"No, it was..." Changmin searched for the word. "Important. Vital even. It answers a lot of questions for me. And makes me want to ask more."

"How could that..." Yunho couldn't bring himself to give the packet any label. Calling them photos damned any decent image captured on a camera and he didn't want to think of the faces he saw there. "How could those give you questions?"

"I wondered sometimes what Jaejoong went through. I know he says that no one... touched him like that but Yunnie-ah, Jaejoong lies," Changmin said softly. "He lies when he thinks he can get away with it and he believes in his heart that telling the truth would keep someone else from hurt. I've seen those faces before. I've seen that kind of fear before and it's been on Jaejoong's face. When someone we didn't know touches him or when a fan reaches out and lays her hand on his body, he gets stiff and I see that fright come to life. So I have questions about whether my older brother is lying to me and he's had more pain than he's willing to tell me."

"I — can't answer that." Yunho admitted. He'd taken Jae at his word; that no one had ever pushed themselves onto him like Kimura had those other men but once the seed of doubt was placed, it found fertile soil, blossoming into a tangle of weeds. "I hope he doesn't think that I ... I needed him to be untouched."

"I don't know," Changmin replied. "Sometimes I don't think anyone understands what Jaejoong thinks other than Jaejoong."

"There are too many things in my head," The leader said with a weary sigh. "I don't think I can think straight sometimes. All I know is that I have to confront Kimura with this. And I have to do it so he can't retaliate."

"Can I ask you something.. personal, Yunnie-ah?" Min scooted forward. "Something that will probably make you uncomfortable?"

"I don't think you can ask me anything that can make me feel worse, Min."

"It's about... doing these things. Not like Kimura does," Changmin hastily said when Yunho shot him a dark look. "I mean... it looks like it hurts. Here in these photos — they look like they're in pain and I can tell it's not something they want but...I see you and Jaejoong..."

“Aish, Changmin, you ask...” Yunho exhaled hard and stared up at the ceiling. “You’re asking for so personal...”

“I know but when I ask Jaejoong,” Min explained. “He starts talking about love and poetry...stars and fireworks. Yoochun giggles and Junsu is worthless because he thinks I’m too young to know. How bad is it when Mr. I-don’t-drink-beer tells you that you’re too young to know something?”

Yunho thought about it and nodded. “Okay, that’s true.”

“I just want to know... why? Why do it ... why have sex if it hurts?”

“It doesn’t,” Yunho said, clearing his throat. “Or at least I don’t... God, Min, why do you always ask *me* these things?”

“I just went over that.” Min’s eyes wrinkled. “Do I have to go over it again? Are you getting so old you don’t remember things from a minute ago?”

“No!” He hissed. “Aish! Okay, I’ve never... Jae... God this is hard to talk about. I’ve not had Jae... or Jae’s not had me in that way. I’m always...”

“You’re always the one penetrating then?” Min cocked his head, regarding his hyung. “Is that what Jae wants? How do you know it doesn’t hurt?”

“Why do you ask these questions?” Yunho shifted, sitting back down on the mattress after nearly sliding off. “You’re not thinking of ... giving Kimura what he wants?”

“No!” Min dismissed the idea with a snort. “I’d give him a knife in the nuts if he comes near me. He can’t do bad things to anyone if he’s missing his dick. I just...want to know and you’re here.”

“I wish I weren’t then,” He replied with an exasperated sound. “We take care. Or at least I try to. Tried to. You don’t need to know when we...”

“I’ll know when the two of you start having sex again. We all will,” Min told him. “You’ll be more pleasant and happy and Jaejoong will start cooking again. My stomach would like for you two to start having sex again soon. I’m sick of eating take-out food. I miss Korean cooking and right now, I’ll kill for one of Jae’s stews.”

“It’s good to know you’re thinking about us.” Yunho shot back.

“I’m thinking about my stomach,” Min said, patting his belly. “I’m a growing boy. My stomach is my first priority. But answer the question. Why?”

“Because it feels good.” He shrugged and looked down, finding it easier to talk without seeing Changmin’s eyes on him. “You have to... well, no *you* don’t have to do anything... I make sure that there is enough... moisture for Jae’s body. That the... way is prepared so he doesn’t feel... I hate you for making me talk about this.”

“I hate that you can’t make a full sentence.” Min shrugged. “We all have our burdens.”

“There’s a spot inside of a man,” Yunho visibly struggled to get the words out. “It’s inside of him and when we.. Jae and I... are together, I can rub up against that spot, giving him pleasure.”

“Do you touch him too? In front?”

“I am going to have to wash your mouth with chili pepper when we’re done.”

“You think I don’t touch myself sometimes?” Min asked.

“I don’t want to think about you doing that,” Yunho admitted. “And I don’t want to think of you having sex either.”

“I am going to...some day.”

“Just not soon, okay?” Yunho begged. “And don’t tell me about it. Aren’t you embarrassed to talk about this? Open like this?”

“Not with you,” Changmin said, shaking his head. “I’m not interested in you. It would be like having sex with my uncle. My very old uncle with a floppy thing that swings back and forth when he walks to the bathroom.”

“I would pound you but it would wake Jae.”

“Hitting me would mean that you probably wouldn’t have sex for a long time,” Min cautioned, raising one eyebrow. “We’re going to visit Korea soon. I can get my stew there. You, on the other hand, have no other options. Well you do but then we wouldn’t have to worry about you dangling any more if Joongie-ah found out.”

“How did you get to be so wicked?” Yunho sighed, shaking his head.

“Joongie raised me,” Min replied with a smile.

“Speaking of Joongie, are you staying up for a while? I need to make a phone call,” Yunho checked the time. “It’s almost six in the morning. I might be okay.”

“For a little bit.” He nodded, stifling a yawn. “But I’m tired. I don’t want to sleep through my day off.”

“I’m not going to be long,” Yunho promised. “I can’t be.”

The balcony proved to be his sanctuary once more but this time, the rain clouds kept the sun back, leaving the city in pitch darkness. Swallowing his nerves, Yunho dialed and waited for someone to pick up. A woman answered, sleepily asking if everything was alright.

“It is, Mom,” Yunho said softly, cradling the phone against his cheek. Now that the time had come for him to pay his father, he found he couldn’t give the man what he wanted. “I need to talk to you.”

“I am here.” She sounded clearer as if the sleep fled from her body at the sound of her son’s broken voice. “What is wrong, my Yunnie.”

“I... had to ask Father for help,” He choked back a sob, gritting his teeth against the pain. “He told me he would if I promised to do something.”

“What was that?”

“That I wouldn’t...contact you again. That I wouldn’t ever talk to you again,” Yunho cleared his throat, steeling himself for the pain he knew was coming. “I wanted to tell you goodbye at least. And to tell you why... why I have to do this.”

He heard his mother’s tears, even though she tried to smother her cries, Yunho heard them across the ocean and they slammed piercing needles into his heart.

“I’m sorry... so sorry, Mom,” He said, closing his eyes. “But Father made me choose between having you in my life or... Jaejoong. And I had to... I had to choose Jaejoong.”

Eleven

“Yunho.” Kimura gave the Dong Bang Shin Ki leader a quick glance, his eyes sliding over the young man as if the Korean were nothing to him.

He probably was nothing, Yunho surmised. If the man had the power to, he’d erase Yunho from the ground he walked on. The past few weeks had been brutal, their schedules packed too tight to do anything but dance, sing and sleep. Food was few and far between, small meals caught in between rehearsals of one thing or another. Lately the game appeared to be scheduling the members to appear on talk shows, their Japan manager knowing full well the members’ language skills were sparse at best.

Jaejoong saved them, surprisingly so. Yunho knew he should know better than to underestimate the singer. The young man proved time and time again to be more perceptive than they’d given him credit for. With the spotlight glaring down on them, Jaejoong stepped up and smiled winningly as he maneuvered through what sounded like nearly flawless Japanese. He apologized for his lack of speech, bowing deeply as he begged for forgiveness but the gesture was more for show than anything else. The female interviewers gave him carte blanche and when flustered, a blush and a shy duck of his head laid the groundwork for the show to forgive the foreigners practically anything. Yunho was pretty certain he could strip down to a pair of purple underpants while singing Thai nursery rhymes and the interviewers would cut the slack.

If anything, their performance irritated Kimura and he fought to push them harder, driving Junsu nearly to exhaustion one day after booking him on back to back shoots. Yoochun rebelled first, refusing to be hurried from a signing and Changmin followed suit, taking his time in greeting young school children at an event. The company listened to Kimura’s complaints and dismissed them, pointing out the group was focused solely on public relations.

“No,” Yunho thought as he watched Kimura rifle through some papers on his desk, playing power games similar to the ones his own father played with him as a child. *“We’re focused on ensuring Jaejoong is never alone with that monster.”*

“Did you need something?” He asked the leader with a droll smirk. “Perhaps you need more to do if you’ve got enough time on your hands to stand like an idle moron in my office.”

“I actually wanted to talk to you about something,” Yunho closed the door behind him, hearing the latch snap shut with an ominous click.

“You need the door closed for that?” Kimura rested one hip on his wide desk. From his place at the door, Yunho wondered how he ever thought he could admire the man but then, the manager reminded him of his father... powerful, self-assured and unfortunately, brutally ruthless.

“I thought you’d like some privacy,” Yunho said, crossing the room and tossing the packet he held in his hand on Kimura’s desk. The manila envelope skittered across the polished wood, coming to rest against a crystalline award. “Take a look at what’s inside and then we can talk.”

He sat, keeping his nerves tightly under control as he watched the man glance curiously at the envelope. Forming a steeple with his fingers, Yunho carefully watched Kimura’s face for the moment he realized what Yunho tossed so casually at him.

The moment came when the photos spilled out onto the desk, a collage of sickness and perversion. Kimura’s face bleached to bone, his skin tightening on his skull. Yunho was pleased to see his fingers tremble as he reached for an image then stopped, as if by touching the photograph his nightmare would come true.

Clearing his throat, Kimura steeled himself before turning to Yunho, his voice steady. "Where did you get these?"

"Just because I am some hick from Korea doesn't mean that I can't find people in Japan who are willing to make a little money," Yunho said with a shrug. "The man came highly recommended but I doubt I'll see him again."

"And you think this is going to change things somehow?" Kimura swept the photos from his desk, rising to lean over Yunho, a vein throbbing in his forehead as he screamed. "Do you think that by going to the company with this shit that they are going to believe you? That they'll remove me? Is that what you think will happen in that small little mind of yours, boy?"

"No, these won't be going to the company. I'm pretty sure someone here has been covering you for years." Yunho held the man's stare, looking coolly over his hands. Leaning forward, he rested his elbows on his thighs as if daring Kimura to escalate matters. "No, Kimura, I had a different destination in mind."

Yunho kept his face as still and cold as he could, reciting an address in the Chiba district he'd committed to memory. He'd practiced, modulating his voice until he got the cadence just right, thinking of how his father conducted himself when upbraiding someone who'd displeased him. More than once, Yunho had been the one standing in the middle of the carpet, his feet lined up with a row of fleur-de-lis as his father dressed him down, numerating his sins and infractions in a bloodless voice until he reached the end of the list. Dismissed, Yunho would be handed a piece of paper with his punishment written in his father's strong hand and he found himself outside of the office, trembling at the knees.

"That's your mother's address, isn't it, Kimura?" Yunho looked disinterested. He made a show of standing and walking to the fridge hidden behind a wooden panel. Selecting a cold bottle of water, he pointed it at the man. "Do you mind? I'm a bit thirsty."

Kimura's face churned through shades of red then shifted back to white. He swallowed, trying to find something to say. "You wouldn't..."

"Dare? Why? Because she's someone innocent in this? Like Jaejoong?" Yunho sipped at his water, giving Kimura a small smile. He shrugged, seemingly ignorant of Kimura's threatening posture. "I'll be kind enough to give her a few days. She'll need them to recover from seeing what her oldest son has done."

"I'm the eldest son, you know. And you see... things like this aren't so different between us... between Korea and Japan," He continued, taking up a place at the desk's corner. "I know what it's like to disappoint a parent...especially with something like this. Not as... lurid as you but still, disappointment. I hear she's not well."

"I'll ruin you, Jung," Kimura stepped towards Yunho. A taint of violence enflamed the man's dark eyes as he crossed the room. "I could kill you."

"You could," Yunho agreed. "But I did my homework. I know you have a younger brother in the same province, one that's running for mayor. He's already under a scandal for corruption, although it seems like he got that patched over."

"You think this would bother my brother?"

"No," Yunho admitted. "But I'm sure his opponents and the local newspaper would be bothered."

"Think you're smart, boy?" Kimura pressed himself close into Yunho's chest, poking at the young man's chest with a finger. He stabbed, dimpling Yunho's shirt. "I can survive this. You think you can survive it getting out that you fuck that pretty boy of yours?"

"Yeah," Yunho replied, tilting his head back. "See, I found something out about Japan. Our fans would love to think we're having sex. It's a part of the pop culture here. We'd deny it, of course, but then Jae and I could exchange a secretive smile and drive the gossip back up. You don't have any evidence of our relationship. All of us living together? We've lived together for years. There are five beds between our two bedrooms right now. We look innocent enough but you? You don't, Kimura."

The man warred with himself, dropping his hands to his side. Yunho struggled to remain calm, taking a delicate sip of water as Kimura paced the floor. He stopped suddenly, turning to look over his shoulder at the group's leader.

"What do you want, Jung?"

"I want you to remove yourself from managing the group. You walk away from us. We walk away from you." Yunho spread his hands in surrender. "You don't lose anything. We don't lose anything."

"What's to stop you from coming back with this shit?"

"Nothing," Yunho replied. "Just like there's nothing stopping you from holding us back. You're powerful. We're five fresh-off-the-boat Koreans. At home, we're something but here, we're at the bottom again."

"You're a fucking idiot if you think he's going to be faithful to you," Kimura sneered. "Some day, someone's going to come along and he's going to go sniffing after someone else's longer dick and then everything you did here... everything you did today is for shit. And, you'll still be on the bottom hoping for scraps from the music industry. Ask yourself, Jung. Is he worth losing everything just because he's a good fuck."

"Yeah," Yunho said, looking straight into Kimura's eyes. "You have no idea what I'm willing to lose to keep him."

"Then you're on your own. We're done." He spat at the younger man. "Get the hell out of my office. I'll call upper management and tell them I'm finished working with you."

Yunho was shaking when he left, forcing himself to walk slowly out of Kimura's office and past the pretty young secretary who'd offered him tea when he first arrived. The inner phone line lit up on her desk, flashing as Kimura rang someone within the company. Giving the woman a polite nod, he walked by, not trusting his Japanese to give her a proper goodbye.

A right turn led him to the men's bathroom, a single room that could be closed off with a flick of a door lock. Shutting the world off outside, Yunho heaved, choking on his bile. Running to the sink, he vomited once then again, shivering when the cold in his belly wormed down to his marrow. His stomach emptied, churning inside out until the strain rode his throat raw. Shuddering, Yunho took sharp breaths, fighting to gain control of the shakes rumbling through him.

Leaning his forehead against the wall, the young man rested for a moment, waiting his stomach tremours out. The tile felt cold against his hot skin, as soothing as his mother's touch when he was sick. Choking back a sob, Yunho slammed his fist on the hard wall, the pain rattling up to his elbow.

Pulling himself up, Yunho turned on the faucet, letting the cold water run into his cupped hands. Splashing his face first, he gulped a mouthful to swallow the sour in his throat then rinsed, spitting into the sink. The soiled water swirled down the drain and Yunho wished he could do the same with the sinking feeling left in his guts.

Outside the bathroom, the world continued on its way, oblivious of the young man's distress. Squaring his shoulders, he left the building, keeping to the overhang to avoid the afternoon's chilly rain. Flipping up the fur-lined hood of his jacket, Yunho crossed the street, heading towards the red post box he'd seen before entering the company's headquarters.

Withdrawing five envelopes from inside of his thick parka, Yunho took a deep breath and checked the postage he'd affixed to the packets earlier that day. The addresses were carefully written, the characters clear and black in a common square text and stood out boldly on the manila envelopes.

He'd debated what to do, conflicted between wanting to protect the group and doing what his heart told him would be the right thing. The decision was his, Changmin told him. They all trusted him... and regardless of the outcome, they'd stand by whatever he'd wanted to do with Kimura. few minutes of Min's time and Yunho had the names of five crime investigators in the Tokyo area dealing with molestation. A

moment later, labels with names and addresses along with a knot in his stomach that made sleeping impossible.

Depositing the mail into the slot, he took one last look at the building behind him, exhaling hard. Shoving his hands into his jacket, Yunho tilted his head back to let the rain wash his face clean of his remaining tears and murmured up to the heavens, hoping the storm would take his pleas to his mother's heart.

"I am sorry I couldn't keep my word, Mom," Yunho said, closing his eyes against the pain in his heart. "I'm sorry for becoming a man you can't be proud of."



Jaejoong lay on the Yunho's old bed, listening to the rain. He'd turned off his music player minutes ago, unable to concentrate on the tune playing in his ear. The concert was fast approaching and he still needed to learn all of his parts but his mind wandered whenever he tried to concentrate. It lingered on the young man who left the apartment wearing a hooded red parka and a look on his face like he was about to face a firing squad.

Their mouths almost touched when Jaejoong went to say goodbye but the pain in Yunho's eyes drew him back and now, the singer regretted not brushing his lips over Yunho's. Jae wanted nothing more than the taste of the other man in his mouth as he waited.

A phone jangled from under a pile of his clothes and Jae scrambled to dig it out. Hoping it was Yunho, he spoke in Korean. "Hello?"

"Hello, *koneko-chan*," A familiar voice rumbled in Japanese. It was low, sensual and spoke of hot nights spent dancing in dark corners.

Jaejoong inhaled sharply and lifted his hand to his ear, fingering the spot where the other man bit him. "Hyung!"

"Ah, kitten, didn't we talk about that?" He chuckled, switching to Jaejoong's native tongue. "How is your Japanese coming along?"

"Good," Jaejoong replied, laughing when he answered in Korean. "Sorry."

"It's okay. It's easier to talk to you this way."

"I'm glad you called," The singer slid over the bed, turning over onto his stomach. "I'm... waiting for Yunho to come back."

"Ah, his trip to the lair of the..." He paused, swearing when he heard Jaejoong's breath catch. "It will be okay, *goyangi*. Your *knight errant* will slay your dragon."

"What does that mean? Those words you used in English?"

"It means ... ronin," The man replied. "Someone who bound by his honour and defends those who need it. Like Galahad or Shimada Kambei; men who live by their souls and not by what society tells them is right."

"Ah, then that is Yunho," Jaejoong agreed. "And you."

"Me?" He laughed aloud, the sound carrying over brightly. Taking a puff on his cigarette, he exhaled and Jaejoong's mouth watered with the need for a nicotine fix. "I'm no knight, little boy. I'm done fighting windmills."

"Sometimes I don't understand what you're saying."

"Sometimes I don't understand what I'm feeling," The man replied. "So there we are."

"I never thanked you for ... helping me that night." Jae whispered, stretching out to grab a pillow resting against the headboard. "I needed...someone sane to talk to."

"And instead you found me."

“Don’t. It was... I needed someone like you. I needed you that night.”

“Hearing you say that, in that throaty sexy voice of yours makes any plans I missed that night worth it.”

“Do you ever stop teasing?”

“Do you ever stop being beautiful?” He responded. “But no, it was easy to see you needed someone. And I was there. Besides, if you’d gone to Kimura’s hotel, I don’t think you’d be here right now. I’m always drawn to broken angels and you, baby, are the most broken of angels.”

“I’m a kitten and an angel?”

“Easily done. The moon is both a rock and a rabbit,” The man replied. “You’re also someone I’d go off fighting windmills for but I think someone else already has that job. But you’re welcome, little one. Very welcome.”

“I don’t know what else I can do or say.” Jaejoong pulled at his belly hoop, worrying at the gold ring. “Thank you doesn’t seem like enough.”

“Just remember me when you’re done taking over Asia.” Another puff on the cigarette echoed against Jaejoong’s ear. “I’d like to work with you...on something other than your broken heart.”

“I’d like that, hyung.”

“Ah, again with the hyung,” He laughed, tickling Jae’s ear. “What do I have to do to get you to stop making me feel like an old man?”

“You’re not an old man,” Jae said with a grin.

“You make me feel like one whenever you call me hyung.” The velvet tickle in Jae’s ear grew deeper, dropping down an octave. “I’ve got to get going. I’m meeting some friends for a beer. I’d invite you but...”

“I need to wait for Yunnie-ah.” Curling himself around the pillow, Jaejoong adjusted the phone against his ear.

“And I’m running late,” He sighed. “Good night, Je Je baby. I hope that your ronin gets home soon.”

“Good night, hyu...”

“Ah...ah.” He tsked. “Please.”

“Good night, Camui-chan.” Jae said softly. “Have a good night with your friends and...thank you again.”

Twelve

The scandal never hit them, although there were small ripples of splatter along the company walls. Within a week, the members were moved, apologies given to them from a small man that couldn't seem to stop bowing and inquiries sent about their health. More circumspect entreaties were sent, tiny questions about how Kimura treated them. Yunho handled the matter with a guileless innocence and a reassurance that no, none of the members had been tainted by the predatory monster.

He wasn't going to give Kimura the satisfaction of having Jaejoong's name spread around as his leftovers.

Two days after Kimura quit as their manager, rumours broke through the company's silence when the police came to take him into custody. Apologies were made, discussions of compensation ran rampant behind closed doors and in the midst of all the chaos, the members found themselves in a new, larger apartment closer to central Tokyo.

The move was quick, happening while they were practicing and only Yoochun was awake in the van when it made what he thought was a wrong turn. Their new manager reassured the shouting baritone of their destination, only having to repeat himself when the others woke to shush the young man for disturbing their sleep. A quick ride up in the elevator and the five men found themselves in a modern window-rich apartment, its wide balcony overlooking a small park.

"The company thought it best if you... all of you..." Shizu, their handling manager bowed deeply, opening doors to show the members the apartment. His Korean wasn't as fluent as Kimura's but his manner was gentle, a softer touch that Junsu approved of first. "We thought it would be better if you had more room and were...away from where there were difficulties."

"Thank you," Yunho returned the genuflection, dipping deeper to show his respect and gratitude. The others mimicked the leader, each bobbing several times as they walked around the place.

Familiar items were arranged among new things, their wide red couch sat adjacent to two patterned crimson love seats, a wide screen television taking up the opposite wall. The kitchen was stocked, pots and pans dangling from a rack against the wall and a walk in pantry made Min's mouth water when he poked his head inside to check out the store room.

"I live in this building," Shizu continued, nonchalantly opening another door to a bathroom. "My partner and I... we are two floors below you if you need anything. I've left my number on the list next to the phone and there is also a packet of take out menus where the company has an account. The information is all next to the phone."

"I like to cook," Jaejoong offered, checking out the contents of the freezer.

"I just like to eat," Min said, coming out of the pantry with a bag of shrimp chips. There was a brief tussle over the snack as Junsu and Yoochun pounced on their youngest, wrestling to steal the bag away.

Yunho rolled his eyes. "I'm sorry, Shizu-san. They are...children sometimes."

"Sometimes?" Jae poked his head out from under the butcher block island.

"Nearly always," Yunho agreed. "Thank you. Very much."

"Your things are in the dining room. Please forgive the staff if they've mingled your items. It was..." Shizu chose his words carefully, smoothing his hair. "Difficult. It was difficult to tell what things belonged to which person."

“That’s because Jaejoong owns everything and lets us borrow what we need,” Yoochun returned to the kitchen, having liberated a single chip from Min’s bag. The sounds of shouting came from the hallway and then a yowl from Junsu. “I think Susu-ah is losing.”

“Yunho-ah,” Min shouted. “Come here!”

“You better see what he wants,” Jae ducked a punch from Yoochun, stepping to the side. “Stop that or I’ll find a wooden spoon or something to crack your head open with. We can make soup out of the rice you’re using for a brain.”

Changmin stood in the hallway, his long body leaving a dual shadow on the polished wood floor. Two streamers of lights hung from the high ceiling, a soft blue glow hitting a tall, pebble-glass window at the end of the hall. Motioning for Yunho to come to a closed door, he peeked over the leader’s shoulder, checking to see who followed.

“Where’s Susu-ah?” Yunho craned his neck to peer into one of the bedrooms. It was empty, save a sleek bedroom suite of pale oak. “There’s only one bed in here.”

“That’s probably mine,” Min replied. “It’s bigger than the small beds but...never mind, hyung, just look in here.”

Changmin opened the door across the hall from the opened room, swinging it wide open. “This is what I wanted you to see.”

The bedroom was large, nearly double the size of the room three of them shared in the old apartment. Painted a soft cream, it drank in the light from a bank of windows, the floor’s sheen reflecting the clouds. Empty black bookcases waited for books and CDs and two glass topped desks sat on opposite walls, room enough for a wide array of electronics. A stereo sat on a high Queen Anne table, its speaker wires hidden behind the walls to four speakers set at the ceiling’s far corners. An open door revealed a walk in closet while another led to a bathroom.

But Yunho could only stare at the king-sized bed that dominated the middle of the room.

“There’s...only one bed in here.”

“Yeah,” Min said softly. “The other room has two double beds which Junsu is going to push together. He wants that room because it has less windows. He thinks he can keep the room warmer if Chunnie-ah has fewer windows to open. I didn’t want to tell him about flow dynamics. I’ll let him figure it out.”

“What...There’s only one bed,” Yunho gulped, rubbing at the back of his neck. “Oh God, Jaejoong...”

“Hasn’t seen it yet,” The young man replied. “Shizu thinks the two of you are sleeping together. Or someone does. Most of your things are in the closet over there. Joongie’s too. My stuff’s in the dining room with the hyenas’, although I think a few of my books made it into here. I’ll have to go look.”

“There’s only one bed,” Yunho repeated. “One. Bed.”

“Your powers of observation amaze me, hyung. Soon you will be telling me that water is wet and lemons are sour,” Changmin drawled. “More importantly, what are we going to do with only one bed in here?”

“Shizu...”

“Knows.” Min nodded. “Probably everyone knows. Kimura might have even been told to keep you two apart and now with this...thing... happening, they probably think it’s better if you two are happy. Happy people are quiet people.”

“You think someone told Kimura to do that to Je Je?”

“No.” Changmin’s mouth pressed thin and he shook his head emphatically. “No, I think that was his own sickness but he could have been told to keep you two...quiet. He just decided to use it to break you two apart.”

“Well, he did a good job,” Yunho complained. The bed loomed large in the space, probably taking up more room in his mind than it actually did but all the singer could see was an expanse of blood-red linens and pillows. “Jaejoong and I aren’t...”

“Yeah, I know,” Min nodded. “I still am eating fast food, remember? No stew for Min. No bulgogi. No bibimbap. Not even refrigerator kim chi which takes...what?... half an hour to make. We all know you’re not sleeping together.”

“You’re not to fall to break into two, you know.”

“See? It’s that grumpiness. That Yunnies-ah is not getting loving from Jae grumpiness I talked about.”

“What am I going to do?” He couldn’t stop staring at the bed, pristine miles of soft red. Jaejoong’s pale skin and dark hair would gleam on the colour and Yunho cleared his throat, wishing he could scrub the image from his mind.

“Do about what?”

“I... have to go unpack,” Changmin gave the singer a wide innocent smile, ducking around Jae. “I ... um .. have to go find a place for everything.”

“What...?” Jae had to move quickly avoid being run over. Stepping into the room, he jostled Yunho, hitting him with his elbow. “Where is he going so fast? Oh...shit!”

He’d seen the bed, Yunho groaned. The massive bed that their manager probably expected them to share, unless the room was meant for Yoochun and Junsu but he doubted it, not with their belongings stacked up in the closet.

“There’s... only one bed,” Jae said, walking around the mattress Yunho secretly thought was as large as a lake. “Shizu must think...”

“That we’re... lovers,” The leader finished for him.

“Yeah,” He murmured, trailing his fingers over his mouth. “That.”

“We can ask him for two beds if you want,” Yunho suggested suddenly then winced at the twinge of pain in Jaejoong’s eyes. “Boo, I don’t know what to do here. I wasn’t planning on this. I didn’t know.”

“No, none of us did.”

“No, we didn’t.” He walked over to the bed, sitting on its edge. The comforter was as soft as it looked, velvet smooth beneath his hands. The image of Jae returned, this time with the lanky singer naked and moaning underneath him. “Je Je...”

“I miss you, Yunnies.” The young man nestled up against the bed, straddling the other’s legs. He remained standing and placed his hands on Yunho’s shoulders.

Jaejoong knew where to touch the other man, knew the spots that ached after a long day of dancing. No matter how much stretching Yunho did, his right shoulder ached and seized up. Jaejoong’s long fingers were perfect for digging out the knot of muscles balled up along the bone. A kiss on the juncture of Yunho’s neck would bring a moan and a bite to his collarbone usually prompted him to grab Jaejoong by the waist, flip him over onto the bed and kiss him until they panted for air.

It had been a long time since Jaejoong panted for air.

“I miss you too,” Yunho said, palming Jae’s waist. The singer was skinnier than he liked, a product of the increased regime Kimura dictated as revenge and the sparse meals they snuck in when they had time. The lean muscle he’d built up in the gym was eaten away by his frenetic activities and Yunho frowned at the jut of bone visible under Jae’s skin. He’d grown too slender for his jeans to stay up properly and they slid down his hips, caught on the rise of Jae’s ass.

“Can we try this... again?” Jae stroked Yunho’s face with the back of his hand, grinning at the burr of a slight beard. “Not...”

“Not picking up where we left off,” The leader leaned forward and kissed the wink of gold in Jae’s navel. It tasted of spice and sweet, a hint of salt from the heat in the van. “But rebuilding us...”

“Starting over...sort of,” Jaejoong agreed. “Can you...share a bed with me? Until we... If we...?”

“If I can’t, then I’ll switch with Min,” He replied, working the ring between his lips. “But not because I’m giving up on us...”

“But because we need... room. I don’t want this to be about...just sex, Yunnie-ah,” The singer sighed, kissing the other man’s ear, laughing when Yunho wiggled away and rubbed at the side of his head.

Keeping his other hand on the man’s hip, Yunho tilted his chin up, staring at the other man’s pretty face. “I don’t either. I think... we need to learn how to be around each other again. We’ve been trapped in this nightmare for too long. It’s about time we both spent our time in bed... talking. Like we used to.”

“Yes,” Jae murmured, stealing a kiss from Yunho’s mouth. “We can kiss though, right?”

“Kissing.” Yunho bit at Jae’s full mouth. “Would. Be. Nice.”

He stole one for each word, loving the feel of the other man on his lips and under his hands. There were no shadows lurking in the hall. No ghosts haunting the space between them. The only thing keeping them apart was hard words and scabbed over emotional wounds, both easily overcome. Jaejoong deepened the final kiss, turning nice into sweet then to a heated eroticism Yunho didn’t want to break free from.

“Hey,” Yoochun popped his head into the room, his eyes widening at the sight of the bed. “Whoa, that thing is huge!”

Yunho shifted, pulling at the tightness across his crotch, trying to hide his arousal before realizing Yoochun was talking about the bed. “Um... yeah.”

“So you two are...” Yoochun gulped when Jaejoong yanked away from Yunho and grabbed his arm, jerking him back towards the door. “Ouch... you’re going to leave bruises.”

“I’m going to leave one on your head if you don’t...” Jae growled then closed his mouth in resignation when Junsu walked in.

“You should see our room...” Junsu whistled low at the sight of the bed. The tenor dove for the mattress, laughing as he bounced on his belly. “Ours isn’t that big and we’ve got two beds pushed together.”

Yunho met Jaejoong’s sigh of surrender with his own, rolling his eyes when Yoochun joined his lover, the pair using the broad bed as a trampoline. Shrugging, he stood, holding his hand out to Jaejoong and winked. “All we’re missing is Min.”

“Min would never jump on the bed,” Jaejoong glanced up. “He’s too serious and besides... I think he’s too tall. He’d bonk his head on the ceiling.”



It was later when the apartment fell silent. Yoochun allowed himself to be lured away by the promise of a movie and food with Junsu wheedling a promise that they would actually watch the show instead of studying each other’s mouths. Extracting a solemn vow, Chunnie hooked his arm around Junsu’s waist and they left, bidding Yunho a good night.

The leader shook his head, guessing the promise would be broken before the previews ended before going back to digging through the boxes he’d dragged into the main living area. He’d already set up the game system, looping the wires through the back of the credenza so no one would trip on them. Briefly, he considered the couch as an alternative bed but the thought of spending the night without Jae within reach saddened the depths of his heart.

A breeze hit the sweat on his brow, a lifting cool coming from the open patio door. Glancing at the few boxes remaining, Yunho stood and dusted off his hands. A minute later and with a cold beer in hand, he headed out to the balcony and into the rain drenched night.

“Yunnie-ah?” Jaejoong padded out of the bedroom he would share with the leader. “Have you seen my Must Listen CD?”

The living room was empty, the glass door to the rear balcony left open enough to let a soft wind lift up the sheer curtains. Pulling back the panel, he poked his head out, grinning at the sight of his lover standing against the railing, the gentle rain soaking into Yunho’s thin t-shirt.

“Come here.” Yunho held his hand out, the drops striking his open palm. “Come stand by me.”

“If someone sees...” Jaejoong murmured, dropping his eyes.

He couldn’t believe he still felt shy around the man who knew him the best, the one who made him smile down into his soul. Under Yunho’s fingers and mouth, he saw the heavens and knew he’d grown with the touch of Yunho’s love.

The shyness was still something Jaejoong couldn’t quite shake.

Yunho liked it. He would miss the delicate blush on his lover’s face once the last of Jaejoong’s hidden scars healed over. Yunho also knew that nothing would match the joy in his heart on the day that Jae turned to him and knew that he was loved, without question and without reserve.

That day couldn’t come soon enough for Yunho, despite his fondness of the blush in his Boo’s cheeks.

Jaejoong took Yunho’s hand, weaving his fingers with his lover’s. The rain’s icy bite made him gasp, his stomach muscles involuntarily twisting inwards. “Yunnie-ah, it’s cold.”

“Give it time. It’ll warm up.” Yunho pulled Jaejoong over, cradling the other man in front of him, wrapping his arms around his lover’s waist. “Or better yet, let me warm you up.”

They stood against one another, hidden from the outside world behind a veil of rain and a curtain of faceless buildings. No one knew where they lived and the placement of the balcony gave them enough privacy to watch the city lights around them. Yunho treasured the balcony. Jaejoong was fond of the amorous feelings it seemed to dredge up when Yunho stood on it.

“What were you saying?” Yunho murmured against Jaejoong’s neck, licking at the small birthmark along Jae’s jaw.

“I can’t find one of my CDs.”

“Are you sure it’s your CD?” The other man teased. Jaejoong seemed to have a loose grip on ownership where things were concerned. He and the others had adjusted to Jae’s innocent avarice. They just knew that if they couldn’t find something, chances were good that it was in Jae’s possession.

“Yes.” Jae’s pout begged for a kiss and Yunho complied, sucking on the other’s lower lip, leaving behind a dimple of bite marks. “It’s one of Se7en’s. He signed it for me.”

“Ah, that son of a bitch.” Yunho’s tone was flat, lacking any real heat but the sentiment was still there.

“Yunnie-ah.”

“What?” The other man shrugged, nonchalant in his disregard. “He’s a bastard.”

“He’s not that bad.” Jae shook his head. “He’s fun. You just don’t like him...”

“I don’t like him because his hands wander where they shouldn’t,” Yunho replied, tightening his arms around his lover’s waist. “I don’t have to like him. He’s got nothing to do with us. Hell, he’s not even in our stable.”

“He’s a friend.” Jaejoong leaned his head back, resting against Yunho’s shoulder. He stroked at his lover’s wrists, running his hands over Yunho’s sinewy forearms.

"I think Min might have it." Yunho cocked his head, watching a seabird arc through the steel grey sky, circling about as it looked for food or a safe place to land. "I saw him with a stack of CDs earlier."

"I'm worried about our Minnie-ah," Jae sighed. "He's been quiet lately."

"How can you tell?" Yunho made a face at Jae's mocking snarl. "He's fine. I think he's worried about falling behind in Japanese."

"How can he fall behind?" The singer scoffed. "He's farther ahead of any of us. He's stupid sometimes."

"He is a lot like you, actually." Yunho was ready for Jae's skeptical look. "He is."

"How?"

"Changmin lacks self-confidence, even though he is very good at whatever he wants to do," Yunho replied. "He works hard. And while you two have different personalities, you only open up when you're around someone you trust not to hurt you."

"You think things out too much," Jaejoong complained, frowning slightly. "Minnie-ah is... smart. So smart."

"You are too," The leader whispered into Jae's ear. "Just in different ways. Both of you are stubborn and won't give up if you have your teeth into something. He just, thank God, not as tumbled around as you."

"No," Jae agreed with a nod. Whispering under his breath, just loud enough for Yunho and the wind to hear. "I'm glad about that. He's not..."

"As bruised," Yunho finished, leaning around to kiss Jaejoong's succulent mouth. "But you're healing and well, our Minnie-ah is probably getting to the point when he's looking to be bruised."

"The phone calls." Jae's eyes narrowed. "You don't think those are from his mother, do you?"

"Not unless his mother calls at two in the morning and makes Min's voice drop low," Yunho admitted. The phone calls were worrisome and for all of Min's innocent protests, he didn't believe he was speaking to relatives or friends from home. "Last night, I heard him when I went for some li hing mui for my throat. He was in the living room. I guess he didn't want any of us to overhear."

"What was he saying?" Jae turned in Yunho's arms, curious. "Did you hear anything?"

"Jaejoong!" Yunho shook his head. "Privacy. He gives it to us. We should give it to him."

"Aish." Jae twisted until he rested once more against the railing, pretending to be mildly disgusted at his lover. He knew who kept Changmin up late at night and made the younger man blush in the darkness. "You are worthless. I'll have to get Junsu to listen in."

"He should have his secrets if he wants them."

"Minnie-ah can have his secrets." Jaejoong said. "I just want to know them too."

It wasn't much of a lie. Not certainly one that would damn him, Jaejoong though. He did want to know Min's secrets. In this case, he simply already knew. And had sworn not to tell the man who would rip Se7en apart if he knew as well.

"Leave him be, Jaejoong." Yunho sighed, cradling his lover closer. "Let's go inside and get you out of these wet clothes. You're too cold. I want to warm you up more."

Thirteen

Yoochun's crowing laughter carried down the hall, closely followed by Yunho's loud protests of cheating. Jaejoong debated rejoining them but the ache along his forehead twisted a knot between his eyes. The conversation with Rain left him parched inside, the fear of Min's heart being broken even further by Se7en haunted him. He almost called the other man up, his mind wandering into the forbidden, to tell Se7en to leave Min alone... to leave off his pursuit of the youngest member.

His phone lay silent, waiting for Jaejoong to make up his mind. Sliding open his phone list with a flick of his finger on the screen, Jae dialed and smiled when she answered.

"Auntie," He purred, cuddling into the mound of pillows at the head of his bed. "Are you busy? Are you working tonight?"

"*Musang!* Oh it is good to hear from you. No, I'm not busy. I'm home waiting for the Mister to come get me. He'll be here in about an hour." Scarlet dropped her voice to a loud whisper. "We are going to dinner at an American restaurant. I'm wearing... jeans."

"Oh, scandalous," Jae teased.

His heart lifted, hearing her nickname for him. When she'd first called him *musang*, he'd asked what she meant and her description left him confused. A chance trip to the zoo brought him face to face with a civet and he gave her an odd look, wrinkling his nose at its musk.

"I smell like that?" He'd asked.

"No, dongsaeng," She replied. "You act like that. Wild and hissing but with the right people, you purr."

"Hah, I am fine in them," Scarlet shot back, teasing Jaejoong back to the present. "And you, little one, are you fine?"

He spent a few minutes catching her up on the move and more importantly, the large bed he lay sprawled on. The *bakla* listened intently, asking pointed questions about Yunho's behaviour before she sighed. "It sounds like you are asking to be hurt, little one."

"Hurt? Yunho would never hurt me."

"Not intentionally but you can't expect a man to sleep next to you, someone he loves, and not touch you," She said softly. "That's a lot to ask of him."

"It's a lot to ask of me too," Jaejoong replied. "When he speaks, I want to crawl into his mouth but sometimes, I hurt too much. I keep seeing... that one... sometimes when I hear someone speaking Japanese and touching me."

"*Musang*, I need you to be honest with me..."

"I will try, *nuna*."

"Did Kimura... did he go farther with you than you told Yunho?" She sighed, pressing the back of her hand on her forehead, her long red nails clacking together. "Have you told him...everything?"

Jaejoong didn't respond immediately and Scarlet's heart sank, dropping past her breastbone and into her soul. It drowned there in her past tears when Jaejoong simply whispered, "Yes."

"And you've not told him...about before?"

“No...just a little,” He admitted, his words hitching up, his voice breaking. “I can’t, *nuna*. He’ll not... look at me... or he’ll be afraid to touch me. You don’t know him. He is like that. He’ll spend more time trying to handle me like I am a piece of broken glass he doesn’t know which side is sharp. I can’t stand it.”

“You have to tell him, baby,” Scarlet advised, swallowing her own sorrow. “It’s not fair to him. He’s risked so much for you. He’s given up his family so he can love you.”

“I know, *nuna*. I know.”

“I can’t make you talk to him about this,” She said as she wondered if it was too early to pour herself a glass of cranberry juice and soju. Her nerves needed calming and she felt helpless with the ocean separating them. “You need someone in your heart... someone who knows everything that has happened to you. You aren’t giving Yunho credit. He is a man and men don’t like being lied to. It injures their ego. You know this. Your ego gets hurt all the time when he does things without telling you.”

“I’ve lied to him... a lot,” Jae said. “I’ve not told him about Min and Dong-Wook either.”

“Aish, well ... “ Hissing, Scarlet startled one of the cats lying on the back of the couch. The Siamese yowled back at her, expressing his displeasure at the disruption of his nap. “That isn’t your secret to tell. That’s between Min and his *hyung*. Between Yunho and Jaejoong... that is yours. That’s the only thing you should be worrying about.”

“How do I tell him that... man hurt me?” Jae sniffled, quickly looking at the door. He’d fallen into the rolling Korean street dialect he’d learned when he’d moved to Itaewon and although he was fairly certain the others wouldn’t know the blend of their native tongue, Filipino and Chinese, he couldn’t be sure that they couldn’t pick up a few of the words. “How do I tell him, *nuna*, that Kimura took me... especially when Yunho worked so hard to make sure I was never alone.”

“That happened before he knew, *musang*,” Scarlet reminded him. “You have to tell him that. If he finds out anyway, then he will be hurt you lied to him and probably feel guilty because he couldn’t protect you. It’s worse if you don’t tell him, baby. Much worse.”

Jaejoong remembered that afternoon as a blur of pain and clouds. To him, it seemed like the last day he’d seen the sunlight, shards of lemon yellow lights. The bits he recalled were remembered through a veil, filmy memories where he felt detached from what was happening. His tongue stung, bitten at the tip by Kimura’s teeth when he forced himself into Jae’s mouth, kissing the young man while he took what he wanted. The pain shattered Jaejoong’s resolve, and his frenetic struggles were futile. Weakened and tired from lack of food and over-exertion, he’d been able to fight the man off.

Even worse, he felt that he deserved the intrusion into his body, welcoming the pain as one he earned. Turning his back on Yunho, stoking the angry embers of his resentment fueled his self-loathing and when Kimura drew away, Jaejoong began weeping, hoping he’d purged himself of the guilt he’d carried.

He didn’t know the pain had just begun.

Ripping free of the young man’s body, Kimura’s hatred of his temptation flared and Jaejoong’s world turned white with agony. The first few hits were tentative, testing the young man’s resilience. When Jaejoong whimpered and tried to crawl away, his fingers hooking into the rug, Kimura grew bolder and struck, a steel-fisted cobra biting at its prey with heavy ringed fists.

Kimura’s arms grew tired before his rage was spent and the last few spurts of his anger were delivered with solid kicks to Jae’s ribs, cracking the slender man’s bones. The only sounds left in the room were Kimura’s strained breathing and Jae’s defused mewling as he rolled over, his naked body bruised and his soul stripped into ribbons.

The manager dressed himself, glancing down at the young man’s beaten form as he zipped up his slacks. Filling the cup of his tongue with spittle, he flung his disgust onto Jaejoong’s face, splattering the young man’s cheek with foamy saliva. Nudging Jaejoong with the toe of his Italian leather loafer, Kimura ordered him to get out of the room before five in the afternoon. Another group would need the practice area

and the Korean would more than likely want to avoid someone seeing him lying on the carpet with his legs spread open as if Kimura hadn't satiated him.

Jaejoong didn't remember when exactly he'd gotten to his feet but it seemed as if hours passed before he found the strength in his body to stumble to the bathroom. The sink water ran pink with his blood and he shook as he pulled out long lengths of paper towels from the dispenser, soaking the wads in the basin and washing himself of Kimura's touch.

His clothes rubbed him raw, scraping over the bites and bruises when he walked. Jaejoong barely recalled the face of their driver and the happy bubbling voices of the other members didn't penetrate his ghostly shell. The ride home to the apartment was another eternity then everything fell into a darkness he didn't want to end.

That evening, he took four showers and scrubbed his thighs and back nearly to bleeding. The feel of Kimura's hands on his body echoed on his skin and Jae sobbed until his body wrung itself clear of salt and tears. When the water hit his shoulder blades, he felt a bite break, the heavy flow separating the nearly bitten through skin. Blood ran from the middle of his tattoo, the inked spot bubbling up at the edges of the bite, the water carrying Jaejoong's tears along side of the red trickling down his spine.

The area was — sacred — Jaejoong's cries staggered, his lungs fighting for air under the water stream pounding Jaejoong's face. He'd placed his *soul* there — the soft skin Yunho bit and kissed when they made love. He couldn't count the times he'd been on his knees with his head down as the other man nipped and rolled the tattoo between his teeth, murmuring his love into the bites as his hips thrust his sex deeper and deeper into Jae's welcoming body.

Now, it was a spot that wouldn't come clean... no matter how much Jaejoong scrubbed it.

The present slapped him hard and Scarlet's querulous concern made him swallow the memories drawing up in his mind. Clearing his throat, Jae wiped at his face. "I'm here, *nuna*. I'm sorry..."

"You need someone to talk to, baby," She urged softly. "If you can't tell Yunho right now, then please at least talk to someone else. Someone who will understand what happened."

"When which happened?" Jae asked, his words bitter and sour. "Kimura or before? I can explain away the time when that man... hurt me but now? How can I tell Yunho that Kimura... that I let Kimura make love to me?"

"That wasn't love, *musang*," Scarlet said soothingly. "He tried to take you apart because he hates what he is. What he did to you had nothing of love about it. What Yunho does to you...how he feels... that is love, dear. The reason Kimura did what he did to you is because he hates himself for wanting someone as beautiful and as precious as you. He wanted to destroy you because he's too much of a coward to destroy himself."

"You've always told me there is no shame in loving another man." He bit at the pillow, shoving his cheek into its softness. "That when someone... when someone like me... kills himself, that they were murdered by society."

"Anyone who destroys someone's soul deserves what karma gives them," Scarlet replied. "There is no shame in loving another man. Kimura's shame isn't in wanting you, *musang*. His sin is in trying to murder your soul because he couldn't have you."



Junsu stretched his arms up over his head, moaning when he felt a crack between his shoulder blades. The dark hallway was sometimes treacherous to walk through, especially when he and Yoochun forget to pick up their shoes. Working the kink out of his back, he stopped at his closed bedroom door, spotting a light on somewhere in the main part of the house. Padding towards the light source, he entered the living room and stared for a moment at the column paper lantern glowing softly in the corner.

"Did I leave it on?" He moved over to turn it off, pausing at the patio's open doors.

A familiar harsh odor tickled his nose and Junsu sighed, thinking Yoochun took his absence as a chance to sneak off and have a cigarette. He'd almost convinced himself to lock the baritone outside as revenge for smoking when he heard a snuffling noise too perfectly pitched for the low-voiced Chun.

Stepping out, he peered into the darkness, a light mist falling over the patio. "Joongie-ah?"

"Go back to bed, Junsu." Jaejoong's Korean was harsh, filled with a sharpness Junsu heard only when he snuck down to Sin with his lover. The dialect was born in the hard streets of the lower districts, a rough growling tone merged with the ugliness of vulgar slang.

"What's the matter, Je Je?" Junsu came up behind the young man leaning over the patio's high railing, worry chewing away the tired he'd felt moments ago. When he touched Jaejoong's hair to stroke away the harshness in the other man's voice, the singer pulled away. "Hyung, what's wrong? Did you and Yunho fight?"

"No, nothing like that," Jae bit off a sour laugh before it turned to vinegar in his mouth. "I'm fine. Just go back to bed."

"You don't sound fine, hyung," The younger man said. "Please, come inside. If Yunho is asleep, Yoochun and I can stay up with you. Maybe talking about it will help?"

"No. It won't."

With his shoulders hunched over, Jaejoong's shoulder blades jutted out, winging up his shirt. The night sky was black, devoid of any stars but the clouds reflected back the city's light, a watery pour of golden bleach over Jae's pale skin. Junsu thought he looked like a magpie lurking over a newly dug grave, waiting to snatch the soul of a loved one as it fled to Heaven.

"Please, Susu-ah," Jaejoong turned his head, the shadows drenching his face. "Go back to bed. I'm fine."

Reluctant to leave the singer alone, Junsu hovered for a second, shuffling his feet but Jaejoong wasn't paying attention anymore. Sucking off another drag from his cigarette, he resumed his shoulder crouch, watching the city street below them.

"If you need me or Chunnie-ah..."

"I know," Jaejoong said softly. "I know where you are. Good night, Susu-ah."

He waited until he heard Junsu walk away then the soft click of a door being closed before exhaling the stomach clenching sob he'd been holding in since he first heard the other man speak. It crawled up his throat, sinking long needle fangs into the soft tissues of his throat and raked over his tongue, whimpering with a pain-soaked mewl. He'd frozen when Junsu touched his head, forcing himself not to strike out or throw up while his hair was being stroked. Even the feel of another's body heat on his skin made his nerves crawl and Jaejoong shuddered, wishing the falling rain were harder so it would burn away the feel of Junsu's contact.

His cigarette sputtered, the paper nearly too moist to burn. Drawing in a drag, he blew out a curl of smoke and watched the wind carry it away. Staring at the unfolding grey column, Jaejoong's mind wandered, dragging over a rocky cliff when he realized how far up the apartment was and how the weak breeze barely chilled the water on his face.

"So tiny," Jaejoong whispered, tilting his hips out as he leaned forward, staring down at the heads of people rushing around on the street. The evening was coming to a close for the city but the foolhardy and stalwart were still out, coming home from work or a night out. A tinkle of laughter reached his ears, the sound carrying up from another patio.

The thought was fleeting but ... seductive, a razor blade winged butterfly that sliced through his thoughts and sipped at the syrupy nectar of his will. It would be so easy, it whispered. Just a pull up and then freedom... and if you stretched your arms out, you would fly straight down.

“God,” He said, ashen and cold. Jaejoong flirted with the wonder of death at times but the cold embrace of its arms around his heart and the touch of its kiss left him chilled inside. He couldn’t believe what he’d contemplated. Even if just for a moment, it was there, beating with a sluggish heart as his pain breathed life into it.

He fumbled for his phone, caught between the trap of his lies and the agonizing spears of his own emotional wreckage. A woman answered the first number he dialed and he apologized profusely, checking the display before dialing again. His fingers were too stiff to properly call up the codes and Jaejoong skittered in a breath, tossing the remainder of his cigarette into a sand-filled coffee can. Trying the correct number, he breathed a sigh of relief when Camui’s silken voice said hello.

“I need...to talk to someone, hyung,” Jaejoong bit his lip, tasting the pain. A drop of blood spread on his tongue and he trapped it against the roof of his mouth, working over the ridges.

“First, no calling me hyung,” The other man said smoothly. “Secondly, anything you would like, kitten. You know I am always here for you. Now whisper your sweet nothings into my ear so I can hate myself for not finding you before your fierce tempered lover.”

“I need you to talk... to me,” He forced himself to step away from the railing. The want of it was too strong and Jaejoong reached out for the patio door, clenching its steel frame so hard it bite into his palm. “I need someone to talk to about... what Kimura did. About how I feel. Camui-san, I don’t think I can survive this any more. I don’t think I can survive reliving Kimura’s kisses any more.”

“Where are you, koneko?” He asked, concerned. “Are you alone?”

“Please, Camui-san, help me find my soul and erase this pain.” Falling under the weight of the rain on his shoulders, Jaejoong touched his forehead to the rough cement tiles. “Right now, I think the pain is the only way I know I’m alive...and I want nothing more... than to make it go away. Help me make it leave me, hyung... before I try to do it myself.”

Fourteen

They met for a few times, not speaking for about an hour or so before Jaejoong excused himself and left, bowing deeply with respect. The fourth time the Korean singer showed up at the door, Gackt spent the hour holding him, letting him cry out some of the pain. The fifth time Jaejoong arrived on the older man's doorstep, he carried a bottle of wine and a haunted look in his eyes.

It was the look that told Gackt Jaejoong was ready to talk. The wine was merely a gift.

The house was large, overwhelmingly so, and kept dim to protect the Japanese's sensitive eyes. Vast dark lengths of wood and stone made up most of the rooms, soft white furniture softening its hard lines. A white sofa, large enough for two people served as Jaejoong's cocoon away from his pain and he drifted towards it, habit drawing him across the floor as Gackt followed close by.

The singer was silent for ten minutes and Gackt wondered if he was wrong about Jaejoong's readiness when the younger man opened his mouth and began to speak.

"He's dead," Jaejoong was small.

Tucked into a ball and wedged into the corner of the couch, he diminished himself against the creamy white around him. Dressed in pure black, the singer was more shadow than man, a filmy broken slice of darkness made hollow by another man's abuse.

Gackt didn't need to ask who *he* was. There was only one man who could bring the sound of shattered glass to Jaejoong's voice.

"How?" Gackt asked, placing a half-full glass of a fruity, pungent red on the glass table in front of Jaejoong. He perched on the edge of the couch, turned to face the ball of chaos and pain sitting besides him.

"Someone killed him. They found him, stabbed in the stomach with his insides pulled out. It happened in jail," Jae replied. He left the wine where it was, not trusting himself to pick it up. His anger and confusion raged inside of him, a hateful storm of emotion raining fire down on him and he was tired, finding no shelter from its fury. "Our manager, Shizu, told me the police suspect one of his victim's family was in prison or... knew someone there. What they did to him...how he died... they suspect it was someone who knew what he'd done."

"It might have even been someone he... broke," Gackt said, sipping at his own glass. "Men sometimes... when they are hurt, like you were hurt, they seek out danger and take risks. Sometimes even try to destroy society by committing crimes because they have that much anger inside of their hearts."

The wine teased him, tasting of unfamiliar spices and dark fruit. He imagined it was close to the taste of Jaejoong's mouth, erotic and red. Those kisses belonged to another man, one who would cherish them and the kitten who presented them. Gackt's only task was to return Yunho's most cherished possession to him — hopefully healed enough to be sipped from without the singer's crystalline soul shattering under the pressure of Yunho's touch.

"Someone stronger than me."

The wine turned to bitter in Gackt's mouth, soiled by Jaejoong's loathing. He swallowed and set the glass down, momentarily unwilling to sip at its richness. "You... can't say that, koneko. You are stronger than most men I know."

"I'm nothing compared to most men." He looked up, his deep brown eyes bare of contacts and rich with tears. "A man wouldn't have... let this happen to him. I should have... fought him off. Told him no... did something."

"You did tell him no."

"You weren't there. You don't know, Camui-san," Jae replied. "I could have been enticing him to do this. I probably made him think I wanted him to..."

"I've known you for a while now, Kim and the last thing I think you are is a tease," He said, brushing the singer's hair back from his face. "What happened to you... was Kimura's doing, not yours. What you're feeling is normal."

"We're led to believe that as men, we can't be weak or show emotion," Gackt continued. "If we show tears, they're only allowable in anger and never in pain. Sorrow is something we are supposed to stand stoically instead of weeping. We're to have our pain in private, not shedding more than a terse nod and a grunt that we're okay, even if we are shredded down to our souls."

"I don't agree with that," The man said, pulling Jaejoong to his side. "We should be allowed to mourn our loss of innocence without being made to feel weak."

"I feel...dirty. Like I can't go to Yunho because I'll soil him," Jae's eyes glittered, reflecting the candles around them. "Kimura took who I was from me and now that he's dead, I feel like I should have been the one to do that. The one to exact that revenge. I'll never have that part of me back because I didn't take it back."

"I can't change how you feel, not unless you change how you think," He replied to the singer's harsh words. "We're told that if a man uses us like a woman, that makes us less of a man. I would say that surviving someone like Kimura is a greater battle than other men have fought. Surviving Kimura is a victory and shouldn't be regarded as a defeat to your masculinity."

"Not many would think me much of a man now, Camui-san. Even before Kimura... people would say I am less of one because I loved...love Yunho. How can you think that now... what I've given someone freely in love and has been taken from me by someone I trusted...how can that make me more of man? How does that make how I'm feeling now a victory."

"Because you go on. You've placed a mask on your pain and forged forward. The problem is, Je-chan, your heart hurts and your anger needs an outlet."

"I hate when people look at me and say; Oh, he's like a woman. Being... forced that way just made it worse. I don't feel like doing things that I love to do. I don't want to cook any more. I don't want... Yunho touching me or kissing me. It's like anything that I was is now ruined. How do I take back... me?"

"You ask for help," Gackt said. "Like you did with me. And then you talk to the others and share what happened. Let them love you. Let them try to understand your pain. You don't have to share it with the world but you should share it with the people who love you. They should know what was done to you."

"Have you been...hurt? Not like...this but inside? Something else?"

"God, *koneko-chan*." The other man's eyes dimmed, remembering someone lost to him. "I was on tour when someone I loved... my Yoochun ... died suddenly in his sleep. No one told me until he died until almost a week later and by then... I'd lost my chance to say goodbye. They buried him the same day that they found him but I couldn't do anything. I couldn't cry or be angry because I was on tour."

"When did you cry?" He ached for his friend...his mentor. Gackt was becoming the closest thing to an older brother that Jaejoong ever experienced and to not know this tragedy made him hurt for the other's heart. "Did you get to cry?"

"Alone," Gackt admitted ruefully. "There wasn't anyone for my heart to hold onto near me. I had friends but I thought that my sorrow would burden them. They knew, of course. I couldn't hide my loss. Everyone around me knew but they couldn't say anything because I told them I was fine."

“What happened?”

“One day, *koneko-chan*, I stopped being fine.” He whispered into the other man’s ear. “I lost time. I lost my soul in the blackness I carried. It finally ate through me and there was nothing left. I was so angry and hurt, blaming everyone who took away my chances to say goodbye...who took away my dearest friend... that it burnt me up inside.”

“What did you do then?” Jaejoong didn’t want to imagine the day when he turned around and found Yoochun missing from his shadow. He was already fairly certain Yunho’s absence would kill him.

“Tried crying. I needed to let it out but I couldn’t.” Memories played behind Gackt’s hooded eyes, their sensual heat dimmed to a staid grey. “Then I drank until I couldn’t feel me anymore but the dreams kept coming. Kami came to me asking why I wasn’t there so I would wake up and drink again. Soon I began drinking and hoping I would never wake up again. I would either see Kami in my dreams all the time... or see him in death.”

He grew distant, pulling into himself and for a long moment, Jaejoong saw the public Gackt take the place of the mercurial, teasing man he’d grown to know. “I’m sorry, Camui-san. So sorry.”

“I don’t want you to get to that point, Je-chan. I don’t want to see you fall into the darkness so deep that it’s easier to let yourself slip into it than to crawl out of it.” The kabuki mask slipped away, revealing the philosopher beneath. “I came out of it when a friend I’d just met came to me. He hadn’t known me long and he told me something intriguing.”

‘I’ve only loved you a short time,’ he said, ‘So if I am the one to lose you for saying this, then others will think I have lost the least of them but really, I would have lost the most because I have only had you for moments. But, Gackt dear, you are dying and I can’t lose you.’

‘We need to peel back the hard skin that holds in your anger and hurt. It will be painful but you need to heal. It will scar and you will carry it forever but at least you will not die of your own poison. If you hate me for saying this, then hate me but I will leave knowing that I’ve lost someone I loved only in heart and not in body. You will still be here for me to love, even if I am far away.’

“So he and I, we peeled back my pain,” He grinned widely, taking the glass from Jaejoong to steal a mouthful of wine. He’d been right. The singer tasted as sweet as he’d imagined, the scent and wet of Jaejoong glimmering on the glass. Laying his mouth on the spot, he savoured Jae, knowing it was as close to him as he could get then returned the wine glass to his friend’s hands. “I wrote and then threw away words and songs then wrote some more.”

“You said goodbye in your music?”

“I did. I said goodbye the only way I knew how,” He murmured. “And every time I sing those songs in concert, I hear everyone’s voices raise up and I think; *‘Ah, surely Kami must be able to hear me now. Hear how loud they are. Surely he can hear this in Heaven.’* When they sing my words to the sky, they carry my love to him. And in writing and talking about him and about my pain, I lessened the poison I’d put into myself.”

Gackt shifted his arms, wrapping them around Jae’s waist. The singer resisted at first, not wanting the other man’s comfort but the Japanese singer was stronger willed and pulled the younger man into his lap. “Even now, I want to console you but you fight me. I know part of it is because you... because of who you are and what you had to be to get to this point in life but it’s also because you blame yourself for Kimura’s actions. And you’re wrong, kitten. You did *nothing* to deserve this. You did *not* ask for this.”

“I... wanted to tell Yunho but...” Jae shoved his fists against his forehead, digging his knuckles into his eyelids. “We were all so tired and after too much time passed... I thought he wouldn’t... want me.”

“Now that, I can’t say anything about. I don’t know your *bear*.” Gackt teased carefully, bringing a lift to the corner of Jae’s full mouth. “I don’t know if he’s the kind of man who will stand by you but if I had to guess, I’d say he’ll be hurt you didn’t talk to him. And even more hurt that you thought he wouldn’t want you.”

“Yunnie-ah — has a temper.” The singer admitted. “And I’m not — much better sometimes. When he let Kimura separate us, I was angry. I wanted to... hit him. He made me feel like I wasn’t as important to him as Japan.”

“You wanted him to speak up and pronounce that you’re his lover?” Gackt asked. “Did you tell him that?”

“No,” He said with a shake of his head. “When I get angry, I don’t want to talk about it so I...”

“Ignored him? Continued being mad at him for spite?”

“Yes,” Jae replied. “Then our schedules started getting hectic... and Kimura began to press into me. Pushing me into corners. I was still mad at Yunho but... I couldn’t go to the others. I couldn’t tell someone else and not Yunho. Pretty soon, it was too late.”

“Je-chan, it’s never too late,” Gackt explained, shifting so the singer’s legs were more comfortably stretched out over the sofa cushions. “If this had happened to any of the others... Min or even Yoochun... would you have been mad that they didn’t say anything? If Kimura was touching them and forcing himself on them, should they have kept quiet.”

“Yes, I’d be mad and no, they shouldn’t keep quiet. I’d... have killed him.”

“Why?” The Japanese man cocked his head, a quirk to his expressive mouth. “What makes them worth defending and you not?”

“Because I love them.” Jaejoong sat quietly, searching inside of himself. “Because they are...innocent. Because they are...people who... they are... someone worth something. They have so much to give and to have that done to them — to have Kimura touch them — would hurt them. I couldn’t stand to see them hurt like that. I wouldn’t want them to feel like I do.”

“Do you think your love for them is better than their love for you? Do you think you love better?”

“No! I never said that!”

“You did...with your silence,” Gackt pointed out, quietly driving home his point. “You chose to disregard the person they love...you. If someone hurt Junsu, your duck joker, you would stand by Yoochun in his anger and rightfully so. But you won’t stand by Yoochun when someone hurts his Jaejoong? He’d want you to. He’d want you to know that you are as worthy of his love as is Junsu or the others.”

“Yunho...”

“Given his actions against Kimura and probably at a cost to his pride, I would say Yunho loves you deeply.” He leaned over, rescuing his wine glass and put it in the singer’s hands to sip. “I think he’s going to be mad and hurt but I don’t think he’ll turn away from you. He might need to walk off his anger but really, that would be understandable. You might have to pay the price for your silence with a little time but I think that would be worth it.”

“He will hate me,” Jaejoong murmured, upending the wine glass. The potent burgundy lulled his thoughts, dulling his senses and he leaned back, resting against Gackt’s slender chest. “I’d rather die than have him hate me. I wish I’d died when Kimura touched me.”

“I’m glad you didn’t,” Gackt replied, brushing his lips against Jae’s forehead. “I wouldn’t want to hear the songs that Yoochun and Yunho would have to write to erase their pain. I don’t think the world could stand their tears. It would flood us and we would all drown in their sorrow.”

“What do I do, *akei*?” He hiccupped, the wine going to his head. Exhaustion tugged him down. Emotionally drained and with an empty stomach, the liquor hit his system with a punch. “How do I solve this? How do I fix what I’ve done.”

“Don’t worry, *neko*,” The older man said. “I’ll help you.”

In moments, the singer’s breathing deepened and he shifted, sliding down Gackt’s body. Cradling the Korean, the singer lay back against the arm of the couch, letting Jaejoong fall further into a comforting

slumber. He disliked seeing the shadows ringing the younger man's eyes, dark rings and puffed wrinkles from lack of sleep marring Jaejoong's beauty. It'd been too long since Gackt had seen the young man smile and he'd never known him to laugh.

Kimura's touch had been on Jaejoong for as long as the Japanese singer had known him and Gackt felt it was time to wipe his friend clean of its stain.

Jaejoong's discarded jacket held what Gackt needed and he whistled as he dialed the first number in the singer's speed dial. A man answered, sleepy and bewildered.

"Hello Jung. This is Gackt, one of Je-chan's... friends," Gackt slipped the empty wine glass out of Jae's fingers and positioned it on the coffee table, refilling it carefully as he tucked the phone under his chin, his other arm around Jae's slender body. "I am calling to see if you have some time free. I think there's something we need to talk about. How soon? Now — I think, *now* would be best."

Fifteen

Yunho stared at the man standing in the open doorway. He was lean, a supple erotic construct of a man that Yunho wasn't entirely sure was real. His life experiences didn't prepare him for the likes of the polished, sensual creature who felt as much male as he was female. Gackt wore his confidence as a second skin and Yunho knew he was looking at the man Jaejoong had the potential of becoming... if he survived the apocalypse of his soul.

"Come in, Jung Yunho," Gackt stepped aside. His t-shirt was thin and Yunho could see through the fabric to the bronze circles of his nipples. A shadow hinted at a trim stomach, whispers of muscles and a tear near his ribs exposed a hint of pale skin. Leaving Yunho standing by the open door, he walked down the main foyer, his bare feet silent on the cool stone tiles.

Gackt was nearly swallowed by the candlelit dim before Yunho realized he should follow. Closing the heavy wooden door behind him, the young Korean quickly worked his sneakers from his feet and hurried after the singer.

The house was a dizzying collection of rooms, half walls and glass sheets. He finally found the singer in a library of sorts, the shelves with manga and manhwa. Water flowed between the panes of blue glass that served as walls, intersecting the view to what appeared to be a living room. A bright red blanket covered someone sleeping on a white couch and Yunho's heart skipped up to his throat.

"Joongie-ah," Yunho stopped, his fingers pressed against the glass-trapped waterfall. "What did you do?"

"Nothing," Gackt purred, further reminding the leader of his main vocalist. "He fell asleep. He was done crying and finished his wine."

"Crying," Yunho didn't sound surprised. Gackt's eyebrows lifted and his grey-hued eyes followed the young man as he walked around the room. "He seems to do that a lot when he thinks none of us are looking. Why was he crying here?"

There were layers of feeling in Yunho's words, Gackt realized. Betrayal, hurt, injured pride and concern. Yunho's jealousy fought with his love for Jaejoong and the Japanese man could see the struggle in the other man's emotions, anger fighting for dominance. He stayed calm, despite the fire in his eyes, cooling pulling on the role of leader. The love and concern in Yunho's eyes won out, it seemed, despite the inferno in his heart.

"I've been...speaking with your Jaejoong," The other man replied smoothly, offering Yunho a bottle of Asahi beer. "Here, you'll want this."

"Thanks." Popping open the bottle, Yunho sniffed at the beer, inhaling the wisps of cold. He took a tentative drink and nodded his approval. "Thank you for sending the car. I never would have found this place."

"You are welcome. Please sit down."

The room seemed comfortable enough, wide couches made for lounging with individual lighting near tables large enough to hold a book and a drink. Katana were displayed on one wall, a black wooden rack bristling with the long swords. They looked old, even to Yunho's untrained eye and he turned to give them a closer look and spotted an elaborate, formal white uchikake hanging from a T-bar. It was an eclectic blend of traditional and urban, and strangely soothing.

He sat, choosing a couch where he could watch the living room and the young man who held his love in a battered heart. The beer left a small buzz in his brain but he shook it off. Gackt's feline-like presence kept him alert and he didn't need alcohol dulling his senses.

"How long have you been... speaking with him?"

There were other questions Yunho wanted to ask; *Do you love him?*

Does he tell you his secrets? Does he let you hold him when he cries? Do you want him as much as I want him?

Does he love you in return?

Has he stopped loving me?

"For a while."

Yunho wanted to grab Gackt by his filmy expensive t-shirt and shake him, loosening his tongue and spilling everything the man heard or ever said to Jaejoong. Or ask more questions he wasn't sure he wanted the answer to.

His mind whispered, driving Yunho slowly insane: *Has he told you he loves me? Has he said he can't live without me? Is he dying inside and are you the one he wants to save him?*

Does he love me at all?

"Does he talk about me?" He finally asked, trying to keep his heart from breaking. Yunho felt... tiny in front of this man, a child set before a creature that stepped out of legends. Giving Gackt a sideways glance, he was again struck by the otherness the Japanese singer embodied. He wasn't even entirely sure the man was human.

Snorting, Yunho recalled the first time he'd seen Jaejoong, defiant, beautiful and feral. He'd hated him on sight, viewing him as a rival.

At the time, Yunho didn't think Jaejoong was human either.

"Sometimes we talk about you," Gackt admitted softly. He regretted leaving the wine in the other room but retrieving it meant he might wake up the sleeping young man on his couch. From the look in Yunho's eyes, protective and growling, Gackt wasn't sure he'd be allowed one foot closer to Jaejoong than necessary. "Mostly, we talk about how he feels. He talks. I listen."

"So in this thing... between you and me." Peeling the beer label off of the bottle seemed like a better idea than punching the feline-faced singer. At the very least, he'd want to hit the man more than once but Gackt's graceful calm and stalking athletic walk made him pause. "Are you going to be talking or are you going to be listening?"

"Some of both." He shrugged. "I needed to see you. I needed to talk to you about why Je-chan comes to me."

"So it's about Kimura."

Gackt cocked his head to one side, studying the young Korean. "He told you, then? That he's still bothered about Kimura?"

"No, I guessed." Yunho swore, washing the bitter away with a splash of beer in his mouth. "So he comes to you instead of me. I've been kissing away his bruises and cuts for years and now he runs to you?"

"He think you'll... be angry at him. That he'll soil you," Gackt warded off Yunho's angry hiss. "Don't be mad at him. Your Je Je has been broken before... this. He was cracked and mended over like a porcelain figurine... the shepherdess in the *Wizard of Oz*."

"I know that. I've been with him through some of it. Did you tell him I would leave him? That I would reject him?"

“No, someone else sowed those seeds before I knew him. Those poisonous weeds took root long before either one of us were in his life.” He murmured. The Korean was as volatile as he’d imagined. In a moment, Yunho’s energy would drive him to his feet and the floor would sound with his pacing.

Yunho lasted half a minute longer than Gackt thought he would.

Gackt smiled. He wouldn’t have lasted less than half the time he’d given Yunho.

“I would never throw him away,” Yunho gritted his teeth.

Words came back to him, stained and worn at the edges but still brilliantly dark against the light of Jaejoong’s love; *‘You twist my mind around, make me do and think things that I shouldn’t even ...want. You are the wickedest thing that I could have ever had happen to me. This thing between us... is not right. It can’t be.’*

‘We can’t do this. I can’t do this.. Do you know what this would do to me? My family? The others? We have to leave this here. It can’t go any further.’

“Never is a long time, Yunho,” Gackt leaned back, supple and graceful. He studied Yunho, giving the young man a small smile. “Never stretches backwards as much as it does to the future. There were times in the past when you threw him aside — nothing more than an apple core that you’ve nipped all of the meat from. Some of the scars he wears — some of the minor ones — are from you.”

“I’ve apologized for those,” He growled, turning on his heel to face the older man.

“And you’ve just brought them back to your mind,” Gackt replied. “He walks on broken glass around you, afraid to come to you to speak his pain and you walk on eggshells with him, afraid to bring up his pain.”

Yunho’s temper flared then winked at him, “You related to Changmin? You sound a little bit like him.”

“The baby? No, I’ve not met him,” The Japanese man said, stroking his cheek with a finger, contemplative and musing. “I think I’d like to. From what *neko-chan* says, he sounds... delectable.”

Amused, Gackt watched Yunho’s pacing falter then continue. The remark about their youngest member struck a nerve.

“Are we done here then?” The leader asked, facing the man across the room. “Was that what you felt we needed to talk about? That Jaejoong is still haunted by Kimura?”

“Doesn’t that do anything to you?” Gackt snapped.

The lazy sun-drenched cat was gone, replaced by a snarling white tiger. Gackt stood in one swift motion, crossing over the floor with long strides. He was on Yunho before the younger man could react, his fingers worked through Yunho’s shirt and pulling him close. They were nose to nose before Yunho had taken another breath.

“Don’t you wonder why Kimura still haunts him? Why haven’t you asked him? Why do you linger too far away from Jaejoong for him to touch you?” The man shook Yunho, a quick shake to rattle his teeth.

“Let go of me,” Yunho shoved at Gackt’s forearms, breaking the other’s hold on him. Stepping back, he kept his fists down. The need to strike the Japanese singer grew stronger, the presumption of his words stinging. “I love Jaejoong. You have no fucking idea what I’ve given up to be with him.”

“No, I don’t,” Gackt replied sharply. “But do you have any idea what he’s gone through so you can keep whatever little pride you have left? Do you know he keeps quiet about that because he worries you have bargained your soul for him...and it was for nothing? Did you know Kimura... raped him? That everything you did to drive that man away was for nothing? Or at least nothing in Jaejoong’s eyes?”

He flung out what weapons he had, bitter words and sharp looks. Gackt wanted to bring the young man to a boil, forcing him to respond angrily to him so Yunho would go to Jaejoong’s side. He’d excelled at manipulating people and their thoughts, carving out reactions and subtly guiding others’ opinions until they matched his. He considered himself a master of socially maneuvering people around him so he was surprised when Yunho’s anger deflated and the young man slumped down onto the couch.

“You... wouldn’t know,” Yunho said, dropping his face into his hands. He was too tired for tears, worn too tight around the edges to do anything but long for some sleep and maybe food. Most of all he wanted to pull Jaejoong away from the graceful singer and back into the plainness of their lives.

Gackt came over to stand in front of Yunho. The younger man’s sorrow was too pure to ignore or push. “What wouldn’t I know, Jung?”

“I’ve known since we’ve been in the same room because Jaejoong talks in his sleep, Camui-san.” His heart froze, crackling and breaking but he forced himself on. “Through his nightmares as he cries, still asleep and unable to shake free from his dreams. He murmurs at first then starts screaming softly and saying no...begging until his voice breaks....”

“And do you know where I am?” Yunho’s eyes were broken when he looked up at Gackt. “I am there, holding him. I hold him every night, Camui, because every night I have to listen to Kimura rape him.”

Sixteen

"I'm here, baby."

Jaejoong heard the whisper. It dove in through his own screams, his dream-voice hoarse and dry. He tries speaking, pounding at the thin glass separating him from his lover but a man's hands were on his hips, fingers digging into his naked torso and yanking him back.

Then the world turned, replacing horror with a bold arabesque comforter and long stretches of golden, vanilla-green tea scented skin.

"Yunnie-ah," Jae mumbled, trying to clear the sleep from his brain. "Where...?"

The room was sensual and unfamiliar. His view of his surroundings were odd as if the ceiling were too short then Jaejoong realized it was the bed that was tall. Four posts rose up from its corners, woven iron spires beaten and formed to resemble fire. The black flames licked the air, immovable and firm, nearly reaching the airy white lanterns above it. A light burned from a sconce set near the bed, a soft warm glow reaching out to touch Yunho's face.

"Hey," Yunho leaned over, capturing Jaejoong's mouth in a gentle kiss. "I was hoping you'd sleep until morning."

"Where are we?" He rubbed at his eyes, moving under the bed sheets. His jeans were gone as was his shirt but his boxers gave him some modesty. Realizing suddenly where he'd been last, Jae's eyes widened. "Are we at Camui-san's house?"

"Yeah, we are," The other man said, tucking his arm around Jae's waist. Yunho almost shifted over but stopped, wondering how much room Jae needed. "I carried you in here. I told Shizu we'd not be around in the morning. He said it was okay."

"You carried me in here?"

"I carried you when your body was broken," Yunho reminded him. "I can carry you when your soul is broken too."

"How did you know... ah, Camui-san."

"Yeah, your fairy god-dragon," Yunho muttered. The singer still made him uncomfortable but he could deny Gackt's genuine fondness for Jaejoong. "He's a bit odd."

"I like him. He makes me feel..."

"Normal?"

"Yeah, normal," Jaejoong replied, deliberately ignoring Yunho's sarcasm. "You don't understand."

"I don't have to," Yunho said, softly. "All I have to do is accept."

They left things unspoken between them, both searching for the beginning of the tattered ribbon binding them together. Too alike in some ways and so very different in others, the singers lay on their sides, staring into one another's faces.

"I couldn't talk to you," Jaejoong knew in his gut Yunho understood but the leader shook his head. "It hurt too much and then... it hurt too much because I didn't."

"Joongie," He took his lover's hand, entangling their fingers. "I need you to talk to me. Now. Here. We can talk to each other now."

They touched frequently in front of others or in public but behind closed doors and away from prying eyes, even the smallest touch became intimate. There were burrs and ridges on Yunho's hands, rough spots where dancing took its toll. Brushing against floors and clothes caught on his skin, leaving thickened calluses on his palms and fingers where Jaejoong's were smooth. The textural differences were erotic on their own. When Yunho rubbed against Jae's fingers, it echoed their lovemaking, smooth against the intrusion.

Jaejoong found himself missing the stretch of his body around his lover. Lying with Yunho in a borrowed bed, he felt peaceful for the first time in months, the slow slumber of his exhaustion fleeing his limbs. Their rings touched, a chiming sound that brought a smile to Yunho's mouth.

"I love you, Yunnie-ah," Jaejoong said, a quiet drop of affection in the sea of black sorrow surrounding them.

"I love you too, baby." Yunho lifted Jae's hand, kissing his fingertips while his body mewled, aching to fall into Jae's sweetness and plunder its depths.

They lay tangled in one another, legs hooked around shins and arms around waists. Jaejoong's head lay on Yunho's shoulder, his fingers tracing over the other's chest. Lethargic, the singer fought sleep, having emerged from a dead slumber that left his mind filled with cobwebs. He knew he had to speak... to scrape off the layer of filth on his tongue and soul... but fear froze his heart, stilling its fire with foul memories.

"He... couldn't get hard," Jaejoong whispered. It was easier to talk to Yunho's chest.. easier to talk to his heart than to his face. The other man's eyes held his reflection and Jae didn't think he could speak if he had to see Yunho's pain overlaid with his face. "He tried... pulling and trying to shove into my mouth but I wouldn't let him."

"So he didn't... get himself inside of you?" Yunho asked. His breath was soft on Jaejoong's temples, a comforting touch for his busy head.

"No, not... that part of him. He tried. He pushed and then...I could feel him trying and then he... used his fingers to pull me apart and tried again but he couldn't...get into me. He was too soft and oh, he was angry. So angry. I could feel him getting hot... lying down on my back and I could feel his body get hotter." A sigh and Jaejoong closed his eyes, resting his cheek on Yunho's warm skin. "Then he yelled and he used his hands... used his fingers until I felt like something tore. His finger nails cut me and I started bleeding. I think he got scared. I don't know... I know it seemed like forever and he was shoving and pushing then... he spilled himself."

"I tried to get away from him but I couldn't move. I couldn't feel my face, like it was numb." The young man rubbed his fingers around Yunho's heart, loving the feel of its beat in time with his. "When I felt him... when I felt his seed on me, I started crying because he'd bitten me between... under my neck where my tattoo is. The place that.. you... bite... where you used to bite me."

"Joongie-ah, that spot is still mine," Yunho brushed at Jae's hair, stroking through the long strands at the back of his head. "It will always be mine."

"He hit me then. When he struggling to get inside of me and then spilled himself on my legs, he punched me. Over and over." Jaejoong struggled to get the words out, caught on his fear of Yunho's rejection. "I kept hearing him say things like... *You're not even good enough to get me hard...that I tempted him... and made him weak so he couldn't... do what I wanted him to... what I'd asked him to...*"

"I never asked him to touch me," Jae's voice broke. "I never did, Yunnie. You have to believe me. Never."

"I do." He murmured, bending his head down to kiss Jae's hair.

"It was worse than that time...before...the time at Trance. I should have been stronger. I'm older and... I'm stronger. I should have been able to shove him away."

“Baby, Kimura outweighed you by about five *kwan* at least. You wouldn’t be able to fight that off, no matter how strong you are.” Yunho kept his voice soft, a whisper to soothe the other’s rattled nerves. “No one can say that you didn’t try. I know you, baby, I know you didn’t seduce him. I know it.”

“People will think... because I love you...” He blinked, unable to shed another tear. Jae’s mouth felt too dry but he was too weak to sit up, too drained to do anything more than lie against Yunho’s side.

“Hold on.” Yunho slid up, grabbing a bottle of water from the nightstand. “Gakkun said that you need to drink more because you’re dehydrating your body. He shouldn’t have let you drink the wine but he thought you could use the sleep.”

Jaejoong sat up and forced himself not to gulp down the bottle. The cold felt good on his throat and his tongue lapped at the gush, forcing the flow down. “Did he call you? Did he tell you?”

“No, I told you — I already knew. I’ve known for a while but yes, he did call me,” Yunho took the half-empty bottle from Jae, putting within reach on the table and wrapped his arm around his lover’s waist, holding him close. Settled back against Yunho’s body, Jae sighed, tension releasing from his tight body. “He sent a car for me which is good because I wouldn’t have been able to drive.”

“I should have told you,” He whispered. “I knew I should have but we weren’t talking and then, it got too long. If I told you, you’d want... you’d not want to be with me. As long as I didn’t tell you, I had a chance to make things right. I just didn’t know how.”

“You should have told me. Even if I killed him, you should have told me.”

“I was afraid that if I told you and you did...nothing, it would hurt even more. I don’t think I could have taken it. I don’t think I could have survived you...not caring.”

“That’s not going to happen, baby. I promise.”

“When he was hitting me, all I could think about was how I was going to hide the bruises from you. I didn’t know Chunnie saw them and blamed you. There’s just too much... so much behind us.”

“There’s a lot in front of us too,” Yunho said, smiling as he heard Gackt in his words.

“He told me that you’d know. He would make sure that you knew I cheated on you and eventually get the members to drive me out. He kept telling me things...whispering things to me until I couldn’t tell what the truth was anymore. And then in his office... when he...”

“His office?” Yunho asked suddenly, tightening his mouth when he realized he stood in the room Kimura used to try to take Jaejoong away from him. “I should have set it on fire when I had the chance.”

“For me, it didn’t matter that he couldn’t... finish... that he couldn’t... it was that he tried and I didn’t stop him,” Jaejoong bit his lip, needing to feel the pain. His mouth was still too dry and a numb stillness was spreading through his limbs. Fear paralyzed him, an uncomfortable playmate roughly handling his nerves. “He said it didn’t matter. That he could say that he’d had me to your face and you’d...”

“You were afraid that I’d look at you and not want you any more?” When Jae nodded, Yunho sighed heavily. “I’ve not said anything because I wanted to wait until you could talk about it. I’ve held you through the worst of it, baby. I’ll hold you through anything but you’ve got to hold me too. At least in your heart. You have to trust me, Joongie. I might not always react the best way but under everything is love. I will never throw that away. I am never going to throw you away.”

“Even after... Kimura?”

“Especially after Kimura,” Yunho replied. “Camui-san was right when he told me that men are trapped when something like this happens. If they say something then people will think they are weak and gay men have it worse.”

“You think people think I’m gay?” A frown was in Jaejoong’s voice, deepening his worry. “I’ve been trying not to... give that impression. I can’t risk the others. I can’t risk you.”

“See?” Yunho pointed out. “You are gay and you worry about people perceiving the truth because that’s what we were brought up to believe. That’s wrong, Joongie. I know we’re trapped behind this wall that we can’t climb over and show the world who we love. We have too many people depending on us to feed their families. The other members depend on us as well. There is too much pressure from the outside of us, Je Je. That’s why we have to be honest somewhere in our lives. At least be honest with ourselves.”

“Kimura wasn’t... honest with himself, do you think?”

“I think Kimura’s perversions didn’t have anything to do with him liking guys,” Yunho said. “I think his depravities were his need to make other people small. He liked the power he had over you. I think he couldn’t get himself hard because he knew he couldn’t break how you felt. Kimura couldn’t make you his. He couldn’t take what was inside of you. You were stronger than his perversions. You’re stronger than his control was. Even if he had you where he could hurt you, you still weren’t his. That’s what pissed him off, Boo. That you were never going to be his.”

“He couldn’t push into you. He couldn’t take possession of you and even if he could, he’d still never have you.” He continued, running his fingers up and down Jaejoong’s spine. “He could have plunged as far into you as he could and still, he couldn’t touch what he needed to touch the most... your soul. He didn’t break you. You’re broken not because of what he did to you but because you feared I wouldn’t love you. And I can tell you that I will always love you and I will help you mend what’s inside of you, baby.”

“But he didn’t get all the way in,” Jaejoong said. “I didn’t feel like I could call it that.. because he didn’t..”

“Kimura raped you, Joongie. Even if all he did was spill his seed on you and beat you, he still raped you. He assaulted who you were because he was trying to take what wasn’t his. That’s what rape is. Trying to break someone apart is rape.” Yunho breathed, letting out all of the tangled frustrations he had in his belly.

“I feel like he tore me apart,” The singer agreed.

“Your father... that man at Trance... that first guy who touched you and then tossed you aside... those are all assaults. They all try to break off small pieces of you so they can take those pieces. Those kind of men think they’re powerful when they do that. They take out those parts of you and say; *‘Look what a man I am because I was able to take this from another man!’* when in reality, you’re the real man for surviving them.”

Jaejoong’s hand slowly moved over Yunho’s chest and ribs, remembering the other man’s skin under his palm. There were newer curves along the man’s stomach, ones he’d been hesitant to explore before. They were fragile together but in a borrowed bed, it seemed easier... freer to rediscover the man who said he loved him.

The man who *did* love him.

“What do we do now? How do we fix... us? How do we fix...”

“How do we fix you?” Yunho completed Jaejoong’s thought. “We work to erase your nightmares. We learn to trust one another. We learn to laugh again. We hold each other and talk about what hurts. We learn that our pride doesn’t matter and that no matter what happens, we shouldn’t turn our backs on each other... even if we’re pissed off.”

“We get pissed off a lot,” Jae sighed, turning around in Yunho’s arms so he could lean his back against the other’s chest. “We’ve always fought.”

“We probably always will,” Yunho said ruefully. “We seem to like... fire in our relationship.”

“Can we do this? Can we survive each other, Yunnie-ah?”

“We’re going to have to, baby,” He replied. “I think we swore to love one another until the stars burnt out. Last time I looked, they’re all still there.”

“True, they are.”

“Besides,” Yunho reached over Jae’s shoulder with his free hand, moving the other man’s hair out of the way. He craned his neck and sank his teeth into the black ink scrawled under Jaejoong’s skin, working the roll back and forth before letting go. “I need to remind you that you’re mine, baby. So much mine.”

Se7enteen

“Is he asleep?” Gackt asked as he deftly wound steaming ramen noodles from a pot on the stove.

Yunho nodded, not surprised to see the Japanese man still awake at two in the morning. The lack of windows in the interior of the house made it impossible to tell what time it was outside and the lighting inside was set at an eternal twilight.

“Sit down over there. I’ll bring you something to eat,” Gackt nodded towards a sitting area next to the kitchen.

The alcove was small compared to the rest of the house, barely the size of Changmin’s room. Set up in with traditional noodle shop’s lower seats and broad wooden table, it oddly seemed to fit into the rest of Gackt’s eclectic home, drawing from an old-style simple elegance. Square lanterns lit the table and Japanese condiments sat at the far end against a short wall. A decent sized courtyard lay beyond, surrounded by the house and dominated by a rough rock waterfall. The sound of the water was soothing as it hit the pond below, soft lights splashing thorough the low greenery and occasional flower. A sand circle spread out near a stone walkway and a grassy area boasted several low chaises, their cushions covered in a mossy green fabric.

“It’s nice here,” Yunho said, stifling a yawn. He’d not slept properly in days, if not weeks and the group’s brutal schedule was taking its toll on him. Something about the courtyard lulled him, cradling his fatigue. Glancing up, he noticed a small overhang roofed with black half-moon tiles but the ceiling was opaque and dark. “Is that glass above?”

“It opens if I need it to.” Gackt replied from the kitchen. “The gardeners usually open it if I’m not here to give the plants some sun. If it’s nice outside, I’ll open it to watch the stars and if the rain isn’t too cold, it’s nice to be out there and let it wash over me.”

Yunho slid back on the cushions, angling himself so he could see his host. The other singer seemed as competent in the kitchen as Jaejoong, expertly mincing green onions. After tossing handfuls of raw seafood into the still hot broth, Gackt waited a few moments then fished out succulent prawns and scallops, arranging them carefully on the steaming ramen. Ladling the miso broth over the noodles, he carried the two bowls over, shaking his head when Yunho started to get up to help.

“Stay there.” He set the hot bowls down. “I’ll come back with some bean sprouts and green onions. *Hashi* and *shoyu* are at the end. If you can pull them out, I’ll be right back and we can eat.”

He arranged two pairs of chopsticks on cloth napkins then grabbed the *shoyu* from the carousel. Spotting a potent red chili sauce, he moved that was well, his mouth watering at the sight of the food. His stomach growled and Yunho blushed, hoping the older man didn’t hear it.

Gackt surprised him with a platter of *banchan*, the small white dishes brimming with Japanese delicacies meant to be eaten with the ramen. Plucking a tiny green plum, Gackt mimed opening his mouth to Yunho, quirking a sensual smile when the Korean let his lips part. Dropping the sweet pickled fruit on Yunho’s tongue, the older man used his index finger to close Yunho’s jaw before returning to the kitchen. Another tray served the minced green onions, sliced *tamago*, two tall pint glasses and a frosty tall bottle of Tsing Tao.

“Feel free to taste the things you don’t know before you put it on your noodles.” Gackt tilted a glass, pouring the beer slowly to keep the suds down. The foamy brew hit the side, curling up under the liquid. “I think everything that we’ve been through together, we can eat from the same dishes, no?”

“What’s this?” Yunho used his chopsticks to select a round brown something from one of the dishes. He carefully looked at it, taking a tentative sniff when he thought the other man wasn’t watching.

“It’s a *shoyu* egg. The eggs are small because they’re from jungle fowl instead of a chicken.” He put one beer down in front of Yunho and began on the other. “Taste it. You’ll like it.”

Biting carefully, the Korean held his hand under the egg as the yolk threatened to crumble. From the taste, the pungent, earthy hard boiled egg had been peeled and then soaked in a dark soy sauce. The flavour was intense and pleasing on Yunho’s tongue. Tucking the rest of it into his mouth, he chewed slowly, comparing it to the sweet vinegar taste of the plum he’d just eaten.

“You’re a good cook,” Yunho admitted, picking up his glass. Saluting his host, he took a sip then set it down, waiting for Gackt to join him. “I wish we had more time for home cooked meals. I think Jaejoong misses fussing over us.”

“We talk about food sometime. I’d like to learn how to make kim chee soup,” Gackt admitted with a smile. “Although I probably won’t make it as spicy as he likes it.”

“Joongie-ah would sip from a volcano if you let him. He likes things hot.” Yunho laughed.

“It shows in his tastes in boyfriends.” Gackt returned the salute with one of his own, smiling at Yunho’s sputter. “Ah, it’s nice that you’re still so innocent. Or should I say, traditional?”

“Traditional? I suppose so but...I mean...” Yunho wiped at his mouth with his napkin. “Jaejoong is...” He trailed off, unsure of what to say.

“You’ve never said it out loud, have you?” The man selected a few pinches of bean sprouts to place on his noodles then dosed the *miso* with a splash of the chili sauce and *shoyu*. “Does it scare you? To admit that he’s your lover?”

Yunho readied himself to protest but the man’s piercing gaze pinned him against the high back bench. “I’ve not... no, it’s hard to admit it but not because I don’t love him. It’s hard to say it because ... of everything we are. Of where we came from.”

“Say it to me, Jung Yunho.” Gackt leaned his elbows on the table, motioning in the air with his chopsticks. “Say it aloud for someone who isn’t a member of your group. Admit it to someone outside of your inner circle.”

With Gackt’s steady gaze on him, Yunho tilted his chin up, letting his pride rise. He wasn’t ready to rise to Gackt’s bait but the challenge was too great. The man was daring him to admit to something he’d not shared with anyone since his parents — since the last time he’d been called his father’s son.

“Kim Jaejoong is my lover,” Yunho bent forward, resting his elbows on the table and staring back into Gackt’s eyes. “He’s been my lover for years now and he’ll continue to be my lover for as long as he lets me. For as long as he wants me.”

The Japanese singer’s grin was an erotic splash of hot on his pretty face and he snatched a shrimp from Yunho’s bowl, guiding it up to his own mouth. Chewing on the peeled crustacean, his grin grew wider. “Ah, the images that admissions gives me. I’m surprised I can chew.”

“Je Je is right. You are wicked.” He shook his head in amazement.

“He said that, eh?”

“Right before he said he wanted to be exactly like you.”

It was Gackt’s turn to sputter, his laughter bubbling up from his belly as he choked on a mouthful of beer. Handing Yunho a dish of crispy sesame tofu strips, he began eating his ramen, still chuckling. They ate in silence for a few minutes, Yunho remembering to slurp at his soup as a courtesy for the cook. The Japanese man pointed out the differences in the slices of fishcake he’d brought out but other than a few grunts as he ate, Gackt remained quiet until Yunho was halfway through his noodles.

“We should talk, you and I,” Gackt said with a tilt of his head at Yunho’s raised eyebrows. “You’re surprised at my concern for your kitten?”

“No,” Yunho chewed and swallowed the egg he had in his mouth. “I just don’t know what to say or how to say it. We don’t... talk in Korea. Jaejoong and I talk but it’s usually about... me dealing with the members. He avoids talking about things that happened before he became Dong Bang and I don’t push him.”

“You should sometimes. It would be good for him,” The man said, waving off Yunho’s protesting murmur. “He needs to see himself more clearly. Do you know it took me several conversations before we broke down exactly what Kimura did to him? He’d been torturing himself with the idea that he’d been with someone else besides you and in reality, after we examined the incident, Kimura never was able to ...force himself on Je-chan. Knowing that helped him.”

“I don’t know who you are more like? You’re as outrageous and scandalous as Jaejoong and as blunt and embarrassing as Changmin.” With a shake of his head, Yunho reached for his beer, taking a long draught. Gratefully accepting Gackt’s offer to refill, he sighed and said, “I don’t feel comfortable discussing things... intimate things.”

“We are going to, you know. I am not a stranger in this to him even if I am to you,” The other man pointed out.

“I know. I’m trying,” Yunho said. “It’s not easy to give so much of myself. I... only with Jaejoong and even then, I think... I’m too careful.”

“You could try harder, Jung.” Gackt pursed his mouth, motioning for Yunho to continue. “Please, tell me the first thing you thought of when you heard what he had to say?”

It wouldn’t be too difficult, he surmised. Or at least it shouldn’t be. The self-contained musician made him feel like a child and for all his bravado, Yunho felt every second they had distancing them. Another mouthful of beer and it hit him, starting from the stem of his brain and working up until courage rose from his slightly drunk tongue.

“Okay, the first thing I thought when he told me Kimura didn’t... get to him was relief,” Yunho admitted, his mouth twisting. “How sick is that? First thing I thought was; he’s still mine.”

“It would be a common response.”

“No, it isn’t. My first thought should have been; it doesn’t matter, Joongie. It shouldn’t matter but no, I’m selfish enough to say that after all this time, I thought Kimura took him because that’s what it sounded like when I held Joongie-ah at night,” Yunho said. “I’m disgusted that I thought that. I’m pissed off at myself for thinking of me first and it’s not about me. This whole fucking mess is about Joongie and how he comes out of this. I know that and still, I was relieved.”

“I would have been relieved,” Gackt admitted with a wry smile. “I’m sorry but it’s true. Even if I felt ashamed I thought it, it would be my first thought. We’re human, Yunnie-chan. We’re going to have human thoughts.”

“I’m not convinced you’re human yet.” He said, helping himself to another mouthful as Gackt laughed at him. “But yeah, that was my first thought.”

“And the second?”

“The second thought? It was about me too. I wanted to be there to help Joongie-ah. I wished I’d known. I wished I’d spoken up,” Yunho replied. “After that, it got a bit confusing but I think most of all, I was glad it was Jaejoong and not me because I’m not as strong as he is. He’s the strongest person I know and even if Kimura had... done his worst, Jaejoong would have spit on him eventually and risen up. You call him *koneko*? That’s wrong. You should call him *bul sae* — *hinotori*...phoenix.”

“No one rises from the ashes like Jaejoong... like *my* Jaejoong.” Yunho sat back, contemplating the *banchan* on the table. “I would have broken apart and fallen. He would have been better than me in picking me up. I know that. If it were me... if it had been me that Kimura did that too... I wouldn’t have survived it.”

"I think you might have but you would have been... probably more damaged," Gackt replied thoughtfully. "Who you are is more tied up with the male ideal than Jaejoong."

"See?" Yunho waved his chopsticks in the air. "You even talk as carefully as he does when he's trying to say I'm an egotistical, prideful asshole. He never throws that in my face. That I have to be the *man* all the time. He lets me... lets me touch him and make him blush. He gives in to my ego without thinking and I don't do anything in return."

"Have you let him make love to you?" Gackt asked bluntly.

Yunho choked, reaching for his beer to help wash down his food. "Aish, so much candor. I am not ready for it."

"Sorry, I'll rephrase it," The singer smiled. "Have you let him fuck you?"

"How is that better?" Yunho hissed, feeling the rise of heat on his face.

"I thought maybe you'd feel better if I were more... open," The other man shrugged, his Cheshire Cat smile teasing Yunho.

"And no, I've offered but he.. says he's not ready for that. I'm not sure I'm ready for that." He replied. "I've wondered at it and sometimes... aish, I'm not going to talk about that with you. I'm not ready for that. But sometimes I wonder if it makes Jaejoong feel less of a man because we don't... you know..."

"Switch places?" Gackt asked then murmured with Yunho when the other man nodded. "I'm not going to tell you that Jaejoong doesn't have feminine qualities but rather he is very comfortable with who he is. He doesn't place any gender value on what he likes or dislikes. He's fashionable and discerns what he considers will be popular. He cooks, something a lot of people consider a feminine role but at the same time, he has a male's pride as well. He doesn't like to lose and when someone calls his masculinity into question, he will defend it."

"He is a complete person, both Yin and Yang in his soul," The singer continued. "You should consider yourself lucky for finding him."

"I didn't find him," Yunho said. "He found me. Jaejoong fell in love with me. I only followed."

"Was it difficult to walk away from your family? Even for Jaejoong, was it hard?"

"I didn't walk away from them," Yunho's words bittered, souring the air. "They walked away from me. I'd made up with my mother but... we've since parted."

"Was she the price you paid for your father's help?"

Yunho stared at the other man, his mouth slack. Swallowing, he glanced at the way to the bedroom, making sure Jaejoong was no where in earshot. "What kind of witch are you, Camui? I told no one that."

"I guessed as soon as you said you've parted with your mother. You're not someone who would walk away like that. Not unless you had to," Gackt said with a nod. Getting up to retrieve another beer, he popped open the bottle and poured another draught for the younger man. "Jaejoong said your father helped you and considering what he told me of the man, I guessed that he exacted his pound of flesh from you to do it."

"You are as scary as Changmin — scarier because you're older," Yunho exhaled. "I should drown him now before he owns all of our souls if you are what he's going to turn out to be."

"I think I see more of me in your Jaejoong than in the quiet *okojo* you have as your youngest member." The man's face grew distant, remembering things he wouldn't share with the Korean singer. "I am the first one to tell him to love as much as he can because it's gone before you're ready for it to be. And sometimes, you can never find another."

"I wish I could love as fully as he does," Yunho said, suppressing a wry smile. "I'm not as self-sacrificing. He gives too much sometimes. Even if I don't ask him to, he gives too much. This thing with Kimura, Jaejoong gave me too much. My pride... my masculinity shouldn't have mattered to him but it did."

He was so careful not to injure my pride that he hurt himself. I look at myself and I don't see someone I like, Camui-san."

"Call me Gackt or Gakkun if you like," He said, putting the egg dish in front of Yunho. "Be sure to eat. I don't want to have to drag you to bed because you're too drunk to walk. If I'm going to walk into a bedroom with two pretty Korean boys, it's not going to be to tuck them in. So tell me what you see, Yunnie-chan."

Yunho ignored the flirtation, dismissing it as something Gackt did, as natural to him as breathing. "I see my father. I see someone hard-headed and unwilling to bend. I think in a few years I'm going to push Jaejoong around like my father pushes my mother around but instead of bowing down to me — like my mother does to my father — Jaejoong is going to walk out."

"And then," Yunho stabbed at one of the eggs, trying to capture it as it slid around the dish. "Then he's going to come to Japan and probably live with you. Because you understand him. Because you know that he hates being himself and you... you've spent your whole life being someone more than you are... and that's something Jaejoong needs to be."

"Insightful," Gackt mused, "A bit preposterous but still insightful. I would say that Jaejoong wants to be better than he thinks he is but for him, that's trying different things. I play at what I look like on the outside and how I am in public but I'm still the same inside. Jaejoong was broken before you became a part of his life. He is glass that has been shattered by hammers wielded by people who were supposed to love him."

"So, I can't ever fix him?"

"Fix him, baby?" The man raised his eyebrows. "You can't fix Jaejoong back to who he was but you can help him become something else. The best thing to do with broken glass is to make a stained glass window. That's the beauty of Jaejoong. What he is... the colours he has in his soul are brilliant and he's merely pushing the pieces around until he finds a picture he likes."

Leaning over, Gackt fished the egg out, plucking it from its watery dish and held it out for Yunho to eat. "You, my dear sweet stubborn Yunho, you are the solder that holds the glass together. Strong, sometimes flexible but hard when heated. You will make him whole just not in his original form but you'll have to be patient as he works it out."

"So I'm to wait?" Yunho said around the egg. "And be patient?"

"And work on yourself." Gackt shrugged. "I didn't say you were without imperfections. You'll need to skim off the impurities that you hate in yourself. If you think you're like your father then work to become unlike him. I was lucky, Yunnie-chan. My parents encouraged me — allowed me to follow my dreams without censure. I had a foundation that very few people are lucky enough to have. I don't go a day without thanking the universe for gifting me my parents."

"Do they care who you love?"

"No. They just wanted me to love. They still do." His eyes clouded again, stormy with a warning of thunder. "But then I never gave them the chance to meet who I loved. And now, it's too late."

"Suppose you love again?" Yunho leaned back in the chair. The pain in the other man's face was obvious, his features open and vulnerable. "Do you think that's possible?"

"Do you think you'll love again? Like you love Jaejoong?" Gackt smiled at Yunho's crestfallen face. "Your love for Je-chan started when both of you were innocent and grew complex, entwined into who you are. That kind of love only comes once. I might love again but I will not love the same. It would be unfair to say I could."

"He fills me," Yunho said softly. "When I think I can't go on, he looks at me and then there's... something there that takes my soul and fills it with strength. I don't know why that is but it's true. When I'm sick, he's there. And when I'm angry he yells back at me, telling me when I'm stupid. I hate that this has happened to him because it's made him... less. And he doesn't deserve that. He doesn't deserve to lose who he is because of a man's greed."

“No, he doesn’t,” Gackt agreed. “And he won’t if you’re there. Just remember to love him, Yunnie-chan. Just love him.”

“I have to,” Yunho admitted, shrugging his shoulders as he gave the man a smile. “I don’t know how to do anything else.”

Eighteen

Changmin crossed his arms over his chest, staring at Yunho. Trouble was brewing in his brown eyes, anger lightening their cinnabar hue to amber. A curl hit his lip, a more mature expression than the others were used to seeing on their youngest and for a long moment, the group caught a glimpse of the man hidden under the boy they teased.

“How long have you know about this, hyung?”

Min’s question was directed to Yunho but the honorific didn’t fool the young man. Their youngest was pissed off, simmering below the surface. He debated lying to Changmin — momentarily then changed his mind. The internal discussion was hidden, or so he thought, until Min stepped up into his face.

“You were about to lie to me, no?” He’d dropped his arms, their chests nearly touching. The anger flared, sunbright and hot in Min’s movements. “How hard is it to tell me the truth? I trusted you, Yunho. I gave you my trust and you betrayed it once again. After all I’ve done to help you and *this* is how you treat me? This is the kind of respect you give me?”

Tension spilled through the living room with Min and Yunho face to face while Yoochun and Junsu watched from the couch. Jaejoong sat behind Yunho, balancing a seat on the back of the sofa, his bare feet on the cushions. The singer’s head was down, his shoulders slumped over with fatigue.

Yunho argued against telling the other members but Jaejoong reminded him that he promised to trust the others with his troubles, even if he’d taken some time to do it. Still reluctant, Yunho agreed but when faced with an angry Min, he still wondered if they’d made the right decision.

“You’re right,” Yunho admitted. “I was going to tell you I just found out about it because it would be easier to deal with but no, I’ve known for a while. I just didn’t speak to Jaejoong about it because he didn’t seem ready to.”

“Minnie-ah,” Junsu stood, sliding himself between their youngest and eldest. “Maybe the when of this should have been between the hyung? I mean, this is their relationship.”

“Really? Their relationship? Min turned his anger onto the tenor and Junsu flinched under the heat of it. “The last time I looked, we all had a relationship. It shouldn’t matter if someone is fucking someone else or not, we are all supposed to be in this together.”

A flare of Yunho’s nostrils was all the warning the others had before he launched at Changmin with clenched fists. The leader was nearly over the table before Yoochun realized it. Changmin leaned forward, bracing himself for the other’s man attack echoing Yunho’s aggressive stance.

“Hey... hey!” Yoochun stood, grabbing Yunho’s shirt before the other man could pitch himself forward at Min. Wrapping his arms around Yunho’s waist, Chunnie spun him around until they faced Jaejoong. “Hyung, no! Joongie-ah, help me here.”

“And it’s not like they’re even doing that!” Min shouted at the back of Yoochun’s head. Junsu held his hands up, pressing them against their youngest’s chest. “Susu, let me go! I need to...”

“You need to breathe, dongsaeng,” Junsu cautioned. “Your anger is eating up your common sense like it is candy. This is our hyung you are yelling at. Caution.”

“Caution why? Changmin raged, pushing Junsu away. “Why should I be cautious about someone who isn’t cautious with me? Jaejoong, you tell me you’re going to trust me but you don’t talk? We promised one another that we would!”

"I... couldn't." He looked up. The pain in his eyes was raw as if telling the story of Kimura in its full ugliness placed him back in the room with the dead man. "I didn't want... to talk about it. I thought it would be better if none of you knew because it made me feel... like I was dirty. Like I wasn't worth anything."

"Bullshit," Min spat back. He bucked up against Junsu when Yunho surged forward, the leader held back by a strained Yoochun. "Let him go, Chunnie-ah! Is he going to hit me to get me to submit? Like Kimura did to Joongie? Is that how you're going to solve things, hyung?"

"Babe, hold onto him," Yoochun said to Junsu as he struggled with Yunho. The older man was stronger, compact and supple. It took all of his strength to keep the man in place and Chunnie was slipping fast. "Hyung! Calm down. Joongie, get off your ass and help me here."

"Chunnie, let him go," Jaejoong slid from the couch, gripping his lover's shirt. Looking over Yunho's shoulder at Min, he jerked his head towards the bedroom. "Come. You and I are going to talk first. There are things I want to say to you."

"Anything you say to him, you can say here so I can keep him in line," Yunho snapped. Slapping at Changmin's shoulder, he pushed the younger man back, nearly topping Junsu with shove.

Min stumbled back, catching himself before he fell to the ground. Growling he shifted forward and Junsu yelped, sliding out of the way before the younger man ran him over. Slamming into an unmoving Jaejoong, Min snarled at the singer, his temper rising out of control.

"Minnie-ah," Jaejoong reproached. "Come on. Bedroom."

The young man gave Yunho one final glare then let himself be pushed towards the hallway, his shoulders stiff and unyielding. Jaejoong caught his lover with a quick palm to the man's flat stomach, holding Yunho back.

"No, Yunnie. Let me talk to him first."

"He disrespects you like that?" Yunho gritted his teeth, keeping his voice down to a low rumble. "I want to wipe that smirk off his face with the back of my hand."

"That's not going to solve anything, no?" Jae asked. "Do me a favour and go take a walk. Cool down."

"I'm not going to cool down, Je Je." Their youngest's remarks were outrageous, meant to cut deeply and from the look on Jaejoong's face, Min hit his mark. "He wants honesty? I can give him honesty..."

"Yunho," Jaejoong stepped back, bumping his shoulder against Yunho's. "Please? Just give us some time."

"How much time, huh? How long do I have to listen to him say things like that? He doesn't know shit! He has no fucking idea what you've gone through and he can sit there and judge?" The older man turned, making a grab for Min's shirt. Yoochun stepped forward, grunting as Yunho's mass struck him. "Sit down, Chunnie. Sit. The. Fuck. Down."

"I think everyone's pissed off right now, yes?" Yoochun tucked his head in close to his leader's, his voice low and calm. "Maybe let Jaejoong talk to him and we can sit out here? We can maybe talk things out? We can have dinner later? Talk over some beer? Or even sake. Sake is good."

"I don't want... fine, Joongie-ah, I'll go walk it off." Yunho took a deep breath, his chest puffing out as he stared up at the ceiling. Pacing off, he grabbed his house keys from the counter, stopping only long enough to point a finger at Min's glowering face. "When I come back, your shit better be over with... or you're answering to me!"

Yunho slammed the door behind him, the photos in the hallway rattling in his wake. Changmin's lower lip jutted out and Jae feared Min would follow the older man, hounding him more until they came to violence. As hot headed as their leader, their youngest simmered, his rage fully engaged in the argument.

"Come on," Jae said, quietly padding to the bedroom.

Changmin hesitated, turning to watch the older man walk down the hallway. Disgruntled, he was torn between chasing down Yunho or obeying his older member. Culture warred with his modern independence but eventually, old habits won out and he huffed, grumpily following Jaejoong down the hall and into the master bedroom.

Junsu slid onto the couch first, more relieved than worried. Working his fingers through his hair, he was starting to resemble a rooster when Yoochun patted him on the head, smoothing it back down. Slumping back, he grumbled under his breath. "They make it so hard. Why does everyone have to be moody?"

"Because we're moody people, Susu-ah," Yoochun said, flopping down on the cushions. His weight bounced Junsu up, jostling the singer. "We're singers. We're supposed to be moody."

"I'm not moody!"

"Are you kidding? You have two moods, disgusting sugar and grumpy," His lover snorted. Rubbing at his forehead, Yoochun wondered if Yunho's anger seared off his eyebrows. His fingers brushed over the dabs of hair above his eye and he shook his head. "I hate it when everyone fights."

"Me too," Junsu nodded. "You looked like you were going to cry there."

"No!" Yoochun sniffed, wiping his nose. "Shut up. I have allergies. Someone downstairs has a cat I think. Or something. Her coat was covered in fur and I rode up on the elevator with her."

"Pffts. You always cry. People ask if we fight and I say no... because Yoochun cries all the time. How do you fight with someone who cries?" Sneaking a smile at his boyfriend, Junsu winked and then burst into laughter when Yoochun smacked him. "Hey, be nice. I'm the only one talking to you right now."

"I think we're the only ones talking to each other right now," The baritone muttered, peeking down the hall. "Does yelling count as talking?"

"No, yelling doesn't count. Are they yelling?" Junsu strained to listen. He couldn't hear anything other than Yoochun's breathing. "I don't hear anything."

"Lean closer," Yoochun told him, moving over towards the couch arm. The tenor scooted over the couch, bending closer to his boyfriend.

"I don't hear..."

Yoochun slid his hand around Junsu's neck, pulling the young man closer. He started with a gentle kiss, licking at his boyfriend's expressive mouth until Junsu couldn't help but part his lips to let Yoochun explore deeper. Sighing, Chunnie marveled at the softness of Junsu's mouth, sucking and teasing at the lower bow with his teeth. Something inside of him growled and he groaned, wanting to consume every last inch of the man sitting across of him.

He tugged at Junsu's shirt, needing to feel the other's skin on his palms. He hit his elbow on the couch back, dinging his funny bone on the frame. Swearing into Junsu's mouth, Yoochun shifted, pulling the other man between his legs and angling him to get a better grip on Junsu's back.

Their tongues licked and withdrew, the kisses growing longer and deeper. Junsu moaned, an itch growing from his belly down to his groin. He twisted, kneading at Yoochun's shoulders, working his hands down the other man's back. Yoochun's t-shirt caught at his wrists and Junsu growled, sliding himself down the other man's body.

"Babe," Yoochun slid to the side, hooking his arm around Junsu's waist and pulling him down onto the couch. Covering the other man, the baritone stretched over Junsu, finally able to work the shirt off of his lover. Tossing it aside, Yoochun bent down, suckling at Junsu's right nipple. He rubbed the rough of his palm over the other, teasing it to a peak as he laved the other. Chewing back and forth with his teeth, Yoochun licked and chewed, slowly working his lover into a froth.

"Chunnie!" Junsu gasped and pushed hard against his boyfriend's stomach. "Wait, stop.. stop."

"Stop?" Chun looked up, searching the room for anyone else. "Why? No one is here? What?"

“We can’t do this now.”

“We *can* do this now,” He grumbled, licking at Junsu’s belly, traveling down the singer’s abdominal crease until he reached the button of his jeans. “I’m *doing* it right now. If I keep going, you could be *doing* it right now too.”

“Come on, we can’t,” Junsu struggled to sit up, pushing Yoochun off of him. Searching for his shirt, he spotted it across the room, hanging from one of the swinging lamps. “We can’t do this while everyone else is fighting.”

“Why do you have attacks of morals when everyone is off chewing each other’s heads off? We’re alone!”

“Why do you always get horny when everyone’s fighting,” Mumbling, he pulled his shirt on, getting it caught on his chin. Tugging it down, he popped his head through, choking on the collar. “What?”

“It’s backwards.” Yoochun sighed, lying back on the couch. Grumpy, he rested his feet on the arm of the chair, making squicking noises with his mouth.

“What?” Junsu twisted, trying to get his sleeve corrected. “I can’t hear you.”

“Your. Shirt. Is. Backwards,” Yoochun repeated.

“Hold on,” Junsu shed his shirt again, trying to turn it inside out. “My shirt was on backwards. It was blocking my ears.”

Yoochun rolled his eyes then froze when the front door slammed. A still angry Yunho prowled into the living room, none of the fire banked away. He stopped, skidding on the wooden floor as he first looked at the reclining Yoochun, his mouth swollen from Junsu’s lips and then the tenor, half naked with his shirt over his hands.

“On the couch?” Yunho picked up one of the throw pillows, slapping Junsu on the back of the head with it. The tenor ducked, yelping as he dodge another blow. “Wasn’t it bad enough that we had to bleach the damned kitchen counter and pull Susu’s boxers out of the dishwasher? Now I’ve got to listen to the other two bitch about how the damned couch smells?”

“Heh, the counter. God that was fun.” Yoochun’s burst of laughter brought the pillow across his head and he barked a protest, holding his forehead where the pillow hit him. “Ouch! Hey what was that for?”

“That was for the counter,” Yunho hit him again, crawling on top of Chunnie before pummeling him with the soft cushion. “And these, Chunnie-ah, is for the couch. Don’t go far, Susu-ah, you’re next.”

“Okay, enough,” Yoochun cried out, holding his arms out to block the pillows. Junsu collapsed next to him, wiping the tears from his eyes. Hooking his arm around Junsu’s neck, Yoochun pulled him over, ticking at his bare ribs. “Don’t laugh at me.”

“I’m going to look for fabric deodorizer. Try not to hump the coffee table while I’m gone.” Yunho growled, tossing the pillow onto the sofa.

“Oh he’s grumpy,” Yoochun kissed his boyfriend, flicking his tongue up to dab at the end of his nose. “And you know, those were your boxers I took the blame for.”

“Technically, Chunnie-ah, I wasn’t the one who shoved them in the dishwasher.” Junsu winked at Yoochun, flashing him a wicked smile that tasted of a sinful night. “They were your boxers. I just stole them to wear.”

Nineteen

It was difficult to get angry at Min, Jaejoong thought to himself. The younger man was so serious in his temper, righteous and stalwart. Most people would simmer off and then walk away but Min needed to chew on his rage, taste it and roll it around in his mouth like it was a fine wine before he'd swallow it down.

He sat on the bed, cross legged and patient, a pretty substitute for a wild-soul Buddha. Watching their youngest pace was boring at first, a few strides out and then back before the young man turned. He was thinking, that much was clear. Either for the proper words to explain how he felt or the right words to extract himself from his tantrum. Jae didn't care which he chose, as long as Min understood how he felt.

The room was mostly neat, but evidence of the two men lay about. Yunho's jacket pooled on a chair near the computer tables and Jaejoong's CD piles appeared to be creeping across a low bookcase where a stereo and changer took up most of the top surface. A pair of sneakers were on the floor near the end of the bed, a single sock stuffed into one's side.

Designed to be overtly masculine, there were still softer traces found about the room. The curtains here a heavy gold jacquard but a secondary filmy white lay behind them, filtering the sun streaming into the room. The furnishings ran to dark woods or black but the walls were a creamy parchment, large black and white photos of Paris, Venice and California hanging on the wider stretch. A few personal photographs were propped up on a high bookshelf, captured moments in their concerts or candid shots of the members and their families.

One in particular caught Min's attention, a shot he'd taken of the hyung in Paris, a slice of an intimate moment before they kissed, a view of the romantic city behind them. Tucked away from prying eyes and half a world away from their homelands, the young men often touched and held one another. That night had been no exception as Yunho cradled his lover near the railing of the hotel room, a curled wrought iron balcony framing them below the waist. An enormous church loomed up behind them, nested against other old buildings and a flock of doves scattered across one corner, taking flight up towards the safety of the rooftops above.

He caught a reflection of Jaejoong in the frame's glass. The older man's eyes were distant, his fingers moving over lengths of his foot. Somewhere inside of his head, he wandered, traveling over dream paths none of the others understood or could follow.

There were times when Jaejoong's detached daydreaming made Min jealous. The ability to take himself away from the chaos and stress by disconnecting from the world was enviable. And then there were times when Changmin realized Jaejoong fell away because the world around him was too sharp and painful to live in. Those were the times Jae's ghostly aloofness made Min want to cry.

"Are you ever going to say something?" Changmin stopped suddenly, staring down at the older man.

Jaejoong stopped drawing on his ankle with his finger, looking partially surprised at Min's outburst. Cocking his head, he studied Min for a moment then asked, "What would you like me to say?"

"I'm sorry?" Changmin gestured, sweeping his arms up in wide motions like a crane landing. "Or, I was hurt and I couldn't deal with you?"

The distracted look threatened the edges of the man's grey-tinted eyes. Changmin hated the contacts. He wanted to see the fire or the ashes in the singer's souls but they were hidden behind the shaded veil. It was easier for him to talk to Jaejoong when the other man had brown eyes. He was open then, easily read although, Min supposed, that was why Jae tinted his eyes.

“It wasn’t that I couldn’t deal with you,” He replied, tucking a piece of hair behind one ear. “It’s that I couldn’t deal with me.”

Min was brought up short, choking on his next words. Changing course, he frowned and raised his eyebrows “What’s that suppose to mean?”

“It means I didn’t want to look at how... I felt,” Jaejoong explained.

It was calming really, the slow progression of his own discomfort and fears dissipating under Min’s scorching temper. If the youngest’s screaming was the worst that happened between the five of them, it would be okay. Except for the calming down of Yunho but Jaejoong could deal with that easily.

“You should have told me, hyung...Joongie-ah,” Min knelt in front Jaejoong, putting his hands on the man’s knees. He was fighting his tears, refusing to let them fall and Jae’s sorrow deepened. The rage was still there, covering up a hurt that ran deep into Min’s heart.

“What makes me sad is that we didn’t help you... we don’t help you grow,” Jae admitted. “Every time we do something to keep the peace or to keep things stable... like our parents have done... like our grandparents have done, we’re only continue to harm ourselves. I kept my shame to myself, Minnie-ah because I didn’t want it to get on you. I didn’t share it with Yunho because I thought he should turn away from me. To tell the truth, I spent as much time pushing him away as I did hating him for not holding me in my pain. Who’s to blame in that? Me? Him?”

“What happened wasn’t your fault, Je Je,” Changmin whispered, clenching his fists into the comforter spread over the couple’s bed. “But when you close yourself off to me, then I feel like ...”

“We spend so much of our time being strong, a friend of mine said,” Jaejoong repeated Gackt’s words in his head, keeping the sentiment close to his heart. “That we forget a strong man is only as strong as he is loved and how he respects that love. I was very wrong for not talking to Yunho.”

He covered Min’s hand with his own and whispered, “But I wasn’t wrong for not talking to you.”

“Even after I’ve told you how I feel?”

“Especially after that,” Jaejoong said, nodding.

“Then we’ve got nothing to talk about.” Min pushed himself up, the cover’s weave a soft burn on his palms.

Jaejoong closed his fingers over the younger man’s wrists, holding him in place against the bed. “You spoke your mind before, Minnie-ah. Now it’s time for me to speak mine.”

“Suppose I don’t want to hear you?” Min’s lower lip jutted out, his chin squaring. His body tensed, a flare of his anger stiffening his spine as he stared down into his friend’s inscrutable face. “Are you going to hold me down?”

“Yes,” Jae nodded curtly. “Because you are better than this, Changmin. Because you are older than you are acting right now. Because I need you to understand how I feel...how I felt inside of me. Because I am hoping that you love me enough to give me a piece of your heart as mine is breaking.”

Min choked on his emotions, his throat closing up against the tears Jaejoong ground of him. Turning his head, he composed, forcing himself to sit down on the bed. Leaving his legs hanging over the side, Min leaned over, resting on his elbows and stared at a point in the floor, unable to leave but unwilling to look Jaejoong in the face.

“Yunho thought... I should keep this to myself,” Jae fiddled with the silver ring he’d put on his toe, a thin band with a line of splashing waves etched into it. “He told me that you wouldn’t hear my pain and I refused to listen to him. I told him that you would be angry at first and then when you’d had time, you would stop and ask me questions.”

“Why? Because I don’t know anything?” Changmin said, bitterly resentful. “Because I’m the youngest?”

“No, because you would wonder how I... how it felt and wouldn't be afraid to ask me,” Jaejoong admitted. “That's why I couldn't talk about it. I wasn't ready to see how I felt... how scraped up I felt inside because of what Kimura did. I had to be strong enough to see your curiosity... your delving through. And a part of me knew I wasn't.”

“So this is my fault?” Min glanced up and blinked, finding a drop of salty tear on his lashes.

“Ah, you and Yunho. You are the only two people I know who could twist a rock,” Jae laughed, a short barking sound that was equal parts laughter and resignation. “No, it's not your fault. I had to be able to talk. And *you* have to be ready to listen.”

“I'm listening to you.” A frown line creased his brow and Min pursed his lips. “I just...”

“I wasn't treating you like the youngest, Min-hyung,” Jae teased, peering under Min's cheek to poke at his mouth. “I was... trying not to feel like I failed... as a man.”

“What?”

“What Kimura did,” Jaejoong sighed, turning inwards again. “What he did to me was... to make me less of a man. To... take any pride I had in myself and grind it down. Like he did to Yunho when Kimura told him that you and he were only good enough to be support singers. It took me a long time to find that out... to work out everything that he did... to my mind and my body.”

“He started off by telling me small things, pretending to be my friend.” Jae pulled back, picking at the tear in his jeans. The white frayed threads dangled loose and he set about braiding three together, then another before undoing the plait only to begin again. “Kimura would pat my back and tell me that I did well or that he heard someone say something nice about me but then he'd also say things like ‘Oh, it was so bad that you were off-key at this spot. If you hadn't done that, it would have been perfect.’ There was always one nice and one bad and then, the nice was never said and it was only the bad.”

Jaejoong closed his eyes, shoving the memories of the man and his dark ways behind a wall in his mind but images floated out, wispy threads threatening to ensnare him. “He was my manager so I listened to him. He would rub the small of my back and say to push my voice out from here. That I was too Korean and needed to touch Yunho less... or Yoochun less. That I should be more aloof.”

“Then when I trusted him with everything, he would tell me things ... things that you four supposedly said while I wasn't around. Sometimes I wouldn't believe him but he would say; wait and listen. You'll hear them talk about something bad but they won't mention your name... but you know they're talking about you.”

“Pretty soon I was looking for ghosts, Changmin,” Jaejoong explained, his voice soft and gentle. “And then I became... alone.”

“I don't know when it happened. I don't,” Jae bit his lower lip, licking at the spot. “But one day I looked around and there was no one around me. The world echoed and it was like no one saw me. Or no one heard me...”

“Except for Kimura.” Min fretted, pulling at his hair. “Joongie-ah, we never said anything bad. We've always loved you.”

“I know... now,” He agreed. “But there were things that he would say and you would repeat them like; you hated that I was learning Japanese faster and then a few hours later, you would be angry about not being able to speak on a show because I was more fluent. And, Minnie-ah, you are scary when you're mad.”

“You didn't seem too scared a little while ago.” He wrinkled his nose.

“That's because I could punch you and it would hurt,” Jae said with a grin. “And the others would help me throw you into the room if I asked. That's what I had to... find again, Min. I had to find the faith in everyone around me to... to ask.”

"I hate that he hurt you," Min admitted. "I hate that he's dead and I... I can't do anything. I can't stand not being able to do something for you."

"And you think that you and Yunho are so different..." Jae tsked. "One of you punches someone else and the other's hand hurts. It's hard being between both of you sometimes. You tear and gnaw at me like I'm a toy. You two are worse than he and Chunnie-ah sometimes."

"What did..." Min let his sentence trail off, unsure if he wanted to finish it or even know the answer. The pain in Jaejoong's face was too harsh...too raw for him to face. Too close up for his stomach to take. Every glance at the older man's face echoed another's in the past, another scared and beaten face he loved deeply but couldn't help.

"What, Min?"

"I was scared," He whispered, nearly too soft to hear. "I was scared like when I was a kid and my... my mother came home one night very late."

"She had blood on her face, just a little bit dripping from a bandage and there were bruises on her cheek and mouth." Changmin rubbed at his eyes, trying to erase flashes of a horrific nightmare, snapshots frozen in a little boy's mind. "A policeman came with her and my father started... he started screaming and crying. And I thought.. that maybe she was a ghost and that only I could see her. He was that upset, Joongie. It was like someone killed her and... everyone couldn't move."

Rubbing at Min's shoulder blades, Jaejoong rested his cheek against Min's. "What happened?"

"She was attacked by a man," He said, holding his breath as he spoke. Exhaling was hard but pushing past the pain in his heart was harder. "I'm not sure what happened because no one would talk to me. No one would talk to her. Just to the policeman and it... the things they asked... it was like she wasn't there. My aunt... my dad's sister... kept crying and making noises but no one touched her. She just stood there in the hall, very white and sprinkled with blood."

"I had to go downstairs to see...to touch her to see if she was real." Min moved, folding into the space Jae made as he raised his arm, silently beckoning Min to come close. "My aunt saw me and yelled at me as I came down the stairs. She told me to go back up ... back to my room... that I couldn't do anything. Then she chased me back upstairs with her slipper and closed my room door behind me."

"I couldn't sleep," Min's cries were quiet, a hitching sob in his throat. "I couldn't go to sleep because I thought my mom's ghost was downstairs and... no one could... I thought if I could just touch her, she could go... on. That she could find peace. I was a little kid, Joongie-ah but I thought I could do anything."

"And then I found out, I couldn't change... I couldn't make anything better." He sighed, relaxing into Jaejoong's embrace. Allowing himself to be led down onto the bed, Changmin stared up at the ceiling, rubbing his hands over Jaejoong's arms. "In the morning, my mother was there and she told me to come for a hug but I was scared."

"You still thought she was dead?"

"I was okay once.. once I touched her. Once she grabbed me and held me tight but for hours, I was... scared someone hurt her so badly that they killed her." Min replied, nodding. "But see, Joongie-ah, it was months before she smiled again. Months before she would go outside by herself. I thought... I still wonder at what happened that night but I can't bring it up, not now. Not when she smiles so brightly now that she drowns the stars at night. I can't do that to my mother. I love her too much."

"And I love you too much," He admitted, leaning his head back, closing his eyes when he heard Jaejoong's heart beat. "I was so mad that you kept what happened from me because... you died inside. For a long time you died inside and you didn't... you just stood there and I couldn't touch you. I just wanted to touch you, Joongie-ah. At least to know..."

"At least to know," Min's whisper was hot on Jae's arm, cooler than Changmin's tears when they splashed on Jaejoong's bare skin. "I needed to know that you were still alive, Je Je. I needed to know that

you... you could still see me. That you could still touch me. That there was something more to you than the ghost I saw standing there.”

Twenty

A backbeat trill woke Changmin up and he mumbled, stretching himself out to grab his phone. Bleary eyed, he stared at the time, wondering if he'd somehow pushed his alarm clock off of the nightstand because the glowing numbers read: MMO. Rubbing at his eyes, he refocused, sliding his phone open to answer it and realized he'd somehow slid partially off the bed and his head was hanging over the edge.

"Moshi, moshi," Min answered automatically, trying to shake the cobwebs from his head.

"Hey, baby," A slither of black velvet sex wound through the phone and around Min's brain, working deep into erogenous zone. "I'm sorry I'm calling so late but I just got in and I wanted to hear your voice before I crashed."

"Ah, no," He replied, stifling his yawn. "I'm up... I'm up."

"You are a liar."

"Yes but it's a good lie," Changmin protested, giving in to his yawn. Se7en hissed through the phone, scolding himself. "No, I'm glad you called. Don't hang up."

"I can't hang up, Minku," The other man whispered, a low thrumming heat in his voice. "There's all kinds of things I want to do with you but this is the only way I can touch you right now. Hanging up is the last thing in the world I want."

"How was your day?" Sliding down under the sheets, Min nestled back into his pillows and stared out his bedroom's open windows to watch the rain. "It's pouring here. We're having another storm."

"Your voice is rough," Se7en grumbled. "What happened?"

"I'm sleepy!"

"That's not sleep. That's... sorrow. Or something else. Yelling?" A curse echoed between them. "You and Yunho get into it again."

"I hate that. I hate you sometimes," Min grouched at the singer. "Maybe I had a coughing fit or something."

"And maybe you spent a few hours crying and maybe yelling," Se7en replied. "I know you, baby. I know how you sound. You only sound like that when you're tired inside and out."

"Maybe I found another lover, huh?"

"I know how you sound like after that too, remember?" The older man's mocking tease brought a flush of memories into Min's overheated mind. "I can make you mew and growl. I know how your voice gets when I make you want more. I know what it's like to hear you after my finger's been in your mouth and you've licked it until it is wet enough for me to push into you... to peel you open for me. I'm just waiting for the chance to hear your voice after that but this... this is different. So no, Minku, I don't think you've found another lover. You've not even fully found me yet and after me, there's really not going to be anyone else that's going to make you growl like I do."

I don't know what we're waiting for, Min's brain skittered a noise through its depths He's talking now and we can barely move because we're so stiff. Are you waiting until ALL of the blood's gone from our head? How much more can we want him?

Because we still want to cry, Min reminded the little voice in his head. *Because Jaejoong is still bruised and cut inside and I can't cry out in the open. Not around the others.*

No, His gremlin said grimly. *But you can cry to him. You can share with him. Isn't that what you accused Jaejoong of doing? Not sharing. Not being open. Hypocrite.*

"Baby? You talking to yourself again?" Se7en teased. "Because it's a lot more fun if I can hear you leaking words. Right now, I just hear you breathing and it's not heavy breathing like you're... making yourself ready for my mouth."

"Se7en... Dong-Wook," Changmin closed his eyes, trying to block out the light coming from the windows. It was too hard to talk with the blue rain in his sight. They reminded him too much of Jaejoong's tears falling from his tinted eyes. "Can I talk to you? Can I ask you to keep a secret?"

"Yeah, babe. Of course," Se7en settled down. All trace of teasing fled from the harsh break in Min's tone, the humour taking to the skies in a flutter of smoky dove wings. "What's wrong, honey? What's the matter?"

"Remember when you told me about Kimura? About watching out for him?"

"Yeah," Se7en paused then with a strangled voice asked, "Did he touch you Minnie-ah? Were... one of the men he touched?"

"No. No!" Changmin hurriedly assured. He bit his upper lip, debating long about what he was about to say. What went on in the group stayed among the five. Others tried to push in past the line — the purple line — Yoochun once teased; mingling the red of Dong Bang Shin Ki with a cobalt meant to be drops of water could not be parted from the sea. It meant that they could not be divided by anyone or anything. No one could come into the circle and nothing would leave it. What he said now could violate that pact. He knew Scarlet often heard from Jaejoong about the troubles the group had but the flamboyant man earned his right as one of their confidantes.

If he shared his heart with Se7en, he would be admitting to himself how much the singer had come to mean to him.

It could mean everything.

It would change everything.

And at the same time, it could destroy Min's world with a careless whisper spoken into the wrong ear.

"I wasn't one of the... Kimura's victims," Changmin hissed, hating the word that meant Jae'd been torn apart by the man's abuse but he had no better word to whisper into Se7en's ear. "I'm not, Dong-Wook... but Jaejoong was."

There was a silence... no whisper of a breath or expletive. Nothing as if the world ended outside of the room Min took refuge in. He waited, taking in one breath then another. A tear fell, unbidden and heavy. Sniffing, Changmin wiped at it with the heel of his hand, smearing the moisture across his high cheekbone.

"Se7en?" He hiccupped.

"I'm here, baby," The other man replied, subdued. "How... how is he?"

"I think he's... I don't know," Min admitted. "He says he's okay and that he's talked to someone about it but, it makes us all hurt. I don't know what to say to him. I don't know how to act."

"You act like you always have," Se7en said. The expected hiss finally came, a leak of frustration and anger pressed tight with his tongue. "Nothing changed between you and Jaejoong, right?"

"No, nothing," Changmin agreed. "But we... we all play. We touch and hug each other all the time and lately... over the last few months, Joongie-ah pulled away. I thought maybe he was pissed off at me but Yoochun says that's because Kimura did... those things.. some things to him... and he can't stand to be touched any more."

"Did you ask Jaejoong? Did you ask him how felt about it?"

"No." The young singer pouted and stuck his chin up out of the sheets, shivering slightly from the cooler air coming in the open window. "I didn't want to.. I didn't want to make him feel bad."

"I understand that," Se7en murmured. "Why don't we talk about how you feel? Are you okay?"

"No," Min said. It was hard to admit it but the matter shook him to the core. He'd always imagined Jaejoong as being protected by the world. Even knowing the singer's past, Changmin always surmised that it was light enough for the singer to survive it with a smile on his face and without missing a step. Now he realized that the only thing holding Jaejoong up was some unimaginable strength the other man drew on. "I thought he'd be... untouchable. That no one would hurt him any more...that.. this is so difficult to talk to you about, Se7en."

"Why? Because you can't see me?"

"No, because you're not..." How did he explain to the other man that he never opened his heart and mind wide for someone else's fingers to plunge into? The caress of Se7en's voice in his life was a warm comfort, as sensual as the sun on his body during a burst of rain but he feared that his heart's secrets would be whispered into another's ear. Even if the other man did not mean to, the potential was there.

Was he opening Jaejoong up when he spoke to Se7en?

Was he sharing the other man's private hellish nightmares with someone who had no right to see them?

"Because I'm not... Dong Bang Shin Ki?" Se7en said flatly. "Is that what you're trying to say?"

"Yes," Changmin's answer sliced though he said it softly, wielding the razor of his confession with a delicate touch.

"And us, what are we, Changmin?" Se7en asked, pushing through the thickening veil of Min's secrets. He fought the restrictions the younger man placed on his life, pulling at the tight bindings of promises given to others...given by someone he wanted wholly. "Are we enough to stand next to your group? Am I enough to make it past that circle you five draw in the sand?"

"It's not like that, Se7en," Min protested.

"It is," He exhaled, trying to release his frustration. "I know it is and it's something that I thought I accepted but it bothers me when I turn to wipe your tears and they are actually behind a glass brick wall your members have erected around you. I can watch you cry. I can see your pain but there's nothing I can do to change it. What do I have to do, Shim Changmin, what do I have to do to earn the right to wipe your tears?"



His fingers hooked the ties to his drawstring pants into two loops, twisting them into a bow. Yunho smirked back at Jaejoong when the singer chuckled at his lover tying his pants as a toddler would tie his shoes. The other man was already in bed, lying on his side with a pillow tucked against his chest and Yunho growled playfully, climbing over the mattress to bite a laughing Jaejoong on the neck.

"You're supposed to be a tiger, remember?" Jae pushed Yunho off of him, laughing nearly too hard to breathe. "Not a vampire."

"Why shouldn't I bite you?" He asked, trailing the tip of his finger over the birth mark on Jae's neck. "You've even got a spot on you for it."

His teeth roamed, traveling down Jaejoong's collarbone, barely felt through the singer's light t-shirt. Yunho kissed along Jae's shoulder, rounding over the bone then back up to the soft velvety skin under the other's ear. His body reacted as it always did, thickening at the image...at the remembered feel of Jae's moist heat around him, of the man's fingers stroking his hard sex or the sight of his lover's mouth parted with his tongue arching out to lick a pearled seed blooming from his weeping tip.

Yunho moved closer, pressing his shoulders against Jaejoong's chest and pushed him over onto his back. The singer didn't resist, laying back into the mound of pillows he'd piled up behind him. He let Yunho

take the one he'd cuddled against his belly, moaning when the back of Yunho's hand skated up his stomach, his fingers lightly skimming around Jae's sensitive navel.

"Are you okay, baby?" Yunho froze, his breath hot in Jaejoong's ear. "I don't want to..."

"I'm okay," Jae murmured, lifting his arms up to slide them around Yunho's neck.

Pulling the man down, Jae licked at the darkened spot over Yunho's mouth, exploring his lips with gentle bites. A moan echoed between them, neither sure if the other made the sound but from its harmonics, they were certain they both had something to do with it. He explored, finding a stretch of exposed throat he'd not nuzzled in too long. Traveling back up to Yunho's mouth took some effort but it was worth it considering the savage response he got when the other man tangled his fingers into Jae's hair and pulled his head back, opening the singer's mouth wider.

"God, you taste so good, baby," Yunho whispered into his lover's mouth, running the tip of his tongue under Jae's front teeth then over his upper lip. The fingers of his other hand were busy pulling Jaejoong's nipple to a peak. He wanted it hard and sensitive enough to send a jolt through Jae's sex when he rubbed at it through his shirt. A groaning mewl gave Yunho the satisfaction he'd been looking for and he chased his fingers down Jaejoong's chest, closing his sharp teeth over the tightened bud. Biting down, he felt the man arch under him, instinctively spreading his legs apart and lifting his knees.

A press of Yunho's thigh separated Jae's legs further and he shifted on the mattress, resting his weight on his knees. Panting, Jaejoong cried out with Yunho's ministrations, his head held fast by the other man's fingers in his hair. Pinned down, he heard himself beg, nonsensical mewlings with no clear words other than a plaintive need winding through a ribbon of sound.

"Too long, baby. I don't want to rush you," Yunho warned, releasing Jae's hair and rising to cup the man's face. He kissed the singer deeply, resisting the urge to strip Jaejoong naked and plunge deep inside of his heat. The moist of his sex had begun, whispering want through Yunho's belly but he kept his thoughts solely on the man writhing beneath him... the man whose hands had not touched him for months and now wildly clung to him and a sultry sexy mouth that begged him for more.

"Need," Jaejoong cried, rubbing himself against Yunho's hips. Their bodies met, cocks erect and weeping beneath their strained clothes. His soul echoed with Yunho's protests, ignoring them for the raging lightning crawling over his body and setting his skin of fire. "Want you, baby. Need you, baby."

"Only if..." He pulled back, staring down into the wild beauty of Jaejoong's face. Years sculpted the child from the man but the innocence of Jae's soul remained in his eyes, unknown stars dazzling in their brown depths. He knew every inch of Jae's body...felt every bit of it against him and still Yunho found himself hungering for more...needing more. "Only if you're sure..."

"I'm sure, Yunnie-ah," Jae whispered into Yunho's mouth. "I've never been so sure of any thing...or anyone like I am sure of you."

Twenty-One

If sin had a taste it was of spice and salt, Yunho was sure of it.

When Yunho thought the storm of his lover would drown him, he tempered, turning gentle and calm, a serene beauty lost in music or a book. Yunho never knew which flavour of his lover he would get when he bit down into the succulent Korean.

But the thrill of the unknown kept things interesting

He breathed in Jaejoong's scent and moaned, needing to lick over the singer's body. Holding his desire back was difficult, and he trembled when he lowered his head to suckle on Jae's sex. The singer mewled, his hips instinctively thrusting up his short bursts. Yunho splayed his hands over the young man's slender waist, running his thumbs over the jut of bones on either side.

The touch of his lover on his skin drove Jaejoong insane. He remembered the feel of those fingers deep in his body, stroking at the knot of nerves hidden just beyond the ring of muscle along his cleft. Jaejoong needed to feel that again... to feel the stretch of Yunho's fingers in him. Or better yet, the heavy sway of his lover's sex as it edged into his body.

Their sanctuary became their world, an oasis from the dirt and rain of the outside chaos. Soft cotton sheets cradled Jaejoong's pale form, his long limbs and torso a glowing porcelain resting on blood-red linens. Yunho rested on his knees, starting down at the man who held his heart.

"Let go, baby," He urged his lover. "Try to let me take care of you."

It was hard for Jae to let go. Harder still to trust. In the months since they'd arrived in Japan, Jaejoong's relationship dissolved nearly the shreds and he'd given his career to a man who tore him apart. Now, the man he loved returned and asked him to spread his heart and body open... to let Yunho in and to give him everything of himself.

Jaejoong let go.

Yunho was there to catch him, wide hands and soft mouth moving of Jae's body. His tongue explored places he'd not touched in too long, stretches of skin he longed to bite. The need to possess his lover was strong, urging him to press into the other man until Jae couldn't take him any more.

Patience was never something Yunho had in abundance.

It was something he'd have to learn.

The tremble in Jaejoong's body had a little to do with fear as much as it did desire. There were ghosts lurking under Jae's skin, someone else's fingers leaving bruises on his lover's soul. No one kissed away the singer's cuts and wounds when he was a child. Yunho was hoping he could help now.

"Sometimes, I feel like I should hate you," Yunho admitted, softly whispering his inner torments. Bending his head, he kissed Jaejoong's thigh, nipping and pulling small stars of skin between his teeth. Following a thin blue line under the man's pale skin, Yunho worked up to the crux of Jae's thighs. "You've taken everything from me... my life, my family, my soul... my heart and still, I'm here, begging you for more. Begging you to take me in just one more time because I want to die inside of you Joongie-ah. You are my downfall and my salvation."

His tongue darted out, cupping at the other man's sex. They'd been apart for too long but Yunho still remembered the velvety spots along Jae's shaft that could trigger a response. A flick of his tongue along the man's tip made Jaejoong moan, suckling at the tip cause him to writhe. Holding Jae's hips down with a

splay of his hands, Yunho captured the tiny slit's pout against his lip and pressed it lightly against the ridge of his teeth, barely scraping the sensitive skin.

"God, Yunnie!" The sharp, too pleasurable pain-pleasure dewed pearls on the plum-shaped head. Jaejoong mewled, his voice dropping into long strings of unintelligible moans.

"Do you like that, baby?" Yunho asked, trying to ignore the sexy sounds pouring from his lover's mouth. He wanted to control everything he could on the young man, dipping down into the dark sensuality hidden inside of Jaejoong.

His own sex was hard enough to plunder his lover's depths and it ached, his skin stretched tight over the rigid shaft. Resisting the urge to rub against Jae's legs, Yunho reminded himself to take their loving slowly, prolonging every second until Jaejoong would be crying his name.

"God, I want to hear you beg for me," The leader licked up past the turgid shaft and into the sparse silken hairs above.

"Please."

It was a rough plea but one just the same and Yunho smiled, satisfied at the other man's loss of control.

He would have to take it slow. As much as it killed him, Yunho would take his time, if only to keep the trembling from drowning his lover.

Yunho's mouth widened, placing the heft of Jae's sex on his lip. Rolling his tongue around the edge, he stroked at the tender spot under the pout, drawing long strokes over the velvet. A drop of seed wept onto Yunho's tongue, slightly spicy and salted sweet, tasting wholly of Jaejoong.

"Yunnie," Jae reached down and worked his fingers through Yunho's dark hair. He gasped when the man swallowed him, working his shaft down into his throat. He struggled to keep his hips still but Jae's legs yearned to move, thrusting his length deeper into Yunho's mouth.

"You taste so good, baby," Yunho worked the head into the side of his cheek, wrapping his tongue up and around, tracing the long vein around Jae's sex. "Better than anything sweet I've ever had on my tongue."

"Want... more," Jaejoong growled then his breath hitched as Yunho slid a moistened finger down the crease of his body. "Yun..."

Yunho pulled back, leaving Jae wet. He pressed in, just at the ridge of Jae's centre. There was resistance, expected after so many months of being apart. "Baby..."

"Let me in," Yunho murmured, blowing on the wetness he'd left behind. He grinned when Jae's shaft prickled and shifted, his sac rolling up and tightening into the hollow of his legs. The tip of his sex wept, a release of Jae's pent up need and Yunho lapped up his lover's offering. "Remember what it was like our first time together? I don't want to hurt you."

"You didn't hurt me," Jae reassured the other man.

"I did," He insisted, drawing a hiss from Jae when he pressed along the puckered ridge. "At least my words did. This time...it's going to be different. This time, the only thing you'll hear from me is my love. Because, God knows, baby, I love you."

He tangled himself around Jae, wanting to feel as much of the other man against his naked skin as he could. Their clothes lay in piles at the end of the bed, the drawstring pants he'd just put on was now a pool of grey jersey on the floor. Yunho struggled to reach the night stand, unwilling to let go of his hold on the singer but the distance was too great and he nearly toppled to the carpet.

"Don't laugh," Yunho warned Jaejoong, coming up from the edge of the bed with a bottle of gel. He spotted the merriment in Jae's eyes and a tear of laughter forming at the crease. "You laugh at me and I'll make you regret it."

“No laughing,” Jaejoong promised, turning his head to watch Yunho come closer. His eyes widened slightly and he reached for his lover’s sex, rubbing the head with his thumb. Smearing the milky seed off of Yunho’s shaft with his thumb, he suckled his finger clean, sliding it past his full lips.

The sight of his lover’s tongue lapping at his spill hardened Yunho nearly to bursting. Torn between sliding past Jae’s lips or dipping down into the crest of his body, Yunho worked the lid of the gel bottle loose, squirting the cool oil onto his fingers.

“Turn over, baby,” Yunho bent forward, biting Jae’s earlobe. “Now.”

Jae slowly turned, hitching onto his hip and then over onto his stomach. About to rise to his knees, he was stopped by Yunho’s uncoiled hand on the small of his back. Laying with his cheek on the linens, he cast a glance back at his lover, meeting Yunho’s eyes over his shoulder.

“You’re mine, Joongie-ah,” Yunho leaned into his lover’s back, trailing kisses up his spine. “You forget that all the time, thinking I might not love you for one thing or another. I don’t know what to do to convince you except maybe... make you remember how it feels to have me inside of you. Maybe I should leave you aching and wanting, the sting of my fingers or dick inside your body. Maybe I should just make love to you so much in a day that you can’t think of anything else.”

He slid a finger into the other man’s passage, working in quickly. Jaejoong hissed at the intrusion, held against the bed by Yunho’s strength but he arched and twitched, spreading his knees apart to give Yunho more leeway. Stroking up into the young man, Yunho listened to Jae’s panting, heaving breaths growing tighter and more frustrated as he worked in deeper. When he hit the nodule inside of Jae’s body, Jae jumped, nearly dislodging Yunho from his roost. A slap on Jae’s ass kept the singer down although he wiggled a bit, trying to draw Yunho’s finger in deeper.

“Mine, no?” Yunho asked when he pushed another finger in, scissoring the singer apart. He stretched and worked the rosette, parting the folds of Jae’s body until he squirmed with pleasure, nearly uncomfortable at the intrusion. Pouring more oil over Jae’s crease, Yunho let the dribble work down into the opening and slid in further, nearly to his palm as he flexed his fingers. “Some day, Joongie-ah, I want to fall asleep with my hand inside of you. I think that would be one way for you to realize that you’re mine.”

Jae moaned, a soft kittenish sound that went straight to Yunho’s crotch. The singer writhed, pinned to the bed by Yunho’s fingers. A third joined in, stretching him nearly fully and he bit down into the pillows, trying to smother the sounds he was making but the mewling leaked, weeping from his throat and begging Yunho for more. Sliding out part of the way, Yunho curved his fingers into a beak and worked them into Jae’s core, leaving kisses along Jae’s shoulders while the young man churned underneath him.

“Do you like that baby?” Yunho asked. “Do you like knowing that my hand’s almost inside of you? Just a little bit more and I’d have you all around me.”

He licked at Jae’s tattoo, tracing the letters. On some level, Yunho felt jealous at the group’s name emblazoned on his lover’s shoulders. There were times when he didn’t want to share Jaejoong with the other members, even though he willingly sacrificed private time with the singer for things the others wanted to do. At other times, he wished it was his name instead. Yunho Soul, he thought to himself, biting into the X and moaning when Jaejoong slid himself further back on his fingers.

The oil was going dry, rubbed into Jae’s fine skin. Yunho drizzled more onto his fingers, working the lotion into Jae’s heat. The singer’s words were lost in the pillow, his teeth clenched tight on the linens and his hands were tightly wrapped in the sheets. Hips twitching, Jaejoong let his ass rise slightly, moaning loudly when Yunho squeezed one plump cheek between his fingers.

“Want...” Jae grumbled, lifting his hips up off of the sheets. For a moment, Yunho debated pressing him back down but the sight of Jae’s reddened sex inflamed his desires and he acquiesced, sliding his fingers free of Jaejoong’s body. The singer moaned at his emptiness then whimpered at the feel of Yunho’s sex at the pout of his body. “Yunnie-ah, please... now?”

“Now, baby,” Yunho agreed. “Hold onto the bed. I’m going to pound you through it.”

He entered smoothly, the passage moistened and ready from the oil and Jae's lust. Leaning his head back, he straddled Jae's legs, trapping his lover's body between his thighs. Groaning, Jaejoong gasped when Yunho worked himself in, letting inch by hard inch drive further down into Jae's moist heat with a rocking of his hips. Soon he was over Jae's body, stabbing down into the tightness and pulling back out in short jerks, lifting Jae's hips with every thrust.

"Turn your head, Joongie," Yunho cupped Jae's chin, guiding him sideways. Leaning up, Jae opened his mouth for Yunho's tongue to plunder his. They ravaged one another, each suckling and kissing the other as Yunho's hips rocked hard against Jae's tight body. Each stroke took Jae closer to the zenith, the electric feel of his core's button being hit with every long thrust was driving Jaejoong nuts. He already felt the build up of tension at the small of his back and the warning curl of his sac between his legs.

"Almost, Yunho," He warned around his lover's kisses. His sex rubbed against the sheets, spreading a wet spot as his release leaked from his sex. "God, almost."

"Me too," Yunho whispered. He moved his hands to Jae's hips, holding the other man still. There was a great need to slow down but the urge to possess his lover fully took over. Rubbing his nipples over Jae's back, Yunho began to thrust harder, rocking Jaejoong up into the pillows in small hops.

They hit the headboard quickly, Jae's hands lifting to press up against the firm surface. Lifting Jae's hips with a jerk of his hands, Yunho pounded hard, hooking himself up and in deep with every thrust. The soft moaning keen from Jae's open mouth told him the singer was more than a little close then the splash of hot seed hit Yunho's fingers, Jae's spill gushing from his sex.

Yunho followed suit a moment later, filling Jaejoong's emptiness until it crested past the tight ring and spilling out around the edges. A few more thrusts and Yunho was spent, filling Jaejoong to the brim. Gasping, he lay down on Jae's back, kissing at the other's shoulders. Softening, he twisted himself in deeper, drawing out more moans from Jaejoong's exhausted body.

"Stay there... please?" Jae begged. "I don't want to lose you."

"You're not going to lose me, baby," Yunho kisses his shoulder blades, feeling himself harden slightly as Jaejoong moved on the sheets. "I'm going to keep going until you spend all of tomorrow and maybe the next day missing me inside of you. I want to fill you until you wonder why I'm not inside of you every moment. I want you to rub against my hand as we practice, knowing that if I can find a private spot, I'm going to slide them into you."

"So no, Jaejoong baby," He whispered. "You are never going to lose me because my touch is always going to be on you. Forever."

Twenty-Two

They were tired. Tokyo slept around the van as it moved through the nearly empty residential streets. Only a coffee shop's lights were burning, several university students clustered around one table tapping at laptops and consulting open books. White coffee cups were stacked in a tower near one girl's elbow and Min blearily wondered if she'd hit it while the van waited for the light to change.

He blinked when the view suddenly changed to a row of low apartment houses, only a few porch lights left on to lure their occupants back home. Changmin wiped at his face, his hand nearly too heavy to lift. Muscles along his shoulder blades ached, the pain working up from the middle of his back over to his collarbones, leaving a stream of twinges every time he moved.

His stomach growled, letting Min know that it'd been a long time since he'd eaten. Trying to remember the last time he'd had food, the singer grumbled to himself that the knowledge would only be useful if he knew what time it actually was. From the echoing pit in his body, he guessed more than a few hours passed since he'd chewed down a cup of instant noodles.

Tokyo remained draped in a shroud of rain. The night skies were grey and a thick fog dropped down, obscuring the streets. Their driver slowed, jostling Yunho against Yoochun and the baritone grumbled in his sleep, shifting his legs around the leader's knees. Jaejoong slept soundly, scrunched into a ball in the front seat. Junsu rested against the window, curled in on himself next to Changmin. They'd gotten to the single seats first, leaving the long bench seat for Yoochun and Yunho who'd seemed more tired than the rest but now Min wondered if he shouldn't have claimed it and stretched out his long legs.

They were at the apartment in minutes and it took a few more minutes to wake Yoochun up. Yunho's sharp voice bolted the baritone awake just as Jaejoong suggested they leave his best friend in the van as it would be back in the morning. The elevator up was another journey that lasted forever and Min collapsed onto the living room couch, wondering if he could make it to his room without falling asleep on the way.

"Are you hungry, Minnie-ah?" Jaejoong asked from the kitchen.

"I hate you," Changmin wailed, lolling his head back to look at the older man. "I think I'm too tired to eat."

"Let me make something quick," He replied. "I'm making something for Yunho and I. I can make you some too."

"Do you need help?" Min secretly prayed the singer would refuse and his weary body sighed in relief when Jaejoong shook his head.

"No, stay there. I'm good." The sound of a knife moving through some vegetables lulled Min to sleep and he dozed off after Yunho ruffled his hair as he passed by.

"What are you making?" Yunho asked, wrapping his arms around Jae's waist. His lips roamed down Jae's neck, leaving a thin red line with a nibble of his teeth. A piece of bok choy made its way into Yunho's mouth, making Jaejoong grumble.

"Don't eat my vegetables."

"You're making food for me. Aren't they my vegetables?"

"Not until they hit your plate," He said, moving to the side. Reluctant to break contact with Yunho, he kept within reach of the other man, smiling when the leader slid his hands down to Jae's hips.

“Come here,” Yunho pulled Jae closer, rubbing his thumbs over the singer’s exposed hip bones. Slouching against the counter, he was the perfect height to bend into the curve of Jaejoong’s neck and lick at the expanse of collarbone poking out of the low collar of his shirt.

“No doing any of that in the kitchen!” Min called out.

The shout startled the older men, freezing them in place. Jaejoong’s laughter warmed Yunho’s belly, its artless verve a silvery chime in his heart. Yunho tried to remember when he’d heard Jae’s laughter as open as it was right now. Min’s grumbling subsided as he stood, dragging himself into the kitchen.

Sneaking a mushroom from the pile, Changmin leaned on the counter, nibbling at its bright white knob. “What are you making?”

“Just a quick bibimbap.” Jae motioned to the fridge. “Can you grab the gochujang, Min?”

“No mushrooms,” Yunho frowned.

“Don’t eat them.” Min and Jaejoong groused at the same time. They shared a smile, Jae’s deep chuckle nudged Yunho’s laughter. He quirked a grin at his lover and checked the warming rice, testing the pot’s sides.

“Here,” Changmin placed the jar on the counter. “Is anyone going to wake up the *tategamiinu*?”

“What’s that word?” Yunho asked, scooping rice out into bowls. “What does it mean?”

“Um, the spotted wild dogs. The laughing ones,” Jaejoong responded.

“Oh, *riaon kingu*. Yunho teased Jae’s ear with a nip of his teeth.

“Aish, no no no, no doing that.” Their youngest scowled. “It’s bad enough being between you two when you want to play slap and tickle on camera. No doing it here.”

“Slap and tickle?” Yunho raised his eyebrows. “Where are you learning these phrases?”

“Yunnie-ah, leave our *raigaa* alone.” Passing a heaping bowl of food over to Min, he began to assemble a second, pointedly leaving out sliced mushrooms from the mix. “Here, go eat in your room. Just bring the bowl out tomorrow morning before we go.”

“Or I’ll go looking for it,” Yunho growled.

“I wasn’t the one who stashed half of the bowls under the bed,” Min shot back. “That was Chunnie and Junsu.”

He nearly turned into the wrong room, finding himself staring at the toilet for a moment before realizing his feet failed to reach his bedroom. Turning around, he continued on to the right door, closing it behind him with his foot. The bowl was warm in his hands and his stomach wept for satisfaction, the aroma of home-cooked food waking him up.

Changmin nearly burnt his tongue on the first spoonful, the metal utensil almost too hot to eat from. Blowing on the steaming food, Min got undressed, jogging from one foot to the other as he stripped off his jeans. A full shower would have to wait. Sleep and food took priority although the quick slosh down at the studio probably would hold him over until the morning. The emptiness in his stomach definitely would not wait that long.

Wearing only a pair of black boxer-briefs, he stretched out onto the bed, resting his back against the wall. He could see the fog from the window above his headboard. With the lights dimmed down to a few candles and the window blinds open, his view stretched out as far as three blocks, a sheer curtain of fog numbing the city’s lights.

The noodle shop looked to be open, its dark blue curtain turned black in the shadows. A few people stood outside, their cigarette smoke mingling with the fog, carrying their conversation off in the wind. The sound of the older members coming down the hall were faint but their light-hearted banter was audible, mostly Jaejoong’s low laughter as he replied to Yunho’s teasing.

His first mouthful nearly brought Min to a peak, his body flushed with pleasure at the taste. After months of scraping together meals, Jae's simple toss-together hit the right spot, the homegrown flavours bursting on his tongue. Sighing with pleasure, he scooped up a piece of leftover teriyaki Jae tossed in for protein and chewed slowly, trying to make the bibimbap last as long as he could. When he dug in for another mouthful, his cell phone buzzed, vibrating across the quilt and into his naked thigh.

"Hello," Min set the bowl aside. He was still hungry but the ravaging need wasn't in his belly. It settled lower, twisting him into a knot as he waited for Se7en to answer.

"Hello my Minku," The other man purred. "How was your day?"

They were avoiding the conversation they should have... one of Min's sharing of his heart and his worries. He'd been told by the older singer that Se7en would be patient but Changmin worried at the problem, wondering how long patience would last.

Just talk to him, ahondara," Min scolded himself. *Trust him. Let him trust you.*

Until he breaks your heart, some place dark inside of him warned. *And then where we will be?*

"Minku? Are you there?" Se7en sounded alarmed and Min realized he'd zoned off, his mind wandering to other places.

"Sorry, hyung... Shichi," He stifled a yawn, the weariness of his legs reaching his brain again. "We had a long day."

"I can let you go to sleep," He sounded sincere. Min knew he was sincere. The older man rarely did anything but tease and flirt but lie wasn't a part of his vocabulary.

"No, I want to..."

"You want to what, baby?" There. The tease was back, a little of something wicked in the thrum of Se7en's voice. "I can think of a whole bunch of somethings that I'd like you to want to do."

"Aish, you're going to get me into trouble."

Se7en snorted, a loud hissing sound echoing over the phone. "I doubt you've ever been in trouble your entire life."

"I have," Min protested.

"Name one thing that you've done that could be considered bad. I bet you've never even skipped a class in school." Se7en waited as Min thought. After a few seconds, he crowed, "Told you. What's the worst thing you've done?"

"Hey, I'm not done thinking!"

"If you have to think about it, then you've not done anything bad enough to brag about." Se7en explained. "What's the worst thing your hyung... Jaejoong has done?"

"I think he stole a frozen chicken when he was five and tried to flush it down the toilet," Min mused. "He felt guilty about stealing it and wanted to get rid of it."

"God, the poor toilet."

"Poor Joongie-ah! I think his father beat his butt until he was red." Changmin chewed around a spoonful of food, murmuring with delight.

"Oh the sounds you are making right now, baby," Se7en whispered. "I want to make you make those sounds."

"I'm eating," He said, swallowing. "Je Je made me bibimbap."

"So not only are you in another bed but you're eating Korean food?" Se7en gasped, mocking the younger man.

“Well, I don’t think either one of us is ready for you to come knocking on the door for dinner one night,” Min tsked. He scraped around the bowl, smearing the half-cooled egg yolk. “Yunho would kill you and Jae... no, Jae might feed you. *Then* he’d kill you.”

“I don’t think Jaejoong would mind if I came around for dinner. Especially if he could see that beautiful flush on your face after I was done with you.”

“Aish, don’t talk about that, Shichi!” Min automatically looked at the door as if he expected the older singers to come through it, their raised angry voices demanding to know who was on the phone. “I don’t want to think about you... doing those things to me... and aish, the hyung... I don’t want them to...”

“You don’t want them to know you can purr and moan at the same time? Because you can, baby.” Se7en stood up, looking around his empty apartment. He’d only shared a few hours with the other man, quick drops of sand that flowed past them in a rush. He wanted to see Min... feel him... even taste the other’s delicious snarky, smart-assed mouth. “Did you think of something wicked? Something you’ve done?”

“No,” Min admitted softly. “I’m not a wicked person, Shichi. I think I’ve spent most of my life looking forward, not over my shoulder.”

“Ah, want to be naughty?”

“What do you mean?” He was suspicious, despite his trust of Se7en. His spoon hit the bottom of the bowl and Min sighed, mourning the finale of his meal.

“Come out with me tonight,” Se7en whispered. “Get dressed and meet me downstairs in the alley. I’ll take you to the noodle shop down the street from you. Be wicked with me, Minku.”

“I can’t...” His mind raced, counting off the hours until he had to get up and be on the go again. Their schedules were hectic, running from one interview and then an event before starting dance practice and voice lessons. In between, a few hastily gulped down meals and a shower. No time for anything other than that. Glancing at the book he’d started two weeks ago, Min noticed his bookmark held his place after the first few pages. He’d have devoured the novel within a week in Korea. In Japan, his life was stitched together with appointments and stolen time.

“Will you be able to eat?” Se7en taunted. “The ramen there is your favourite.”

“The Shichi is my favourite,” Min whispered, covering his face as if the other man could see him. “That’s the only thing that could tempt me. The noodles are just a... bonus thing, no?”

“Ah, I like the sound of that, baby.” He sighed, stretching his body out. “So, you’ll meet me downstairs? I can be there in half an hour.”

“Okay,” Changmin agreed, partially sliding off of the bed and wincing when his hips protested the movement. “But I can’t stay out too long. I’ve got to get some sleep.”

“Honey, if I do things right, you won’t be able to sleep at all tonight or any other night until you’re lying in bed next to me, naked and screaming my name,” Se7en chuckled when Min hissed in irritation. “But I’ll be good. I promise. I will go home frustrated and you’ll go back to your little gang den and sleep the sleep of the innocent.”

“You made me not so innocent anymore, Shichi. Remember?” Changmin stood, willing his body to wake up. “And... I think I’m ready to... talk to you about...”

“About what baby?” Se7en asked.

“About what happened to Joongie-ah,” He breathed, feeling the strain on his heart release. The saying of it...the promise of giving to Se7en cut through the ball of stress he’d carried in his chest for too long. Tonight, they would slice through it, sharp words for a Gordian knot. “I want to tell you what happened... and...most of all, how glad I am to have you, Shichi. How very glad I am to have you in my life.”

Twenty-Three

They hid, cloaked in shadows and rain. An overhang gave the couple shelter from the rain and a stolen bottle of wine, purloined from the kitchen when Jaejoong wasn't looking, gave them heat although their intertwined bodies went a long way to warming the chill from their bones. While one stole the wine, the other secreted out a large comforter meant for the older couple's bed. He thought — correctly — that they would need something enormous to keep the wind from getting into their skin and a thick futon kept them off the cold cement.

"Here, baby," Yoochun inhaled the clove and bent over to place his mouth over Junsu's.

The younger man turned his head away, putting his hand over his face. "No, I can't..."

Exhaling the pungent smoke, Yoochun watched the plume weave into the night. "Why not? Why not be... naughty tonight?"

"We're already naughty," Junsu picked through the strawberries he'd liberated from the refrigerator. Chunks of chocolate took up one side of the bowl and the succulent fruit crowded around the sweets. "We're out here in the cold instead of inside..."

"Fucking," Yoochun took another hit on the clove, grinning at Junsu's look of mock-shock. Holding the smoke in, he bent over and murmured, "Come, baby."

Junsu sighed and lay his weight on one palm, his sloe eyes hooded as he opened his mouth to receive Yoochun's breath. The baritone's lips hovered, a spot of moisture tickling Junsu's lower lip. Nearly into a kiss, Yoochun breathed out as Junsu inhaled slowly, taking the taste of his lover and the smoky spice into his lungs. He fought the cough, swallowing the mingled heady flavours and holding them tight in his chest.

"I love that you hold my kisses," Chunnie closed the distance between their lips, sealing the bond between their mouths.

Junsu gasped at the touch, releasing the spicy fog in his chest. The burn raked his throat but the sweetness of Yoochun's tongue licking at the roof of his mouth then delving further in soothed the roughness. His tongue darted, laving under his lover's until he pulled out a long, murmuring moan from Yoochun's belly. His hand wandered, his fingers finding the ridge under Chunnie's zipper. Tracing the long heat he found there, Junsu smiled against the other man's mouth, satisfied at the stiffness his touch brought on.

"Driving me crazy, Susu-ah," Yoochun rested his forehead against Junsu's temple, rubbing against his lover's hair. The clove, nearly forgotten in his hand, smoldered and sputtered, a drop of rain nearly extinguishing the cigarette. Stabbing it dead, he put out the cherry, smearing the ash on the wet cement before tossing the stub into the ashcan. Cupping the back of Junsu's head, he pulled the other man towards him, suckling at Junsu's full upper lip.

The frosty wind hit Junsu's back and he shivered, a misty spray hitting their arms. Laughing, Yoochun pulled the comforter over their chests, tucking the edges under his feet after pulling Junsu's legs over his thighs. Grabbing the wine, he worked the cork loose and the pop echoed between the building.

"Shhhh, you're so loud," Junsu took the bottle from Yoochun, closing his hand over the opening.

"No sense doing that. I've already made the noise," Chunnie laughed. "Just take a sip and pass it back."

The sweet plum wine slid down Junsu's throat, syrupy thick and potent. It tasted of Yoochun, sugary and mind-numbing, leaving his tongue wanting more. He passed the bottle back, licking a stray drop from

the corner of his mouth. Yoochun's eyes followed his tongue's path, shadows hiding the fire Junsu knew was there.

"Whoa, this stuff is..." Yoochun swallowed, wiping at his lips with his thumb. A dribble of wine glistened in the sparse light, catching the glow of the nearby traffic trees. Speckles of red then green danced on the liquid as Yoochun moved his hand closer to Junsu, offering the other man to lick it off. "Clean this off for me, baby."

The young man closed his eyes, parting his lips for his lover. Yoochun murmured, a low deep sexual sound at the sight of the other man preparing to take him in. The flutter of Junsu's lashes on his cheekbones made Chunnie's heart skip a beat then seize up when his lover suckled the tip of his thumb into his delicious mouth.

Junsu's mouth sheathed Yoochun's thumb in hot velvet. He sucked, swallowing a bit of the liquid that tasted of plums and his Korean lover. Tipping his head back, he slid Yoochun's thumb further down his tongue, closing this throat over its tip before pulling back. Taking one last flicking taste of Yoochun's thumb pad, he scraped his teeth over the man's nail and nibbled on the tip before letting go.

"God I love how your face looks when you're like that," Yoochun whispered hotly, adjusting his legs to make room for his stiffening sex. Its tip was plumbed to be swallowed or better yet, eased into the other man's tight passage. "I can think of all kinds of things to do with that mouth of yours."

"Like giving me back the wine," Junsu retorted. Yoochun handed it back, picking through the chocolate. Holding up a piece, he fed Junsu the sweet. Chewing the chocolate with a mouthful of plum wine, Junsu shivered with pleasure and took his time swallowing.

"It's nice out here. Even with the rain," The baritone said. "I forget how pretty the city can be."

"At night. In the rain. Where you can't see the dirt," Junsu complained. "I miss home."

"You miss your dad's pizza," Yoochun accused.

"You do too. He likes you. He gives you so many toppings when you order." Junsu made a face. "When hyung and I want some, he makes us sweep the floor before he'll feed us."

"That's because he feels sorry for me," He nodded. "I think sometimes your dad likes having me as a spare son. He can brag about me all he likes but doesn't have to take the blame when I do something wrong."

"None of us do anything wrong," Junsu laughed. "Okay, well maybe Joongie-ah does but people forgive him."

"It's disgusting," Yoochun agreed. "The baby says that he thinks Jaejoong could dance naked in the middle of a park then pee on children and people would say 'Oh, how cute.' or something like that. It's hard being his best friend sometimes. It's like walking next to the moon. People sigh and pet him."

"Oh how romantic he looks," Junsu simpered, mimicking a young girl's voice.

"It's scary how good you are at doing that." Yoochun gave his lover an odd look. "I like you better as a guy."

"Me too," He agreed. "It's easier to pee. I don't think I'd want to squat. You'd get it all over your shoes."

The large bottle was nearly empty when Yoochun slung his arm around Junsu's shoulders, a buzz gently starting in his head. Junsu's face glowed red, visible even in the dim light. Yoochun suppressed a giggle, nearly toppling over as he stretched to reach the bottle. Frowning, he stared at the few inches left on the bottom and sighed.

"It's almost empty," He mourned. "Do you think we should go get another one?"

"No," Junsu said, stealing a peek into the living room. A light was on and he spotted a Yunho-shaped dark form coming from the hallway into the kitchen. "The Great Yunho-saurus is stomping through the living room."

“Do you think we should warn Tokyo?” Yoochun craned his neck but could only see Junsu’s hair. Sniffing his lover, he grinned at the smell of his own shampoo and soap on the other man’s skin. “You smell good. Good enough to eat.”

His teeth nipped and nibbled at the fine downy hair at the base of Junsu’s skull, a puff of Yoochun’s breath moving the man’s fringe out of the way. Yoochun bit then suckled up the nip of skin he had between his teeth. Under the man’s hairline, the mark wouldn’t be visible but Junsu would feel it for a few days, a bruise just below the skin that declared him as Yoochun’s.

The tenor murmured, trying to pull away but the other man’s hands were on his hips, holding him in place. Wiggling away wasn’t an option. Yoochun’s teeth were firm, small snips that barely let go of the skin long enough for Junsu to pull away. He would leave a line of ownership behind, a red mark more vibrant than any tattoo.

“Chunnie,” Junsu moaned, bending forward. His belly ached, a snake of desire winding up from his groin and up to pinch his nipples into tight buds. Pinned by Yoochun’s hands, Junsu shifted, forcing the man’s fingers to slide down his hips. The baritone tightened his grip, digging into the other man’s soft skin. There would be bruises in the morning, Junsu thought, hidden kisses of Yoochun’s want.

“Need me, duck?” Yoochun’s right hand wandered, finding the curve of Junsu’s groin. The comforter hid them from the night, the shadows cloaking them from anyone in the living room. His fingers scraped over the ridge, pulling Junsu’s desire to the surface. “Something down here tells me you need it.”

“Please,” Junsu opened his eyes when a brief gust of wind crept down his bare neck. “Chunnie-ah, we should go inside.”

“Why?” Those wicked teeth moved, working down the length of his spine and even through Junsu’s thin t-shirt, he could snare small tidbits of his lover’s flesh. “Too... open?”

“Way too open,” He whispered.

A light flared on from the living room, the brightness catching the men in the face. They froze, captured in the glare. Yoochun swore and pulled Junsu back, flipping the comforter over their heads. Peeling back a corner, Junsu slapped at Yoochun’s hand when the man tried to cover them back up.

“Do you want them to see us?” Chunnie hissed.

“Who’s they? Maybe it’s Min.”

“If it’s Min then we can yell at him. He shouldn’t be up.”

“Hold on,” Junsu snuck a peek and gasped. Panicked, he shoved Yoochun’s head under the comforter. “Stay down. Damn. Damn!”

“What?” Yoochun tried to pull free of the linens only to find himself shoved back down. “Shit, Yunho?”

“Um... yeah.” Junsu lied, his eyes wide with shock. “It’s Yunho.”

The lie seemed a small one, a helpless little thing that would save him in the long run but the deep sinking feeling in his belly told Junsu something different. Silhouetted against the wall hanging, Changmin moved closer to another man. His arms were up and then around the man’s neck. They came closer, angling their heads in a practiced motion.

“Why are you here? Why did you meet him here? Why didn’t you meet him some place else?” Junsu whispered, his voice stuck in his throat. “Just go. Go on. Go outside. Oh God, you’re going to get us all killed, Minnie-ah.”

Changmin obviously didn’t hear Junsu. Instead the younger man traced Se7en’s wide mouth with his fingertip, shyly looking down when the older man canted his head to the side, pointing at his own neck. Min’s face darkened with a flush but he brought his mouth down then laved at the spot. Se7en’s face twisted with pleasure and Min continued to lick at the spot, taking a quick suckle then ducking his head back

down. Buried against Se7en's chest, he took a visible breath and came up for air, offering his mouth up for a kiss.

Their lips met and one of Se7en's hands came up to work through Min's hair while the other settled on the small of Changmin's back. They kissed, holding more than a minute between them until Junsu found his lungs begging for air. Se7en's fingers were slowly peeling Min's shirt up and then across the waist of his low slung jeans. A band of red peek up out of Min's pants, the underwear's elastic emblazoned with a row of black skulls. Se7en's index finger stole into the crease of Min's cleft, massaging the dip in the younger man's rear.

"Oh, I didn't need to see that," Junsu moaned, lowering his head. "No, no, no. Not this. Not now."

"What? What's going on?" His lover's querulous cry reminded Junsu he'd left Yoochun under the blanket.

Se7en's fingers worked at a button on Min's shirt and the younger man said something that made Se7en chuckle. Junsu imagined he could almost hear the other man's deep rolling laughter through the glass. Changmin tried pulling away but he was caught, held by Se7en's fingers. The button cracked, its thread cutting through the thin plastic and it popped, arching in the air until it smacked into the glass door. The pop startled Yoochun who grabbed at Junsu's side. The baritone's cold fingers made Junsu yelp and in the living room, the pair turned towards the sound.

Junsu gulped when Min took a step towards the patio then breathed a sigh of relief when Se7en grabbed the young man by his wrist, dragging him to the door. With Yoochun's breath hot on his neck. Junsu finally exhaled when they left, turning off the light and closing the front door behind them.

"Did Yunnie-ah go back to bed?" Yoochun asked.

"What?" Junsu lifted the cover, staring at his lover's handsome face. "Yunho? Where?"

"You said it was Yunnie-ah," The other man popped his head up, looking around Junsu's shoulder and into the living room. "Ah, he went to bed. I'm all for doing things out here but it's too cold. I don't want things to break off. Come on, we can go fool around inside now that the scary thing is gone."

"Oh no, Chunnie-ah," Junsu murmured as his lover climbed over him. He stood then leaned over the balcony to watch a sleek sports car peel away from the curb. "I think the scary thing is still out there. And getting scarier all the time."

Twenty-Four

They never made it to the ramen shop. The coffee room was also a blur in Se7en's rear view mirror, a long streak of concrete, glass and teacups. The Supra glistened silver on Tokyo's rain-soaked streaks, long ribbons of asphalt taking the couple farther and farther from the members' apartments. When Min closed his eyes, he imagined he could feel the distance growing behind him, a thread stretching between the other singers and the moving car. It both anchored him and tied him, a connection he loved and hated.

If we keep going, we could hide here, forever. No one would know us. We could live our lives someplace private. Somewhere like Osaka., Min sighed.

And what are we going to do for money? His gremlin muttered darkly. Have people pay to be insulted as they walked by? Or maybe Dong-Wook will support you by teaching people to dance? Because he would be so willing to give up his dreams for you.

"What are you thinking?" Se7en's voice rumbled deep, reaching into Min's gut and grabbing him in the groin.

A growling woman on the stereo asked if they wanted someone to love, her American-English a running stream of sounds Min picked over in hopping steps. It was like finding little stones to place his feet on, precarious wet rocks that played peek-a-boo in the water's white caps. Se7en sang along softly, his Rs round and blunt in the sharpness of other sounds.

"How we'd support ourselves if we ran away," Min's thoughts slithered free from him, wet lights splashing white stars in the car's dark interior. Mortified at hearing himself, Changmin covered his face and slid down in the leather seat, bringing his knees up to his chin. "God, why was I given a mouth?"

"Because it's probably one of the more delectable mouths I've ever seen," Se7en replied with a low chuckle. "And tell me, Minku-love, where are we running to?"

Minku-love, the gremlin sniffed. Ah, great. He's just upped the stakes. He's called you love. Time to start shopping for hanbok and silver spoons.

"Don't you ever talk to yourself?" Changmin asked Se7en, mumbling through his fingers.

"Yes, all the time," His maybe-lover replied. "Usually when I'm drunk. And yeah, sometimes I think about what would happen if I ran away."

"Too many people." Min grumbled. "This person. That person. Everyone needs a handful of rice for everything I do. I can't walk away."

"No, baby," Se7en agreed with a nod. His eyes were distant, brown mirrors of the storm clouds churning overhead. "Walking away isn't an option for either of us."

They wallowed in their thoughts, each wondering at the other's designation in their lives. Rain left tears on the car's windshield, the wind grabbing at the water and pulling it out into silken webs along the glass. Reaching over, Se7en wrapped his fingers in Min's, dragging one of the singer's hands down.

"Are we ever going to talk about ...what's going with you?" He asked, not taking his eyes off the road.

"You... you should park," Min suggested. "I think this probably is going to be a parking kind of talk."

Surprisingly, Se7en didn't retort with anything that crawled heat over Min's spine. A dimly lit grassy park zipped by and Se7en slowed down, taking the next light to turn around and headed back. The park turned to a garden as they approached, a picturesque red bridge spanning a small brook, lights spilling down over

damp purple-leaved plum trees. The rain settled down into a steady drizzle and Min was encouraged enough by the lack of a storm to roll the window down a hand-width before Se7en turned the Supra off.

Quiet, the older man sat and waited, unbuckling his seat and turning to give Min his full attention. Shifting in place, Changmin stared at the bridge, trying to find some place safe to start in the tangle of thoughts in his mind.

“Talk to me, baby,” Se7en reached behind Min’s chair, looping his arm behind him. “What’s going on?”

“I need....you to promise that you won’t tell anyone this,” Min started then immediately regretted his words at the angry look in Se7en’s eyes. A pulse beat along the older man’s temple and his mouth set in, a hard line in a stony expression. The conversation was a land mine field, pockets of explosive rounds lingering under the placid sand. “Shit, I’m....”

“Shit?” The man exhaled, his breath a harsh hiss between clenched teeth. The anger flowed away slowly from his face. Pressing his index finger to the tip of Min’s nose, Se7en reminded him, “I’m supposed to be the wicked one. I’m sorry for getting pissed off baby but it’s fucking hard on the outside trying to look in — especially where you’re concerned.”

“It’s hard to... talk about what goes on... inside of us with someone else. Even if that someone is you, *hyung*.” Min’s switch to an extremely formal Korean dialect made Se7en wince and the drop of his eyes to the car’s carpeted floor did nothing to ease the strain between them.

“Don’t... don’t talk like that, baby,” Se7en leaned over, cupping Min’s face with his broad hands. His fingers stroked up the curve of the younger man’s cheekbones, his thumbs resting at the corners of Min’s mouth. “Don’t put up those walls between us. Not like that. Not ever like that.”

Drawing the young singer forward, he licked at Changmin’s lower lip then kissed him gently, a nearly chaste brush of their lips. Angling himself, Se7en tasted again, working his tongue back and forth on the shadowed recess of Min’s pout, slowly working the young man open. Their tongues met, tentatively on Min’s part but Se7en pushed in, aggressively consuming the Min’s sweet taste with a savage moan.

Changmin gripped Se7en’s shirt, wrapping his fingers in fabric to hold the man closer. His mouth parted, widening and needing to be filled by Se7en’s tongue, the dart of its tip ticking and caressing his heat. Hardening, his sex strained against the confines of his jeans, and a warmth spread up from his rear, an undeniable need to have Se7en touch him drawing fiery lines over his nerves. His body clenched, the pout hidden beneath his tightening sac responding with a flushed desire. The feel of the man’s fingers drove him near the edge of insanity and Min couldn’t help but wonder how far Se7en could reach up inside of him and if the man would smile when he begged for more.

“If we keep this up,” Se7en pulled back reluctantly, panting with the effort to keep himself under control. “I’m going to say damned the wait and just take you here. But I think I promised you a bed when we...”

“When we make love?” Min whispered, his lashes casting dark shadows on his cheeks. He didn’t hide the blush fluttering over his golden skin. His desire was bold, the need for Se7en’s body to meld with his growing stronger with each breath. Trembling, he knew in his heart that if Se7en told him to strip off his clothes and lay bare for him to see, Min would do so without hesitation.

The power Se7en had over him frightened him but seeing the power he had over Se7en made him want the man even more.

“Talk to me, baby,” The older man ordered, his voice low. “Before I cross over into doing crazy things with you and we’ll never get around to airing things out.”

“I can’t....” Min turned his face, partially hiding in the shadows. The dim light made it easier to speak, and anything that kept Se7en’s sharp eyes from piercing his fragile soul was a welcome balm. “Just let me talk, okay? Because if I don’t, I won’t be able to get it out.”

He started with Kimura and the man’s intensity, outlining the subtle maneuvering the man did to sideline the group’s relationships. Min found himself telling the stories in spurts, unsure of how something

came to pass but knowing what happened to Jaejoong and the rage Yunho carried inside of him. He spoke about the silence and the cold among the young men, their words cutting with a keen precision, sharpened by Kimura's plotting. When he reached the depravity of Kimura's assault on his beloved Joongie, Min stumbled, unable to find the words to tell the older man how terrified he felt when he saw the death lurking in the singer's eyes.

At some point his tears were a sheet on his skin, a salty-sweet curtain of his healing pain. Min wrapped himself in his blanket of woven tears, tugging it tight around his soul. Unwilling to let it go, he worried at its edges, chewing at the hem with his teeth and words until it frayed and then loosened when Se7en tugged hard.

Changmin clung to his insecurity, turning himself until it tangled with his thoughts. He talked about his mother, haltingly and unsure. The other man had never met the woman who shaped his world, the woman who held her hands out to him and encouraged him to walk... to talk... to think... to sing and most of all... to dream. He tried explaining at first how precious her smile was to his heart and how there were pieces of candy hidden in her musings, delightful bursts of umeboshi he found enchanting still to this day.

And he spoke of the horror in his mind when he saw her dead in front of him, a withered shell of the woman who tickled his mind and sang to his soul.

"You don't have to go further if you don't want to, Changmin," Se7en stroked at Min's hair. "Honey..."

"No, I need..." Min stammered. He needed the touch of Se7en's words inside of his heart... needed to hear himself cracking open the soiled core of his fear. "I want to...I need you to hear what's in me."

His hands were on Min, small touches that connected the young singer to the present as he delved deeper. Se7en found the spots Changmin needed to be stroked, unerringly caressing the span between his shoulder blades and the soft downy skin under his right ear. A skimming of his fingertips at the nape of Min's neck sent shivers into the young man's thighs and stoked the smoldering heat he'd thought died from reliving heartbreak.

"Go ahead. Get it out, baby."

Then, even harder still, was the sharing of his fears — seeing the haunted spectre of his lost mother in Jaejoong, the most emotional and free-spirited person he'd ever known. How one man's selfish desire for power and dominance nearly extinguished a star as if he were nothing more than an overburnt candle nearly killed Jae inside and doomed the rest of them to a soulless existence.

Se7en listened, quiet and thoughtful. His fingers moved slowly, stroking the back of Changmin's hand and sometimes wrapping up to touch his wrist but his mouth remained closed and his eyes held an immense caring that hurt Min inside. His thoughts echoed with the mistrust he'd had and the thoughtless words he'd spoken against Se7en's discretion.

"My mom... when I look at Jaejoong sometimes, I see parts of her strength." He rubbed at his chin, smiling when Se7en's fingers ghosted over flat line of his jaw. "I don't see Joongie-ah as a woman..."

"No," He smiled at the memory of Jae's masculine body pressing against him during a game show. Despite his deep affection for Changmin, the sleek lines of the mercurial Korean elicited a response. He'd have to be a dead man otherwise. "Although he made a nice one in that drama."

"Aish, if we ever... if ever I get you in front of them, do *not* say anything like that," Changmin looked horrified. "He'll skin you alive."

"I promise," Se7en crossed himself. "I won't. The only boy I want under my skin is you. What about your Joongie-ah?"

"It hurt. He hurt me." It sounded petulant when spoken aloud, an injured little boy with a skinned knee. "And it is stupid. I know it does, Shichi but I thought I'd... come further than that. With them. That they trusted..." He trailed off, shock rounding his mouth into an O.

Se7en cocked his head and pursed his full mouth. "What?"

“Shit!” Changmin hit his forehead with the heel of his hand. “I did to you what they do to me all the time. Fuck!”

“Whoa, baby. I didn’t think I kissed you hard enough to dirty your mouth that much,” Se7en held his hands up in surrender, leaning back to give Changmin a little space. “This time, the talking to yourself out loud thing would really be helpful.”

“I... don’t get let in,” Min’s anger stung, beading wet on the bow of his thick lashes. “How the hell can I expect you to understand being shoved out when I hate when it happens to me? I *fucking hate* it, Shichi. I hate when they push me aside and that’s what I’ve done to you.”

“And I got mad at Jaejoong. I shaved off pieces of his heart with stupid sharp words because I wanted him to hurt,” He bit back his emotions, the flood of contrary feelings too strong to choose which one overpowered the others. “Everything became.. muddy and I couldn’t tell if I was angry at Jae for not telling me — even after I... did everything I could to help Yunho get rid of Kimura — or I just felt powerless because it was like my mother all over again.”

“What about now? How do you feel now?”

“Okay, better,” Min tried wiping his face but Se7en got to his tears first. “Better now that I’m with you.”

“How are they now? Yunho and Jaejoong? Are they okay?” Se7en asked. His palm was wet, moist from Min’s tears but the shining faith and hope in the younger man’s eyes dried away any residual anger left between them.

“I think... they’re okay. They... were making noise when you called.”

Se7en’s eyebrows crept up his forehead, his curiosity piqued. “Noise?”

“You know,” Min said, rolling his eyes. “Squeak-ah, squeak-ah, squeak-ah. Ugh-ugh. Saranghaaaaaaaae. No, BooJae, I love you mooooooore. They sound like cows. Love sick cows calling to each other over the fence. Then they start *doing things* that make the headboard hit the wall. It’s like they’re pounding mochi or something.”

He waited patiently when Se7en’s laughter rocked the inside of the car. Wiping his face, the older man tried to catch his breath. Pounding his chest, he jump-started his lungs then collapsed again when he saw Min’s pained look.

“Baby,” Se7en waved the young man off. “Stop. You’re making my ribs hurt.”

“Fine, finish laughing,” Changmin sniffled, taking a napkin from the centre console and then looked up at Se7en. “I need you to turn your head or close your eyes... or something. I need to... my nose...”

“You’re silly. Beautiful but silly. Come here,” Se7en took the paper square away from him, tugging on it until Min let go. Holding it to Min’s nose, he said, “Don’t fight me, Minku. Just. Blow.”

“Ah’m not bwowing...” He said around the pinch of Se7en’s fingers. A stern look from the older man and Min sighed, exhaling out into the paper. Wrinkling his forehead when Se7en wiped off the tip of his nose, Min groaned in high disgust. “Eewww. That’s....”

“It’s nothing,” Se7en said. “It’s a part of being lovers. There’s going to be other bodily fluids that I’m going to be either wiping off or even better, licking off. We’re human, Changmin. We’re dirty, crying, stubborn messes that need our asses wiped and our noses tweaked. Loving someone means holding napkins and hands as much as it means giving kisses.”

“I’ve never...” Changmin hiccupped, drawn out and worn from talking. His tongue felt swollen, too used to silence. “You’re asking for something that I’ve never given — for something that I...”

“I’m asking you for something more intimate to you than sex,” Se7en finished for him. “I know, baby. I know and I just needed to hear you say that you trust me enough to let me hold you when you’re crying because Minku honey, that’s all I need from you. I know we’re not talking forever between us... not like

Yunho and Jaejoong but like... us. Just for us to be... us. That I can give you a part of me and know that you'll hold it. And that you can give me a part of yourself in return."

"I hate crying, Dong-Wook," He whispered, letting a snuffle work up from his chest. "Hate it."

"Yeah, I guessed that about you," The older man laughed when the tip of Min's tongue slid out from between his lips in a tiny act of defiance. "Tell you what, baby, how about if we find something better for that tongue to do."

Twenty-Five

Sweat beaded Jaejoong's face, exertion flushing his cheeks. A single drop clung to his chin, trembling when he bent over to catch his breath. It fell when he moved to press a hand to his ribs, hoping to stop the stitch from spreading into his abdominal muscles but it was already too late. The ache moved like a wild fire through his torso, cramping and tightening his lean frame into a twisted knot. Gasping in pain, Jaejoong slowed his breathing, pushing his stomach out to stretch the muscle as he willed the cramp to a cold place in Hell.

He bowed when a staff member handed him a bottle of water but the man was gone before Jae straightened. Others hurried past the rehearsal room's open door, blurs of jeans chattering Japanese at a rapid-fire machine gun rate. He caught tidbits of discussion, centred mostly around food and promotion events. A pair of men in business suits walked by, giving Jae a glance before continuing on. The taller of the two began to talk about the members, wondering if the Korean-born singers would be able to make any impact on Japan's music world. The shorter man snorted, cutting his words with a hissing sound.

While Jaejoong didn't understand everything being said, the man's intent was clear; TohoShinKi would turn out to be a failure and the foreigners would crawl back to their homeland, humiliated and forgotten.

"Fuck him," Jae muttered to himself in Korean. He smiled vacantly as he walked passed the men, nodding when they greeted him warmly. "Omote-ura — Public face, private face. Pfah."

He'd grown too used to those looks while living near Scarlet, sidelong superior glances and the subtle tilt of a chin in his direction as if he were filth that needed to be looked down at. For all of his carefully constructed manners, there were times when Jaejoong wanted to throw off any semblance of being nice and let out what he was feeling.

Remembering Yunho's look of horrified expression whenever he opened his mouth and spoke normally cured him wanting to speak up. Any cool, mysterious persona he might have had escaped as soon as he uttered one word and the country raised, street-cut urchin came out — definitely not someone the company had in mind to represent them.

A chill ran down his back when the air conditioning hit his sweaty shirt. The V of wet between his shoulder blades turned to ice and Jae frowned, wishing he could head home but the other members were still practicing and his side still hurt from where Changmin's stray flailing fist struck him. After being dismissed from the lineup when their youngest member struck him for the fifth time, Jaejoong bowed deeply to their choreographer and fled.

Now at loose ends, he wandered the halls until he found the showers and washed the stickiness from his body. Dressed in street clothes, he balled up the t-shirt he'd taken from Yunho to practice in and shoved it to the bottom of his duffel. His long shorts followed and then the beat up sneakers he'd nearly broken the stitching on. Mournfully, he was wondering if he could get a few more days of practice out of them when his private cell phone rang.

"Hello?" While there was slim chance someone calling him would be speaking Japanese, he repeated the greeting in the Tokyo dialect he was picking up, smoothly transitioning from the rounded bubble sounds of his native tongue.

"Hey." The man's voice was smooth, silky hot and a slither that promised sex and a good time.

Jae chuffed in his throat and flung himself down on one of the couches in the lounge. "Se7en! Suppose Yunnie-ah had picked up my phone instead?"

“Then I would have said something in Japanese and apologized for bothering him after he mumbled out the few words he knows.” The other man laughed. “What can he say now besides ramen, dog and happy?”

“I’m sure he could come up with a few things to say to you in Korean.” Jae admonished. “And why are you calling me instead of Min to leave him a message? They’re still rehearsing”

“I called Minku and yes, I got his voice mail,” He admitted. “I was going to leave you one because I figured you were probably working too but here you are. How come?”

“Aish, because your boyfriend dances like an eggbeater... what is that thing? A whisk?” Jae moaned, rubbing a thickening bruise on his upper arm. “He has no grace. If ever you have sex with him, you’re going to have to tie him down so it doesn’t look you got into a fight instead of making love.”

“Ah, BooJae, you’re giving me very wicked thoughts when you start talking about Min being tied up. Are you sure you want to lead me there?”

“First, forget I said anything about it,” Jae frowned. “I don’t want to think about what you’re teaching Min. And secondly, don’t call me BooJae. That’s not a name for you to use.”

“Only Yunho-sshi gets to?” Se7en teased.

“And my mother.” Jae thought for a second then corrected himself. “And Scarlet. Maybe Chunnie if I’m in a good mood.”

“Are you someplace you can talk, BooJae?”

The endearment made Jaejoong roll his eyes and he glanced around the lounge. “Yes. Why?”

“Because I did want to talk to you,” Se7en sighed, rubbing his face. “I’ve got a bit of a problem.”

“Does this problem involve Changmin?” The singer sprawled on the couch, the faux leather squeaking under his long body. “And does it involve you hurting him? Because if that answer is yes, I think you’d be smart enough to be calling from Korea instead of some place I can reach you.”

“Why is it the Dong Bang boys always immediately assume that I’m going to hurt someone and then respond with violence?” The other man clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “Is that something they taught you in SM trainee school? Is it like some secret ninja assassin training you five graduated from with top honours?”

“Does this involve Changmin and you hurting him?” Jae repeated slowly. “Because I don’t think you heard me the first time.”

“Yes it involves Minku but no, I don’t want to hurt him,” Se7en confessed. “I needed to talk to you about... what happened between you and Kimura.”

If Jaejoong had anything in his stomach besides water, he would have thrown it up onto the floor. Still, his belly gurgled and a faint green sick taste filtered up over his tongue. Swallowing, he tried to keep the stain of his fears down. “How... what did Min tell you? *Did* Min tell you... or someone... else?”

“Changmin,” He replied. “And that’s why I wanted to talk to you.”

“He told you what... Kimura did?” Jaejoong closed his eyes, his mind reliving the feel of Kimura’s flesh on his. It faded away, replaced with the hot feel of Yunho’s kisses and the slick, gentle words of his lover in his ear.

“Yeah, he did. And... I wanted you to know that I’m sorry,” Se7en said. “I should have...done something. I should have helped more and... I’m sorry. I should have known.”

“None of us knew. None of us... suspected,” Jae replied. “I have to think that, Dong-Wook. It’s important... to me.”

“Yeah,” He said but Jaejoong wasn’t convinced. “I just needed to tell you that I’m sorry. And I wished that he’d never gone near you. And...to thank you for keeping him away from Changmin.”

“I didn’t tell Min...”

“You didn’t have to... and no, he doesn’t really get how close he was to being... you in all of this mess,” Se7en said. “Min’s as vulnerable as you are — maybe even more so.”

“I’m not weak,” Jae hissed. Doubts surfaced and he shoved them aside, fiercely denying their existence. “I. Am. Not. Weak.”

“I didn’t say weak. I said vulnerable.” He clicked the phone, tapping the speaker. “You can hear me, yes?”

“No jokes, Dong-Wook.”

“I’m not joking, Jaejoong.” He said.

“Go on.” Jae replied flatly. Se7en guessed the other man was willing to listen although an overly familiar stubborn tone coloured his tone. “Explain.”

“Kimura was a master at manipulating people and you — for all your growling, feral thug ways — are as much of an innocent as Changmin is.” Se7en stopped, trying to find how to express his attraction to the youngest of Jae’s group.

Jaejoong couldn’t help the suspicion creeping into his voice. There’d been too many times in the past when someone he loved was betrayed by a family member or lover — Yunho’s father springing to mind — and the thought of Se7en joining that list made him sicker than knowing Kimura’s hands had been on him.

“You think I’m ... innocent?” Jaejoong was taken aback, trying to see the purity in himself and failing.

“You both want love. You both want life to be okay. You’d like to think the best of people and never see the darkness in someone’s eyes until it’s too late. You’re vulnerable... and that’s probably a big part of why Yunho loves you as much as he does. Because people like him — people like us — we want our world to be full of sunshine when all we see is darkness. You and Changmin... you bring the light with you.”

“So, by talking to you... by sharing what’s between the five of us...” He struggled with the idea of another man knowing their secrets; knowing the most intimate parts of their lives. “He’s taking a step towards you, hoping for what? Love? He says he doesn’t want love, Se7en. He told me so.”

“I know that but...he needed to talk out his emotions and I... needed to be a part of what he was feeling. Even if it is about the group, I need... to be able to see what’s in his heart, Jaejoong. He means that much to me.” Se7en took a breath, holding it in. “He asked me not to... say anything... to tell anyone but...”

“You needed to tell me...” It wasn’t a question, just something Jaejoong let dangle between them. “Why?”

“Because I... promised to stand with him. To care for him,” He let go, his chest dipping in. “Because you’re important to him and that makes you important to me. I needed to talk to you... and tell you he shared this with me. This isn’t making any sense, does it?”

“No, not much, but I’m tired so that probably isn’t helping,” Jae admitted. “So this secret’s come around full circle? He’s talked about something in the group and made you promise not to say anything so you come to me, someone in the group, to tell?”

“See, I knew if I spoke about something that didn’t make any sense, you would be the one person to figure it out.” Se7en laughed, bitter mingled with something Jaejoong couldn’t identify. “I’m taking a risk here, Jaejoong. I need to tell you about this because... Changmin loves you and while trust is important to you, so are friends. I wanted you to know that I’m your friend, Jaejoong. I need you to hear that...and that if you feel like you can’t go to the others because you don’t want to hurt them... then you should at least try coming to me. I wouldn’t have let Kimura get that far. I wouldn’t have let him... touch you that way. No one... *no one* should ever be forced to have sex. That should be something of joy or even just pleasure but it should never be made into something of...terror.”

It was Jae’s turn to hold his breath, unsure of how to deal with the conflicting emotions in his heart. “Changmin shouldn’t have told you.”

“No, you can’t damn him for telling me, Jae,” Se7en reproached the other man. “You talk to Yunho. Or you should.”

“You and Changmin aren’t...” He let the sentence drop. “Are you...? Did you and Min already...?”

“No, no,” He reassured the other man. “At least not yet. I’m not saying that...God, Jae. Do you have any idea what being away from him does to me? How much it hurts when I see his picture and I can’t touch my fingers to his mouth?”

Swallowing hard, Jaejoong murmured, “Yeah, I can imagine.”

“It’s probably worse for you,” Se7en laughed again. “Because I know there are times when you need Yunho so much and there are thousands of eyes on you. We... Minku and I... don’t have that but neither can we... we can’t be together as much. The world has bigger plans for Changmin than to just keep me company and I’ve got too many people I’m carrying to throw it all away.”

“It’s a complicated life, Dong-Wook,” He said softly. Drawing himself in, Jaejoong curled into the couch, seeking warmth from his own body. A shiver went down his spine and his belly ached, needing Yunho’s touch along the line of his stomach. “Why did you break your promise to Changmin? Do you... are you saying you want him like... Yunho and I...”

“Because he feels like he’s betrayed you in telling me,” He admitted in a low whisper. “And not being able to hold him in the middle of the night because we’re sneaking around your group’s collective back is killing me. I don’t do secrets, Jaejoong. I want there to be honesty between me and Changmin. I can’t have my relationship be... like Yunho and Jaejoong. I’m not strong enough for that kind of pain.”

“What?” Jae hissed, his anger raising his hackles. “What the fucking hell?”

“Hear me out,” Se7en pleaded, his husky voice rough with emotion. “I know Yunho. Hell, I think I *am* Yunho in a lot of ways so I understand how ego gets in the way. I want to protect him, like Yunho protects you, hiding things from you because that’s how he thinks you need to live.”

“You’re not helping your case,” He warned the other man. “Not at *all*.”

“Look at what damage you two have done just by trying to protect each other,” The Korean replied. “Think about it, Jaejoong. Think about how much easier this all would have been if you’d just said something... if Yunho had said something.”

“You’re saying... what Kimura did to me was my fault?” Jaejoong hissed.

“No,” Se7en grunted. “Listen to me. What happened wasn’t your fault. Kimura was a fucking asshole and he never should have been able to get near you. Hell, I’d kill him if he’d even looked at Changmin. What I’m saying is that I want... I want Min to feel like he can come to me...talk to me if something happens to him. That’s all.”

Settling back down, Jae asked. “What do you want me to do?”

“Nothing,” He said. “Everything. I don’t know. I don’t have all the answers. I just know that Min trusted me with something sacred and I know you’d be hurt...all of you would be hurt if you found out later that he’d spoken to me without your knowledge. I needed to level the playing field. I needed everything to be out in the open because...”

“Because what, Se7en?”

“Because, I think I’m in love with him, Joongie.” The man’s voice was bare...open and vulnerable. “I need him. I need him more than I need air. I’m in pain when I’m not around Changmin. There’s something deep inside of me that only stops hurting when he’s near.”

“Oh, Dong-Wook...”

“I feel like I’m only alive when my hands are on him,” Se7en’s whisper tore, something inside of him breaking apart. “I can only breathe when my mouth touches his lips and he exhales. And if you of all people,

Yunho's BooJae, don't understand that, then I'm lost because I don't know who else to tell that I am in love with him. I don't know who else would help me make him...believe me."

Twenty-Six

The edge of his phone felt warm pressed against the throbbing ache on Jae's temple. His conversation with Se7en left him more confused than relieved and his stomach grumbled, loudly proclaiming to anyone within a few miles that it was empty.

"Stop that," He scolded his belly. "People are going to think you're Changmin."

The grumbling continued, unaffected by Jae's annoyance. Thinking back of older days, he admitted the pinched feeling in his gut had been worse... much worse during his training. Then he'd scraped off leftovers from diners' plates and prayed no one would spot him sneaking handfuls of cold, air-hardened rice into his mouth before he dumped the rest of it in the trash. He'd been beaten across the head and back more than once when he'd been caught but he'd only grown more stealthy and wearing things with larger pockets so he could hide drier foods in a napkin and walk out with his trousers with enough to carry him over until the next day.

Some nights were lean and on those evenings, he'd fallen asleep sucking on the edge of his finger to sustain him, cuddled up tight in an old puffy sleeping bag he'd taken out of a dumpster. Jae smiled, remembering the smell of cat urine drifting up from one corner, the foul scent increasing in pungency as the weather heated up.

"I ate this morning," He mumbled to himself but for the life of him, he couldn't remember what it was they'd had.

Changmin.

Their youngest was a problem, difficult to solve and easy to love. Most of the time he was prickly, on edge with an overabundance of intelligence unbalanced by an intense curiosity. It was going to be that curiosity that would lead him to ruin or joy. For his sake...and Se7en's, Jae hoped it would be the latter.

"What do I do with you, little brother? And how the hell do I get Yunho out of your way?"

The phone's ring startled him, frightening Jaejoong from his thoughts. He'd registered the number under a different name, as far from his own as possible. After a few incidents with fans, he needed to be overly cautious. Staring at the number, Jaejoong frowned and slid the cell open.

Tentatively, he answered, "Hello?"

"Jaejoong?"

It was a woman, unfamiliar but with overtones of affection and a hint of someone dear to him. She spoke Korean, a soft lilting welcome sound in the harsh Japanese world Jaejoong lived in. He didn't know her but he'd spent time wiping the tears of a man who loved her intensely.

"Mrs. Jung," Instinctively, he ducked his head as she could see his courtesy. "Um.... Yunho..."

"I need to speak with you, Jaejoong," Her Korean was formal but affectionate, a tone used for a son-in-law. "I... cannot speak with Yunho."

"Eh?" Jaejoong frowned, trying to remember the last time his lover spoke with him about his home. The news usually was rarely shared of late, even less so in the midst of emotional upheaval he'd tossed in Yunho's life. "I've... not heard anything. He's not said anything."

"No, I don't imagine that he would," She replied. "He would want to protect you from his father... from my husband."

"Protect me? How?"

“What do you know about a favour Yunho asked of his father?” Mrs. Jung asked carefully, probing into Jae’s heart. “To help you with...that man named Kimura.”

“What do you mean... help with?” Hearing his nightmare’s name twice in one hour stopped Jaejoong’s heart, stilling it in a cold ice. “Kimura is...oh God... oh my God! Mrs. Jung, please tell me Yunho had nothing to do with that man’s death. Please.”

It was a horrific idea. Even with what Kimura had done to him, Jaejoong didn’t want his blood to be on Yunho’s hands. Flashing back to something Gackt said, Jaejoong’s fear grew; *Sometimes, the victim or their family wants to exact revenge. And as Confucius pointed out; Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves.* Losing Yunho to the soul-death of revenge would be worse than anything Kimura could have imagined doing to him.

“Please, Mrs. Jung,” Jaejoong begged. “If Yunho did something... if he was a part of Kimura’s death, then Kimura has succeeded in taking everything from me.”

“No, no,” She exclaimed. “Yunho... no, if I’d even thought my husband would... I would kill him first, Jaejoong. I would never let him take my son into that darkness. Yunho is something...someone special. I will protect him with every breathe I have in me. It is why I called you... why I needed to talk to you.”

“What has happened?”

“My husband arranged for Kimura’s activities to be exposed and left it to Yunho to remove him from your life. I wish I’d known about this beforehand but... I discovered my husband speaking with a woman.”

“A woman?” Jaejoong’s confusion grew.

“She is Japanese. A... loose woman that he uses to... she’s an associate,” The woman said, her voice now strained. “She is effective but ruthless. I am sure she has criminal ties but I’ve never... looked at it. What my husband does...as long as it doesn’t affect the family... is none of my business. If he wants to traffic with a criminal element, then so be it. I just ask that nothing he does is illegal.”

“Has he? Done something illegal?” He asked carefully.

“No, he has done something unconscionable.” Her anger was hot and the flash of it reminded Jaejoong of Yunho’s. He’d always thought his lover got his temper from his father. He’d been wrong. “He has used my son’s pain to separate Yunho from me. It took me some time but... I am done with him. I need to have my son in my life. His father has forced his hand for the last time. For his help with Kimura, my husband forced Yunho to choose between you and me. And he chose you.”

“Oh...” His words fled, chased by the cold fire in his heart. “No, I can’t...he can’t. Not you. Not his mother. No, Mrs. Jung...”

“You see, Jaejoong, that is why I fully believe ... why I believe now that Yunho made the right...choice in loving you. His heart chose well. He chose someone worthy of his love.” Her voice held a smile, a soft wispy chiffon of affection covering her bitterness. “He may have made Yunho choose between you and me — and I support his choice, Jaejoong. He loves you. I hear it in his letters when he talks about you. He never says it. I’ve not heard him say that he loves you since that.. day at the hotel. And that’s what my husband has done that is criminal.”

Her sigh darkened, brining her voice with the silver of a storm. “That is why I had to walk away from my husband, Kim Jaejoong. Because I cannot stand to be loved by a man who would make his own son choose between his loves and forces Yunho to be ashamed of the one that he’s chosen. I want to hear my son say that he loves you. I want to see him hold you in public, without fear. Without recrimination. I want to see him celebrate his successes with the one person... the one man who brings a smile to his soul. And that is you.”



“Yunho,” Jaejoong tried to keep his thoughts from wandering down the wicked path. The man’s mouth was incredible. Searing hot on his already warm skin, Yunho’s tongue tickled and licked long lines along

Jaejoong's belly. His lover's strong hands held Jaejoong's wrists down, keeping the singer pinned to the bed with the length of his body sprawled over Jae's legs. Writhing, Jae tried to struggle out of his welcome imprisonment, wanting to talk but unable to do more than moan loudly.

"Shhhh," Yunho mumbled, finding the dip of Jae's navel. The cold kiss of gold was gone, an irritation on Yunho's nerves. Frowning, he left a kiss behind and slid halfway to the nightstand before giving Jaejoong a stern look. "Stay there. Don't move. I don't want to have to chase you across the bed."

He found what he was looking for in a small velvet box. Closing the jewelry case with a sharp click, Yunho half crawled, half slithered across the bed back to his lover, a predatory gleam in his lust-dark eyes. The glint of metal pinched between his fingers hid in the shadow of his palm when he curled his hand into a fist, brushing his knuckles against the ridges of Jae's sensitive stomach.

"God, look at you," He said, breathless at the sight of his lover sprawled over the bed's blood red sheets.

Jaejoong always looked delicate, something broken off from an angel's grace and fallen through a moonlit night into Yunho's life. Spread out over their bed, his pale, naked body flushed Yunho's desire from the recesses of his crotch, enflaming the corners of his mind. He cupped Jae's face, feeling the man's bones under his hand. Tightening his fingers on Jae's jaw, he gripped hard, the flesh bitten down with the fierceness of his hold. Jaejoong's mouth opened, a voiceless plea for Yunho's possession.

"You drive me...crazy," Yunho bent over, whispering into Jaejoong's open mouth. He held the man's face still, ignoring the grinding of Jae's hips against his belly. The press of Jae's wet tipped sex thrilled him. With a touch of his hand and a brush of his lips, he could excite the young man nearly to release. Staring up at his lover, he smiled at the rawness of Jae's deep brown eyes turned nearly black with excitement. "I tell you that all the time, but I don't think you understand it... the insanity you leave in me when I see you."

"Don't say anything," Yunho said, keeping his voice low. He spoke in a rough growl, drawn as tight as the sac pressed up in the hollow of his thighs. "I think if you say anything right now, I'm going to want to take you and there are some things I need to do first."

"You... unman me. I swear to God I want to spend my life kissing you. I like knowing that your mouth is swollen from my lips and that there are places on your body that are purple from my teeth. I need that, baby. I need to have you feel me every time you move. I love seeing you in my clothes. I love seeing you naked underneath me. Most of all, I love watching your face when I move into you because then... I can see how crazy I make *you*. And that makes losing my sanity to your beauty worth it. Because seeing you... just seeing you.. makes me lose my mind. I love you that much, baby."

Another kiss, barely a touch of his lips drew out another moan from Jae's belly and Yunho used his free hand to touch at the man's length, trailing his nails up over the ridge of Jae's sex. His fingers damp from the pearly liquid of Jae's body, he explored the man's abdomen, circling around his bare navel.

Letting go of Jaejoong's jaw, Yunho lowered his head and suckled around one of his lover's nipples, pulling at the pert flesh until it swelled between his teeth. With Jae's sex trapped between their bodies, Yunho felt every twitch of the young man's desire as he bit down harder, driving Jae's control nearly to its edge. The coppery taste of the singer's areole whetted Yunho's appetite for more and he moved over to the untouched plum coin on Jae's chest and tickled it with the tip of his tongue.

"Put your hands under your back," Yunho's teeth sank in when Jae lay still under him. "Now, baby. Do it now."

Tilting his hips up, Jaejoong slid his hands beneath him, rubbing himself slowly on Yunho's belly. With his wrists trapped by his own weight, Jaejoong sighed and tilted his head back when Yunho covered him, pushing him further into the mattress. Unable to move more than a few inches, he captured his lower lip between his teeth, trying to keep his moans low but it was nearly impossible with the feel of Yunho's mouth working over his chest.

“Yunho,” Jaejoong gasped when Yunho’s fingers gripped his sex’s head. The touch was gone as quickly as it descended, the man’s damp fingers traveling back up to his belly button. “What...?”

“Don’t talk until I ask you something,” Yunho growled and caught the ridge of Jae’s navel between his wet thumb and index finger. “Actually you know what pisses me off?”

Jaejoong shook his head, not trusting himself... or Yunho... if he replied out loud.

“I hate running my fingers over your stomach and finding it bare,” Yunho said calmly but the fire in his eyes warred with the placid roughness of his voice. “Why do you take this out all the time?”

“They... the stylists don’t... like it,” Jae gasped when Yunho’s mouth closed over his nipple, the man’s lips pressing the swollen nub with a painful tightness. “I...”

“I want you to leave it in,” He said, roaming down Jae’s belly until he reached the empty piercing. “If you need to take it out, then you come to me and I’ll take it out for you but then it goes right back in. I want you to always have something to remind you that you’re mine. That you belong to me, Jaejoong. I want to know that there is something of mine inside of you all the time because I can’t be. And if someone has a problem with that, you tell them to come to me and talk to me about it because I’m not going to let you stray from me again. Even if by accident, Jaejoong, I’m not going to let any part of your body, heart or soul wander off ever again.”

Moist with Jae’s seed, Yunho threaded the thick gold band he’d retrieved from the box through Jae’s belly pierce. The metal caught on the tender skin, the hole settling around the tissue from lack of use. Stretching it carefully, the skin was reluctant to give way under the press of the gold but Yunho was insistent, using Jae’s own fluids to slicken the way.

The band slid in with a pop and the sting of the skin giving way worked up Jae’s belly and into his nipples. Crying out softly, he churned under Yunho’s body, needing his lover to do something. The heat of Yunho against his bare skin was a torment, torturing his sex with the merest touch of Yunho’s thighs or the prickle of hair against the tip when Yunho’s straddle brought him in contact with his lover’s stiff, long shaft. The pound of blood along his length matched the rush of blood beating through his belly and ears, his thoughts lost under the primal drumming.

“Mine,” Yunho repeated as he sucked the juices from Jae’s belly ring. The gold glistened first with the salty spice of Jae’s body then with the sheen of Yunho’s tongue. Lapping at the seed he’d left on his lover’s stomach, Yunho smiled at the shudder working through Jaejoong’s body. “Leave it there, baby. Let me have that part of you...even if I have to share everything else.”

Twenty-Se7en

There were women once. A string of women that were properly Korean, demure and sweet-voiced. They smelled of flowers and sunshine and Yunho stole kisses from the prettiest of them, smiling at their weak protests and soft hands when they pressed their palms against his chest. He'd chased after a few, broken a heart or two and thought he'd had his broken in return.

Reflecting upon the past, Yunho realized he had no idea what a broken heart felt like until he met Kim Jaejoong.

Men didn't interest him. They were too familiar; dirty sweaty creatures that smelled like he did and were coarse in language and mannerisms. Men were for playing sports with or discussion things that offended the delicate senses of women — those mysterious, exotic creatures that invoked a man's desires.

There were men who crossed over into the realm of being female. Simpering slender creatures that masked their masculinity with a sheen of feminine wiles. He responded instinctively to them — protective and stalwart. He'd worked with many, avoiding the demi-gender was impossible considering the industry he was in, and even became close friends with a few like Heechul.

But neither man nor demi-man ever drew in him like the sugary sweetness of a woman.

Then he'd seen Jaejoong and his stable, logical world shattered.

They'd fought. Hard. Teeth bared and with hot words, Jaejoong snarled back, biting and scratching as Yunho shook him. They'd each lost blood and tears, sacrifices to their pride and anger. Small things flared the violence between them, stoked to flames in part by their conflicting natures and sometimes, when Yunho was egged on by others. Jaejoong stood apart, aloof and catlike and Yunho hated the man's smug arrogance, vowing to break Jae if he could.

What broke first was his resolve when he heard Jaejoong crying alone on a rooftop.

The tearful sobs were heart-wrenching, long drawn out gutful sighs Jaejoong struggled to keep silent but the wind carried the painful sounds to Yunho's ears and then into his heart. His protective nature rose and he stomped up to demand Jaejoong say who hurt him so deep that he needed to cry out his pain.

It was a slap to the face to hear his own name whispered from the pout of the feral Korean's luscious mouth.

More circling and then tragic dramatic battles that caught the others in the crossfire. After the smoke cleared and when they stood alone, faces sweaty and hearts dripping, Yunho discovered he needed Jaejoong more than he wanted to push him away.

The realization he needed...wanted another man was a shock. He fought it, wanting to reject the desire crippling his mind and heart until Yunho found himself bound and helpless whenever Jaejoong looked his way. He burned where Jae touched him, his resolve turning to cinders under the smoldering darkness of Jae's eyes. When another... man or woman... let their gaze linger a bit too long on Jae's beauty, he fought not to strike out and at the same time, wished he was blind to the other man.

Then his desire overwhelmed his self-loathing and Yunho fell from grace, giving in to the wicked sin of Jae's love. It was a fall he'd never recovered from and one he knew would end only when his soul joined with the man he'd fallen unexpectedly and fully in love with.

Their first kiss still burned his tongue, a savoury fire he kept alive with each touch of his hands to Jae's supple body. It lingered, always there in his memory, drawn back up when he tasted the other man's skin.

Like he was doing right now.

Lying on his stomach, Jaejoong's ivory body gleamed, only the dark of his hair and the black of his tattoo breaking the pale line. Spreading his palms over the young man's shoulder blades, Yunho marveled at the differences in their skin tone, his gold against Jae's blush white.

Jaejoong tasted of rain, Yunho thought, as he laid the flat of his tongue on the rise of the man's buttocks and licked up his spine. Maybe a mountain's cold stream, sweet and fresh tasting and clean. He was left... thirsty, needing more by the time he reached the man's shoulder blades. The black ink beneath Jae's skin was old enough to lay flush and Yunho mourned the slight rise he'd grown used to. He wondered when it finally settled and if he'd been with Jaejoong when it happened.

"Never again, my *goyangi saeggi*," He murmured against the base of Jae's skull, feeling the man tremble under him. It scared him to have so much power over someone.

And it scared him to know someone had so much power over him.

His own belly clenched and as he moved to kiss Jae's back, his sex wept as it trailed over Jae's tight thighs, the tip rubbing on the man's skin, leaving a silvery sheen in its wake. Kneeling over his lover, naked to the rain-blanching moonlight coming through the window, Yunho pressed his legs together, keeping Jae's ass tightly clenched. With his knees depressing the mattress, Yunho held Jaejoong down with his own weight, the singer's hands hidden under the soft pillow cradling his head.

When Yunho's hard shaft touched Jae's ass cheek, the singer let a slithering moan escape from his pout, his eyes closed with the pleasure of Yunho's hands on him. The leader couldn't help but smile, the erotic sound tightening the skin on his sex until it nearly hurt with the want of the man under him.

Yunho spread his fingers out, framing Jaejoong's TVfXQ tattoo. In the dimness, his hands resembled feathers sprouting free from the man's back. Bending over, Yunho fell into the temptation of Jae's beauty and bit into the ink on Jaejoong's back. Unerringly, his teeth closed in over small *f*, working at the letter's edges until Jaejoong squirmed from the mingle of pain and pleasure.

"Yunnie-ah," He begged and even with his hands hidden under the pillow, Yunho knew Jaejoong's hands were tight around fistfuls of the bed sheets.

"You're an angel to me," He whispered, pulling back to see the tattoo swelling slightly under the bruise from his teeth. The welt followed the line of his lover's back, stretching down in a moon crescent towards the tightness of his ass. He laved at the spot, working the spot into a heated wetness. "Sometimes I wish you could see yourself as I do, your black feather wings unfurling from your soul and spreading out to cover us. You say I am your soul but for me, you... Jaejoong... you are my hope."

He sipped at the welt, pressing his lips on the mark and pulled at it, suckling it against the flat of his teeth as Jaejoong whimpered and pleaded for surcease. The young man's words were fading under the primal, needful sounds coming from his throat and the circular movements of his ass under Yunho's taut sex were a slow frantic mating dance to Yunho's lust.

"You, my baby... my angel... my Joongie-ah," Yunho raised his head and bit at the tip of Jae's ear, his voice hot on the man's pierced shell. "You are my hope. My hope to the end. You are going to be under my skin until I take my last breath."

He slid his fingers into his mouth, wetting the length of his index and middle fingers until they were slick with his spit. Spreading his legs, Yunho lifted one and then the other into the press of Jae's thighs, working them open until the other man was splayed open. Jaejoong's hips rose, canting up when Yunho's dry hand touched his hip. Mewling, he panted, his back rising and falling with each breath as he waited for Yunho's first intrusion.

His hand spread Jaejoong open, preparing the young man for his touch. The skin hidden between the man's firm cheeks retracted, the plum rosette tightening and shivering as Jae anticipated the hot wet of Yunho's spit-slick stroke. Yunho moved slowly, pressing against the ridged pout until Jae relaxed, growing used to the man's fingers caressing his entranced. Quivering, Jaejoong's back and thigh muscles slowly

unclenched while Yunho played at the opening, his voice a soft low comfort to soothe the high-tempered singer's nerves.

No matter how many times they joined together, Jaejoong's body refused to loosen its tightness, the warmth of his body wrapping nearly painfully around Yunho whenever they fell into lovemaking and although the leader ached to possess his lover, he refused to rush the process of opening up Jae's body, especially when the young man seemed to need a gentler touch.

"Yunho...need...want...*doum*..." The tension in Jae's voice was nearly at a breaking point but the other man's shivers were nearly gone

It was the break Yunho was waiting for, the small crack of control in Jae's held-in breath and he slid the tip of his finger in, working around the tight ring until the pout bloomed. Working carefully, he slid his finger in slowly, caressing and stroking at the young man's core until he found the small ridge of Jae's passion. Touching the knotted bundle, he unleashed the lightning of Jaejoong's desire, clamping down on his lover's rising hips with his free hand to hold him down.

"No, no, no..." Yunho whispered, running his tongue over the swell he'd left between Jae's shoulder blades. "Stay still, baby. I need to get you ready and my spit isn't going to be enough. Not for you."

He'd left the bottle of gel open, ready for him to dribble onto his fingers. Rolling the plastic bottle in his palm, Yunho felt the chill leave the liquid inside while he worked his second finger into his panting lover. Squeezing gently, he dripped a small stream onto Jae's cleft, watching the vanilla-scented lubricant slide down the man's slope until it coated Yunho's waiting fingers.

Heated by the touch of Jaejoong's skin temperature, the gel released its odor, a sugared fragrance that blended nicely with Jae's own masculine spiced scent. Inhaling the mingled scents, Yunho felt his sex weep anew, driven by the unique and private perfume of Jae's readying body. It was a scent that was theirs alone, the musky sweetness of their joining and one Yunho treasured.

With his fingers deep into the depth of his lover's tightness, Yunho spent a few minutes stroking himself with his free hand, stopping periodically to slather gel over the tip of his sex then spreading it downward to coat himself for Jaejoong's pleasure. When the singer writhed nearly uncontrollably under his touch, Yunho shifted his knees, spreading Jaejoong's legs further apart.

"Push up on your hands, baby," Yunho said, his voice rough and low. Using the fingers still deep inside of Jae's body, he guided his lover up until Jae rested his weight on his shoulders and knees with his hips fully lifted from the bed. The oiled pout greedily lapped at Yunho's fingers, sucking him in further when the man tried to withdraw.

"Don't worry, Joongie," He promised, biting softly into the plump cheek of Jae's ass. "I've got something better for you. Let me go."

Reluctantly, Jaejoong relaxed and moaned in disappointment when Yunho pulled himself free. Wiping his fingers quickly on a small hand towel, Yunho guided the tip of his sex towards Jae's entrance, playing at the rosette and grinning wickedly when Jae growled threateningly at him.

"Now, Yunnie-ah." Guttural and coarse, Jaejoong used the rough street slang of Itaewon to urge his lover on. "I need you inside of me. Now."

"I like hearing you beg for me," Yunho moaned. "Nothing in the world like hearing you wanting me."

He pressed into his lover, letting his weight drive the tip of his sex past the other man's tightness. The velvet kiss of Jae's body spread open, covering his head and then swallowed him. Panting, Jae bent his head forward, his dark hair masking his face as he strained to absorb the waves of shock rocking his body. Yunho poised himself, holding back as he waited for Jaejoong to recover from the pressure.

Jaejoong's shoulder blades jutted up from his back, his weight balanced on the flat of his hands. Yunho took his time in licking at the ridge of bones framing his lover's ink and spine. Rubbing his cheek on the

smooth skin, he could feel the welt formed around the *f*. Tracing the raised skin with the tip of his tongue, he rocked slowly, using the tip of his sex to open his lover up.

“Yunnie...” Jaejoong gasped as he shivered, his hips beginning to pick up Yunho’s rhythm. “Please. Fuck me. Please. I need... you. Need you to... have me.”

“I have you, baby,” Yunho whispered, snicking his teeth on the already pinked flesh until it churned to purple against the black ink. “Even if I’m not inside of you, I have you.”

They rocked, joining together then pulling slightly apart. The motion slid them against one another, sweat moistening the heat between them. Hardened into a nearly painful want, Yunho slowed his thrusts when he felt the curl of his sac on his thighs. He wanted the night to last, needing to hear Jaejoong mumble his name until he was hoarse. Another dribble of gel on his shaft spread a cold numbness on his skin and he felt the rush of his orgasm pull back. Gripping Jae’s hips, Yunho held his lover still then began again.

The sounds of their sex grew wet and harsh, punctuated by Jaejoong’s exhalations when Yunho hit the kernel of nerves hidden in his channel. Held fast, he strained to meet Yunho’s thrusts, unable to do more than spread himself farther apart and drop to his shoulders, submitting to Yunho’s strokes. The sheets were wet from the sweat dripping from his chest and he ached to be filled. Every time he raised his hips in Yunho’s hands, the motion lifted him from the brush of the sheets’ folds, leaving his sex untouched and bare. His shaft’s tip cried with want, his seed dampening its slit.

Yunho kissed and bit Jae’s side, drawing up small slender welts on his ribs. As if reading his lover’s mind, he growled at Jae, “Don’t let go of the sheets. I want you to hold on as I take you. Let me touch you until you come. I want you to feel only me on and in you.”

Jaejoong could only mumble his asset then he almost screamed with relief when Yunho’s fingers closed over his sex, rubbing at the sensitive head. The satiny ridge running around his shaft was stroked and the spot beneath his pout tingled when Yunho’s thumb played with the area.

It didn’t take long before he felt the familiar clench of his stomach begin and the hardening of his sex’s sac as it prepared to spill. Needing his lover deep inside of him before he lost himself in a rush of pleasure, Jaejoong whimpered, hearing himself saying Yunho’s name over and over as if he were an answer to a prayer Jae held in his soul.

“Give me what’s inside of you, baby,” Yunho said, stroking at his lover as he took his own pleasure, thrusting hard into Jae’s deep warmth. His hand cupped, he caught Jae’s spill when the singer went over the edge of his climax, the force of the wave rocking his body with a quaking roll. The orgasm shook Jae’s muscles and the spasm clenched his centre tight around Yunho’s sex, pulling at the man until he followed Jaejoong into the swirling bliss.

“Fill...me, Yunnie-ah,” Jae gasped, holding himself tight around his lover’s sex, milking every drop he could from the other man’s release.

“Yours,” Yunho slid slowly in, filling the depths of Jae’s body. The rush of hot liquid worked into his lover, surrounding him as he fell forward to cover Jae’s prone form. Panting, the singer caught at his own breath, reveling in the feel of Yunho’s softening sex still inside of him.

“Yours,” Jae whispered, releasing the sheets when Yunho’s hands found his. Their fingers tangled, joining them as completely as their lovemaking. “Always yours. Your hope. Your angel.”

“My hope to the end,” Yunho agreed, the tremors moving through them both. “To the end, baby. To the very end.”

Twenty-Eight

“You let me fuck you before you told me about my mother?” Yunho’s wet face was painful for Jaejoong to see but the sight of the man’s tears numbed besides the anger in his voice. With hard flat eyes, he looked Jae up and down. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You...” Jae held his temper, holding his tongue tight against the roof of his mouth. There were murmurs in his mind, little whispers of anger winding out of the soft glow of his love for Yunho. The sharp barbs stabbed and dug in, whipping around in a frenzy in an attempt to get out and draw blood but he kept the words inside. He’d bleed out before hurting Yunho again. “I tried to talk to you. Do you remember me telling you we had to talk?”

“I can’t even look at you right now,” Yunho stood, tossing the phone onto the bed. “I’m so pissed off at you right now I could spit.”

The thorns bit in again and Jaejoong scored his teeth across his tongue, swallowing his pride and anger. Picking up a pillow and one of the fallen blankets, Jaejoong headed out to the living room, leaving Yunho behind. He’d barely tossed the linens onto the couch when the other man stomped out of their bedroom and down the hall.

“I was talking to you,” Yunho said, his teeth gritted together.

“No, you were yelling at me,” Jaejoong snapped back, then taking a breath in, he forced himself to be calm. “You...said you were mad. I was giving you some room.”

“I don’t want...” He paced around the love seat, coming quickly around the coffee table. Yunho’s hands were raised, nearly level with Jae’s shoulders and the singer tilted his chin up, warningly shooting his lover a stern look.

“You grab me and I’ll kick your ass,” Jaejoong said, holding his hand up to fend off Yunho’s advances. “Swear to God, I’ll take your balls and yank them off. I’m trying not to be pissed off so I left you in the room. Now, go away.”

“Why so you can call Gackt-kun? Or maybe go wake up Yoochun?”

The jealousy was cute when he wasn’t its target but standing in the middle of the living room with the soft, slightly painful ache of his lover still stretching his body, Jaejoong was in no mood to listen to Yunho’s envy. Picking up the pillow, he hefted its weight, debating how much damage he could do if he hit the other man across the head with it.

“You going to hit me with that?” Yunho challenged.

“I was thinking about it,” Jae admitted, dropping the pillow back onto the sofa. “But now, I think I’m going to tell you to fuck off and go to sleep. Change the sheets before you go to bed or you’ll end up sticking to them.”

“We’re not done.”

“I’m done,” He replied smoothly, slithering free from the waist of his drawstring pants. He let them drop to the floor, kicking them aside with his foot. Clothed only in his snug boxer-briefs, Jaejoong slid under the sheet he’d taken from their room floor and pulled it up to his chin. “Turn the hallway light off when you go back.”

“I said...” Yunho reached and Jaejoong turned, his snarl white in the living room’s darkness.

“Will the two of you decide either to fuck or fight?” Changmin grumbled sleepily from the hallway entrance, His hair stood up over his head, a fall of black hair covering his weary eyes. “Bam against the wall with the bed and then bam again with the door. Either keep me up with one or the other but not both.”

“He...” Yunho turned to their youngest, pointing a thumb back at Jaejoong. “This one kept my mother’s call from me.”

“You’re the one who needed to have sex before we could talk,” Jae pointed out dryly. “I’ve had sex. I’ve finished talking. Now I’m sleepy. Go away.”

“Are they fighting again?” Junsu mumbled, shuffling down the hall past Changmin.

If anything the singer looked more innocent half rumbled with sleep and mouth swollen from Yoochun’s kisses. Scrubbing his face, he blinked furiously at the uneven blobs of shadow and light in his way, forcing himself to focus his eyesight.

“Yes,” Min responded, moving his shoulder so the tenor could pass.

“Why?” Susu waved his hand in the air, dismissing the question. “Never mind. I’m going to make some juice and try to get back to sleep. I probably should bring back some juice for Chunnie. He’s going to wake up thirsty if he hears me drinking some and then push me out of the bed because he’s against the wall.”

“Should I wait for that bam too or is it going to be quieter?” Changmin sniped, rolling his eyes. “And Yunho, you just made up and Jaejoong told you something a little late. So what?”

“We didn’t just...”

“I heard you,” The young man replied. “The walls are thick and my bed is on the other far side of my room and I heard you.”

“People in China heard them,” Yoochun yawned, rubbing at his face. “Joongie-ah, next time, make sure Yunho closes the door.”

“Just deal with it,” Changmin ordered, moving aside again as Junsu came back. “We’re sick of it, hyung. If you have a problem with Jaejoong, pretend that you’re a man and deal with it quietly.”

“Oh, when he’s done being mad at Joongie-ah, he’s going to be mad at you, Min-Min.” Yoochun hooked his arm around his lover’s waist, inspecting the juice choices in the man’s hand. “Pomegranate? What does that taste like?”

“I don’t care if you get mad at me, Yunho. I just want to get some sleep.” Stalking after them, Changmin retreated to his room, his door closing behind him with a stern click.

“You sounded stupid,” Jaejoong said. “*This one kept my mother’s call from me.* You sound like a three year old. Stupid, stupid Yunho.”

“God you piss me off,” Yunho sighed, flopping down onto the couch over Jaejoong’s prone body. The lanky singer yelped, pushing at his lover with his feet until he worked free. “You do, you know. Piss me off, I mean.”

“You piss me off too,” He replied, pulling at the sheets. Exposing his legs, he rubbed at his ankle, wincing as his fingers probed a tender spot along the bone. Yunho drew the man’s leg into his lap, running his palm over the reddened area, absently rubbing away the hurt. “You yell at my head. It is tiring.”

“I’m sorry,” Yunho exhaled, his fingers circling Jae’s foot. Massaging at Jae’s arch, he worked the man’s muscles loose, rolling the foot around. “I get... my mother...”

“I know.” Stroking through Yunho’s hair, Jae threaded his fingers through the fringe around his lover’s eyes. “I *did* try to tell you but, baby, when you touch me, I have a hard time thinking and...”

“No, I do it too,” He admitted softly. “When I saw you lying on the bed, there wasn’t anything else in my mind but...I just wanted to slide into you. To feel you around me. When we’re together like that, the world only... it’s only as big as that bed.”

"I meant what I said," Jaejoong whispered, bending forward to keep their conversation low. "I don't like how jealous you get. Chunnie is my friend. He's the brother I never had and Gakkun did nothing but help us but the first thing you do is attack them."

"I know. I know..." Yunho hissed. "I hear my words and I think of my father."

"You can't blame all of your behaviour on your father, Yunnie-ah," Jaejoong said gently. "Your actions are *your* actions. I don't love your father. I love you but stop being an asshole. It makes it hard to talk to you."

They sat in silence, Jaejoong's heart trembling with the fear of his words in Yunho's mind. Yunho in turn stroked the tender skin of his lover's foot, his brow furrowed in thought. For a while the only sound was their breathing and the rain hitting the patio. With the glass door pulled open, a screen kept out any night flying bugs but the cool night air flowed through, carrying in the scent of a dewed-over Tokyo.

"I'm... sorry," Yunho said finally. He held himself in, keeping his words inside as he thought about what Jaejoong said. "I don't know what else to say."

"Yunnie-ah, we've... been together for years." The singer lifted his eyes, meeting Yunho's gaze. "I've spent too much of that time leaning on you... not standing on my own. That's...not right. I should be stronger..."

"If you get any stronger, Jaejoong," He scoffed. "You won't need me."

"Is that what this is? That you think I won't need you any more?"

"Isn't it? Isn't that ... I'm afraid that you won't need me if I step back... if I don't... push life back away from you." Yunho turned and placed his hands under Jaejoong's thighs. Pulling the young man forward, he waited until Jaejoong settled into his lap, crossing his legs behind Yunho's back. "I think that's... that's why I am here for you."

"You're here to love me," Jae kissed the scar on Yunho's cheek, tracking the line until he reached the corner of his lover's mouth, leaving a touch of his lips behind. "I don't need you to fight the world off for me. I'm here to love you. I'm... sorry I didn't say anything about your mother first. There's no excuse for..."

"Oh yes, there is," Yunho chuckled, hooking his hands together at the base of Jae's spine. "You haven't seen your naked body on red sheets. There wasn't going to be anything other than sex at that point. Believe me, you'd make a dead man want sex."

"You're very... aggressive," He smiled, ducking his head and laughing. "Sitting up is going to be difficult tomorrow."

"Aish, is this okay?" He shifted, settling Jaejoong into the crux of his crossed legs.

"Yeah, I'm okay," Jae slid his hips forward, the cleft of his ass rubbing against Yunho's sensitive sex. "Very okay."

"We should be talking," Yunho growled, biting Jae's collarbone briefly. "This is how we got distracted the first time."

"I admit, I like distracting you." Shrugging, Jae smiled but he stopped moving. "Did you have a good talk with your mother?"

"Yes," He replied, nodding. "She's left my father and took my sister with her. Hyung is upset and keeps trying to get her to come home but she's said she's not going to go until everyone in the family is welcome."

Rolling his breath in his throat, Jae puffed his cheeks. "She's talking about you?"

"And you," Yunho said softly. "My father... he's not happy about it and he's tried to cut her off from her money but my aunt is helping."

"We'll send her money." They'd banked what they earned for the most part, easier since most of their clothes and electronics were gifts from various companies.

“She refused.” The leader shook his head. “She wants to do this on her own. Mother said that she had stashed household money and allowances so she could walk away and be okay for a while. I made her promise to accept some help if it takes too long. I don’t want her to hurt because of me.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” Jae smiled. “Did she agree? Or was she your mother and fight you?”

“Ah, you know her well then?” He laughed. “She has a temper.”

“You’re like her,” His lover said. “Maybe you should look less inside of yourself for your father and more for your mother.”

“Probably,” Yunho admitted. “I need to... be nicer about Gackt. I know. And Yoochun, I can’t promise I’ll be nicer about him. He’s always in the way when I’m trying to get to you.”

“That’s Changmin,” Jae laughed. “I don’t know how you can confuse them. Minnie’s a lot taller. And he has sharper elbows. But no, you’re going to have to get used to Yoochun. He’s not going to go away. Any more than you are.”

“You finally believe me when I say that then?” Cocking his head back, Yunho studied his lover. Silhouetted by the hallway light, Jaejoong took an ethereal glow, his face pale despite the shadow cloaking his shoulders.

“I do,” Jae whispered. Taking Yunho’s mouth, he pressed his lips firmly on his lover’s. “I do.”

Jaejoong’s soft admittance would have to serve as their vow. Buried in their kiss, the words grew, filling them both. Slanting his head, Yunho deepened the kiss, capturing Jae’s promise to love him forever and carrying it into his heart.

“I love you, Boo,” Yunho said, pouring his soul into his words. “Every time I wake up and you’re next to me, I can’t think of any place I’d rather be.”

“Remember that next time someone suggests we don’t share a room,” Jae grumbled at him. “Or better yet, I’ll say something.”

“Understood,” He agreed.

“There’s something else that I needed to talk to you about. Gakkun...”

“The one I slandered?”

“Yes, that one,” Jae said. “He has a house in Okinawa and says that we can stay there.”

“And when are we going to have time for that?” Yunho laughed. “Our schedule is stacked on top of every minute.”

“Shizu said that we’ll be able to break away for a weekend.” He grinned at Yunho’s wide eyed look. “No really, he did. Maybe even next weekend.”

“Really? I think I can stand owing Camui-san another favour. He gave me back you. I owe him everything just for that.” He exhaled, pursing his mouth. “Ah, Okinawa. Do you remember the time we spent at that teahouse hotel? During the cherry blossom festival?”

“We shared strawberries.”

“And sex,” Yunho teased, playfully wincing when Jae hit his shoulder. “It was good sex.”

“It’s always good sex,” Jae grinned. “You wanted us to go fishing!”

“I think I told you that night that I have you in my heart, Every time it beats, I hear you whisper my name. You live there in me.”

“I remember.” Jaejoong regretted not holding that memory tight to his heart. “I promise, I’ll try not to keep any more secrets from you.”

“What about the ones you already have?” Yunho cocked his eyebrow.

“Those are mine,” Jae sniffed. “Besides, I’m not done with them yet.”

Twenty-Nine

Mushrooms were never one of Yunho's favourite foods. The offensive fungus ranked at the lower end of his food choices, right below deep fried soybeans and bitter melon. Yet standing at the patio door, he discovered there was something harder than even *goya* to swallow.

His own pride.

It's not to say that he didn't swallow his pride on a daily basis. There were times when he had to admit one of the other members was a better singer than he was or that Junsu mastered a dance quicker. But to approach someone and admit he'd been... overly prideful or arrogant, galled him.

Yunho'd waited a few days, mulling over his options and to see if the task got any more palatable. If anything, it soured the dish more and by the time he decided to act, nearly too much time had passed and he was close to losing his nerve.

But swallowing his pride was far easier than bowing to cowardice.

So while his heart was heavy and his feet dragged with each step, Yunho still forced himself to stand at the patio door and begin his inner torture.

They were so much alike, Yunho thought to himself, even down to their habits. Although alone, Yoochun echoed Jaejoong in so many ways. More open-faced than Jaejoong, it was easier to read what the baritone was feeling but other than that, they were near mirrors. If not for his broader face and thinner shoulders, Yunho would have easily mistaken Yoochun for Jaejoong.

One of the two of them dragged an old papasan chair onto the patio, its wide frame easily supporting the double-person cushion and the smaller pillows that somehow migrated outside as well. Curled up like a dragon on its treasure, Yoochun cupped his hand around a cigarette, lighting the end to draw in the first hint of smoke. The menthol scent was a bit of a surprise as both Jaejoong and Yoochun preferred the dark richness of an Indonesian clove but the minty hint wasn't unwelcome.

Not like the stone growing bilious in the pit of Yunho's stomach.

"Hey," Yoochun looked up, turning his head slightly to the side as he exhaled, blowing the smoke away from Yunho's face. "Joongie's inside, I think."

Skirting the rain falling from the patio overhang, Yunho edged over the wet cement, careful not to trip on Yoochun's discarded zori. Working his own footwear off, the leader climbed onto the low divan, tucking his feet under him to keep them warm.

"I... actually wanted to talk to you," He said.

Unlike Jaejoong, Yoochun's expressions were raw, a visible gauge of what he was feeling. Surprise dominated the man's amiable face the a flash of suspicion followed before being shuttered away. Tapping the ash off of his cigarette, Yoochun let it smolder, patiently waiting for Yunho to continue.

"Are you and Joongie alright?" His caring nature was never more evident than when another of the group was hurt, doubly so when that member was Jaejoong.

"You and Boo are... so much alike," Yunho shook his head, rubbing his hands together. The air had grown colder since he'd first started his seemingly long journey onto the patio, made longer by his hesitation and now he regretted not wearing socks. "You always worry about others before yourself."

Yoochun smiled knowingly and pulled a knitted blanket out from under him. "Here, I bring this out with me for my feet. Sometimes it's too cold even for me."

“Good to know,” He laughed, tucking the coverlet over his legs. “I worry we’re going to find Junsu-ah frozen into a block of ice some day.”

“I keep him warm,” Chunnie waggled his eye brows, bursting into laughter at Yunho’s slightly shocked look. “Oh, oh! Your face!”

“I have a hard time thinking about Junsu... or any of you like that,” Yunho frowned, winking at the younger man to ease the tension.

“You don’t have any trouble thinking about Joongie like that,” Yoochun teased, laughing harder when Yunho blushed. “Don’t worry, I know he thinks about you the same way. We talk about it.”

“Okay, *that* is nothing I want to hear,” He confessed with a wave of his hands. “You’re distracting me. I came out here to talk to you, not about Jaejoong.”

“Ah, sorry, Yunnie,” Yoochun replied, wiping a tear from the corner of his eye. “I’ll be serious.”

“Serious?” It was not something Yunho expected out of the baritone. Always emotional, Yoochun didn’t respond to situations with the solemn gravity Changmin exuded. He was more than likely to be passionately enthused or melancholy, his rich emotions running high. “I guess in a way it is about Jaejoong but really, it’s more... of an apology to you.”

“To me?” Yoochun rolled his amazement into a harsh scoffing noise. “An apology?”

“An apology,” Yunho asserted. “I think I’ve owed you one for a while now. I just... didn’t realize it.”

“What for?” The struggle to remember a slight was clear, especially when the younger man shook his head. “I don’t think so...”

“I’ve not... treated you well,” Yunho started. Yoochun opened his mouth but kept silent when the older man took his hands to hold. “Listen to me, Chunnie-ah.”

“Okay,” He nodded. It was difficult to speak with Yoochun’s intent gaze on his face and Yunho let his mind drift away from the patio, thinking back on how he felt about the other’s presence in Jaejoong’s life.

“When you first came to Korea... and became a part of the group,” Yunho started, “I was angry at first because I felt... threatened by your voice joining ours. Jaejoong pointed out my selfishness, reminding me that you were far from your family and I should treat you better. When you and he became close... very close, I burned with anger because Jaejoong was mine, even if I didn’t want to admit it at the time... and again, Jaejoong told me I should treat you better because you were someone he loved and were my friend.”

“Now, when I am angry at him, I throw your love with him into his face as a sign of his infidelity,” Yunho didn’t have to look at Yoochun to see the shock in his heart.

“I... we’re not...” He sputtered in protest. Squeezing the leader’s fingers in his, Yoochun leaned forward, earnestly objecting to Yunho’s words. “Yunnie-ah, you have to believe me! Jaejoong and I ... we’re... brothers”

“I know,” Yunho replied, patting Yoochun’s hands. “I am... unreasonable at times. Stubborn. Arrogant.”

“Sloppy,” Yoochun offered, his eyes sparkling with humour.

“Serious, remember?” He poked back.

“I think you’re serious enough for both of us.” The baritone leaned back, studying Yunho intently. “You gave me a heart attack. I thought you believed Jaejoong and I were... are...”

“No,” Yunho replied. “I know you’re not lovers but... there are times when the two of you are more intimate than... we are and I get...”

“Angry,” Yoochun supplied.

“Yeah, angry.” The world tightened around him, cutting off his breath. It was no longer cold, not under his skin. Sitting across of him was a man he’d always partially viewed as his rival, both in the group and in the heart of a lover. It was difficult to give up an anger he’d stoked to a hot white heat, even harder still to

hear his frustrations dealt with so casually. "I am sorry for being angry at you. Even more so because when Jaejoong goes to you, I should be glad he has someone he loves and trusts so much that he feels safe to talk to you. I understand that now...and I am very sorry."

"Did Joongie-ah ask you to talk to me?" He asked softly. "Because if he did, then the apology probably isn't what you want. Not if it was asked for."

"No," Yunho denied. "He doesn't know I'm talking to you. I thought I should at least tell you how I feel. This once at least."

"I get pissed off at you too." A shrug of Yoochun's shoulders dipped the baritone's body closer to Yunho, their knees touching. "Especially when you treat Jaejoong badly. I want to punch your face in but I can't. It's not my relationship and Jaejoong would be pissed off. I'd rather you be pissed at me than him. He's vicious when he's angry."

"Yeah, I've noticed," He said, touching the side of his face where Jaejoong struck him once. "I sometimes think he learned how to fight before he learned how to sing."

"He had to," Yoochun said. Noticing his cigarette had burnt down, he lit another, the lighter's flame splashing a yellow glow on his face. "But it's what makes Jaejoong who he is. He is fierce as much as he's gentle. I know that about him."

"I.. don't think I know who he is yet," Yunho admitted. "Or you either. I don't think I understand either of you."

"Me? I'm easy," He exhaled, letting the plume flow up into the overhang. "I'm a simple kind of guy. Good music, a couple of beers, good food and company. That's all I need. Jaejoong? He's more complicated. He needs... stuff for his soul."

"Eh?" Yunho cocked his head, staring at the other man. "The two of you are exactly alike! You drift off just like he does."

"Ah, when I lose my mind, I'm thinking about music and lyrics. When he does it, he thinks about bigger things," Yoochun corrected him. "I see dots and lines that make sound. Jaejoong... he's looking at the universe and turning it over in his mind. He thinks about things like why onions have no seeds inside of them or why fish have no eyelids. We talk about things like that when he's quiet...when his mind is quiet. It goes places that I didn't even imagine until he says something. He's deep sometimes. Like a pool of water that is black on the bottom. So many people think that it is mud but it's not, it is depth."

"I thought you said you don't think about these kinds of things?" Yunho gave the other man a curious look.

"I think about Jaejoong who thinks about those things and then shares them with me," He replied, taking another drag on his cigarette. "I admire him. I admire how far he's come from where he started. I wish I was as strong as he was sometimes but then, I see where he is broken and I think; 'Aish, do I want a strength that comes from being snapped apart?' Is it possible to be as strong as you should be if you've been broken through? No matter how well you've mended?"

Picking at a loose thread on the blanket, Yunho cast his eyes down. "I don't know. I never thought about it. I just... I've never thought about what Joongie has done to be here or where he's... been. I can't. I can't look into the past and not wonder if there was someone else that he's loved or had."

"Pffts," Yoochun dismissed the other man's worries. "You chew on things that are old. No wonder you're never satisfied! It's like chewing on a rock and expecting steak. Contemplate the rock but don't bite into it. Look at the past because it will help you understand what's in front of you but don't try to compare it to the present. You're borrowing trouble that's already passed us by!"

"You don't think I have enough trouble? You think I'm borrowing more?"

“Yeah, I think you’re borrowing more.” Another stream of smoke argued with the rain, the water passing through the furl and spinning curlicues. “You worry and fret about loving Jaejoong. Why can’t you just love him? Why are you worried about what I see when you should be thinking about what you see?”

Yunho stammered, unable to do more than confess his fears, “I...can’t trust what I see.”

“Why?” Yoochun slapped his arm lightly. “You’ve known him longer than I have. How can you not trust what you see? He loves you. He spends all of his time taking care of you...hoping that you’re happy. What else is there for the two of you? Isn’t that what love is? If you spend time taking care of the other person, equally and fully, while being the best person you can be... isn’t that love?”

“No. No...” He shook his head, refuting Yoochun’s words. “Love isn’t that simple.”

“No, you’re that simple,” The baritone scoffed. “Jaejoong has problems trusting, that’s true but you shouldn’t. Why should you? Why should you not trust him? Has he ever cheated on you? Has he ever looked at another man?”

“Cheating on me isn’t the...” Yunho trailed off, taking a deep breath. “How did you feel when you found out you were in love with Junsu? With another man?”

“Eh? What?” Yoochun sucked in air through his teeth. “You... you’re still hung up on Jaejoong being a man?”

“No, it’s not that,” He struggled, looking for something to give to the other man to help him understand. “Maybe. Maybe not. I love Jaejoong, with everything I have and sometimes I look at him and I see... someone, a person. Not a man. Not a woman. Just... Jaejoong. And I think I’m cheating him somehow by not... acknowledging what he is. By not seeing him as a man.”

“Jaejoong isn’t one thing or another, Yunho,” Yoochun said, gently rubbing at the other man’s shoulder. His heart plunged back down to his chest, its wild beating slowing as he realized Yunho didn’t care about Jae’s gender. “Jaejoong is... Jaejoong. All of us, we’re the ones with the problems. We’re the ones who have to take things that we like or do and put them in a boy or a girl pile. I used to think that I was... effeminate because I loved music so much. My... father told me once that only women loved music as much as I did. When I fell for Junsu, I thought; ‘Ah, he was right. I am more woman than man’.”

“Do you still think that?” He gave the baritone a sidelong glance.

“No, I am just... a different type of man than what my father had in his mind.” Yoochun shrugged, dismissing the man who abandoned him and his family. “I love a man who is my friend. Someone who can make me laugh and lets me cry at sad movies without feeling ashamed. How can that be wrong? Loving without shame ... a wonderful thing. Don’t carry someone else’s shame and guilt because you love. Jae told me that.”

“I wonder if... because I love a man, that I’m not as much of a man sometimes. There are times when I love Jaejoong so intensely, it hurts me inside as if there is something that needs to burst open... like a flower... but it is too tightly wrapped still.”

“Aish, you are the most man I know,” Yoochun laughed. “You are the kind of man that leads armies. One that people look to automatically when there is a decision to be made. Even when you are wrong, we immediately doubt our choices if they are against yours because you are a leader. You are the type of man that destiny gives a sword to and he carves out a path in the world. It’s just that you’ve fallen in love with... a mystery. Both man and woman but neither.”

“You are more confusing than some of Min’s books,” He grimaced at Yoochun. “How can he be both?”

“Jaejoong is... far above us in knowing who he is. He *knows* what type of person he is. His soul... it must be so old and so strong to take all of the battering that he’s been given. I think sometimes that he’s here for us to learn from because he does what he likes; whether it is cooking or snowboarding. It doesn’t matter to him. If he likes it, he does it. He doesn’t care what people think about the activity.”

“He is the person that I envy the most,” Yoochun admitted. “I’ve never met anyone who has lived as purely to who he is as Jaejoong. He loves who he wants and doesn’t hurt anyone to do it. I know it’s hard on the two of you because Jaejoong...and you... demand a pure honesty from the world. You expect it from yourselves as well and that’s hard when you have to hide. I feel guilty sometimes because I think you’re hiding for me...and for the others.”

“We are,” Yunho replied. “But also, for our families. We know that we can love one another without... making them deal with other people and their hatred. I don’t want my mother to be faced with someone’s hate because I love Jaejoong. It’s one thing for us to deal with it but not for someone I love to wear the mud hateful people will sling.”

“See, that’s what makes you a man,” The singer murmured, finishing his cigarette. Placing the end into a beaten up coffee can, Yoochun said, “That caring is a part of Jaejoong too. Because it’s important to you...and us... he will keep silent. Even if he wants to tell the world that he loves you, he will keep silent about it because in speaking his happiness, he’ll cause pain. And that goes both ways. It’s why he didn’t tell you about Kimura. Because if he talked about his pain, it would harm your happiness.”

“I wished he’d told me,” Yunho cursed, the words low and under his breath. “I hate knowing he... I hate knowing someone did that to him. I would have killed Kimura. I would have, Chunnie. For Jae. For the others he hurt.”

“I know,” Yoochun’s arms wrapped around his leader’s shoulders, tugging him into a fierce hug. “I do too. Or at least I would help you. Even if it’s to wash your hands when you’re done. I would do that for you, Yunho-ah.”

Yunho embraced him in return but pulled away after a moment. “This is awkward. I feel like by talking to you, I’m... trespassing on Jaejoong’s heart.”

“Don’t you have someone to talk to?” It was a gentle question, one that resonated in Yoochun’s heart. “Someone like I have in Jaejoong?”

“You think there are two Jaejoongs in this world?” Yunho whistled softly. “I don’t think the world could take it.”

“No, someone more like you,” Yoochun laughed. “Someone you can sit with who knows when you need to bitch about Jaejoong and when you need consoling?”

“No,” Yunho shook his head, his hair soft about his face. “No, not really. Guess I haven’t met someone stubborn enough yet.”

“Heh, maybe you will.” Clapping his friend’s shoulder, Yoochun smiled broadly. “Now, are the two of you going to take Gackt-san up on his offer?”

“To Okinawa? Yeah, I think so,” Yunho replied. “Did you want to go?”

“Okay, let me explain to you what it means when lovers go away to be alone for the weekend,” Yoochun said slowly. “You don’t invite other people along with you. Aish, might as well bring fishing poles.”

“Oh ho! So he told you about that,” He snorted. “Not one of my better moments.”

“No, you were just... trying to let him be a man,” Yoochun corrected. “But Yunho, you have to let Jaejoong be the man he is, not the man you think he should be. It’ll be easier that way. Guide him with your heart. Watch where he steps but don’t forget to let him wander. He’s a gypsy. In mind and spirit. You can’t tame that and if you did, it would kill him.”

“His wildness is what drew me in,” Yunho replied. “And his eyes. I look into his eyes and it’s like... I have the night sky under my kisses.”

“Pfah, and they say I’m the romantic,” He chuckled. “Go to Okinawa. I think Junsu and I are going back to Korea for the weekend. There are soccer matches that are playing and he wants to go. His mother thinks it’s time we should go visit because she needs to make sure he’s eating enough.”

“I don’t want to leave Changmin alone,” The leader in Yunho surfaced, fretting about their youngest.

“Are you kidding?” Yoochun cackled, pushing Yunho over until he fell back into the papasan’s wide cushion. “He can’t wait to be alone. I told him Susu-ah and I were going to Korea and he looked happier than when he finds a good book.”

“I just don’t want to leave him alone and he gets into trouble,” Yunho said, shaking his head.

Sliding forward, Yoochun searched for his zori, finding one turned upside down under the chair. Flipping the rubber sandal over, he looked at Yunho and grinned. “How much trouble can he get into? Really, Yunho, it’s not like he’s going to go out and have wild sex with someone. The worse that can happen is that he burns some of his food. Don’t worry. It’ll be fine.”

Thirty

To the Dong Bang boys, airport delays were something nearly as frequent as being served foreign food someone expected them to eat with a smile on their face. Losing his temper would be unseemly. Both Yunho and Jaejoong knew that wearing a public face came with a steep price, bound by invisible threads of social courtesies as if they were puppets of an unseen malevolent master.

Although frequent and expected, it still didn't make dragging their luggage back and forth any easier.

Jaejoong packed light, a simple duffel and a bag. Yunho went a bit heavier, his suitcase a bulky weight in his left hand that he dragged behind him by its retractable handle. The elevator ride up was quiet, a comfortable silence filled with hot glances and murmured loves. Once inside the apartment, they left the luggage by the door, hoping to catch the next plane in the morning. Their manager knew of their plans, thoughtfully extending their time off and Jaejoong was glad to collapse on the couch, wriggling his toes against the cool wooden floor.

"Do you know where Changmin is?" Yunho asked, coming down the hall. "He's not in his room."

Jaejoong's heart skipped up into his throat, a skittering frightful thing. He shook his head and dug through his bag for his phone but by the time he found his cell, Yunho was already in the kitchen and dialing up their youngest. For a second, Jaejoong had a brief fantasy that Min wouldn't answer or that he'd somehow fallen asleep some place in the apartment that Yunho hadn't looked but his blood chilled to a stop when he heard Yunho's anger burst open.

"We came home and found you weren't here." Jae winced at the heat in Yunho's voice. "Where the fuck are you, Changmin and who the hell is lover?"

Jaejoong considered his options. He could call Se7en and ask the man to leave Japan but the airport was fogged in so he'd not get far. He'd just worked through the end of his choices, coming up with an insane plan to seduce Yunho from his phone call using a skimpy black thong and caramel sauce when Yunho stalked into the living room, his cheeks flushed red.

"Dongsaeng, did you hear me?" His voice was sharp and Yunho glared at the patio door as if the glass pane could give him answers. "Where are you?"

The seduction option was out. Yunho wouldn't see him even if he'd stripped naked and danced in front of him. Sighing heavily, Jaejoong mentally braced himself for Yunho's next outburst. He tried to shush his lover, concerned about the rise in Yunho's colour.

"Is that why you're not here? Because we're supposed to be in Okinawa?" Yunho asked, waving off Jaejoong's shushing. "Where are you? Answer me, Changmin."

Whatever was going on at the other end of the phone wasn't making Yunho any happier. The tap of his bare foot began, a sure sign of Yunho trying to control his temper. His chest broadened, taking a deep breathe to calm himself.

"Come home now, Minnie-ah." Yunho gritted his teeth, catching Jaejoong's eye. The leader exhaled, pursing his lips at his lover in a sign of extreme annoyance. "You're too young to be out like this. Tell whoever you're with that you're leaving. I'll come get you."

"Dong-wook? Is that fucking Dong-Wook?" He spat, almost choking on his own tongue. "Is that Choi Dong-Wook I hear?"

Jaejoong stood quickly, ready to intervene if Yunho needed mouth to mouth. His lover narrowed his eyes, glancing at Jaejoong standing at the end of the couch. "Did you know he was seeing Choi?"

“Se7en? That Choi” Jaejoong whistled under his breath. “Damn. Really? I had my money on Hyukjae. Of course maybe you’re talking about Tempo?”

“You knew about this? You knew he was seeing someone? And you know I’m not talking about Choi Seung Hyun! You *heard* me say Dong-Wook!” Yunho growled. “What the hell is going on? He’s barely old enough to drive much less...”

“Yunho. Yunnie-ah, calm down,” Jaejoong said, exhaling the breath he’d held for too long. It tasted sour, a bitterness flavoured with fear for Min’s heart. “Changmin isn’t... he’s old enough to make his own decisions. They are his choices, Yunnie.”

“They are *not* just his choices, Joongie,” Yunho gritted his teeth. “Dong-Wook isn’t...”

“He’s not one of us,” Jae replied softly. “You’re frightened for Min because he’s outside of the group? Because we don’t know him well enough to trust him? Is that it?”

“Can you trust him? Do you trust him?” Yunho asked, turning to face his lover. “I can’t let Min destroy us.”

“He would never... do anything to hurt the members, Yunho!”

“He wouldn’t.” The anger in Yunho’s face faded, replaced by something colder and deadlier. “But Se7en might. Suppose he says something about Min? About Min’s relationship with him? Suppose he says something about us? How are we going to protect the members from someone outside of us?”

“Minnie-ah?” Jaejoong spoke over Yunho’s ear. Holding his hand out to his lover, he demanded the phone. “Let me talk to him, Yunnie.”

“No,” Yunho shook his head, turning his attention back to their youngest. “I’m coming to get you, Changmin.”

The conversation disintegrated from Jaejoong’s standpoint. There were tears in Yunho’s eyes, glittering hard diamonds ready to cut into a welling sorrow. “I promised your mother that I’d look out for you, Minnie-ah.”

Just when Jae thought the matter couldn’t get any worse, Yunho said, “I don’t like Choi. How do you know that he’s not doing this because he wanted Jaejoong? And you’re an easy way to get back at me and Joongie-ah?”

“Give me the phone before you make more of an ass out of yourself,” Jae hissed.

“Don’t hang up until I’m done with you.” Yunho barked to Min. “Hold on. Jaejoong wants to talk to you.”

“Minnie-ah,” Jaejoong ignored Yunho pacing the living room and spoke softly to their youngest. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Please, I’m okay. Really.”

“If he says he’s okay then he’s lying,” Yunho growled. “Fucking Se7en seduced him. You know what he’s like. You’ve heard the stories, Jaejoong. He makes a whore look like a nun!”

Jae sighed and begged a moment from Changmin. Pointing to the kitchen, he ordered Yunho out of the living room. “Yunho, stop it. Go make us coffee or tea. Just stop walking around me.”

With Yunho out of the way, it was easier to listen to Changmin tell him about how he felt about Se7en, the tentative steps towards a love steeped in a sweet friendship. Sighing, Jae rubbed at his forehead, the lack of sleep and erupting drama tightening a headache over his temples but he wished it away, needing to listen to their youngest explore his feelings.

“He makes me feel...special, Joongie-ah. I’ve not felt special for a very long time. And never like this.” Changmin’s whisper broke Jae’s soul. It was clear the younger man denied his love for Dong-Wook, even as he confessed it using slanted words. “And even if he breaks my heart, it’s going to be my heart, not any one else’s.”

“You sound like you’re in love, Min.” Jaejoong looked up towards the kitchen area where Yunho stood, his face now white with shock.

Even though he wished love for Changmin, Se7en’s reputation for being a playboy was legendary around the industry. Known for his casual attitude and intense passions, there were strings of broken hearts and unrequited loves left in Se7en’s wake. Jaejoong didn’t want Changmin to join them.

He heard the door close, a hard rattling sound against the frame. A quick spot check on the wall confirmed Jaejoong’s suspicions. Yunho had taken the keys to the rarely used car the company leased for them. The headache tapping on his forehead bloomed, working down around his eyes and back around his head.

“Shit,” Jae muttered. It was one of the few English words he knew by heart and its coarseness felt good on his throat. Warning Changmin, he told the younger man he loved him and hung up. His temper felt unsatisfied so he fed it again, cursing hard and long. “Stubborn, fucking asshole.”

Yunho was gone and Jaejoong’s gut told him he’d left to kill Se7en.



His rage never went cold. It burned hot and poured from him like liquid rock from the depths of an angry world. When Yunho stood across of Se7en, his gut clenched in around a block of ice and the chill of his rage spread through him, creeping along his nerves like winding frost into his limbs.

Se7en moved about his kitchen, its whiteness too bright for Yunho’s tired eyes. Weary from the aborted trip to the airport, fatigue dragged at Yunho’s body but the callous way Se7en tapped tea leaves into a strainer and dipped the steep into hot water.

The punch to Se7en’s face felt good. Even as the blow jarred up Yunho’s arm and rocked his shoulder, it felt damned good to punch the smug smile from the other man’s face. From the expression on Se7en’s face, he’d not been prepared for the hit and for a moment, Yunho felt a shred of guilt about hitting a man unprepared for it.

Then he remembered the shivering in Jaejoong’s body when his lover crossed over to join Yunho’s team and the anger flared up again, fresh and new in the cold of his nerves. Torn free from Se7en’s arms, Jaejoong collapsed his shoulders against Yunho, clinging to the other man and leeching some warmth from Yunho’s body.

No, the punch felt damned good. And Yunho’s fist itched to do it again. Even when the pain across his knuckles finally registered.

Surprisingly, Se7en didn’t strike back. The other man merely looked up at him from where he landed, sprawled amid a tumble of segmented shelves. Standing looked painful for Se7en and when he touched the swell on his cheek, Yunho’s ego crowed in triumph and took flight.

A very short lived flight when Se7en stood in front of him and muttered, “I’m going to be Changmin’s lover for as long as he’ll let me. I think I’m in love with him, Yunho. And I don’t want to let him go.”



He sat in the car, staying at the curbside and rested his head on the steering wheel. The car was comfortable and Yunho debated climbing into the back seat and sleeping off the night’s drama but Jaejoong probably was still awake and fretting. Especially, Yunho gritted his teeth in guilt, after he left his cell phone in Jae’s hands and stormed out the door.

His nose was filled with the scent of leather, the car’s seat slightly damp from his damp jeans. Outside, the rain continued to hammer at the city, sometimes with soft taps and other times with harsh sheets but the sky never broke open to show the stars. Fog rose up around him, streamers of steam from the street’s warm gutters and it cloaked the car from view, hiding it against the side of the building.

The tap on the window scared the melancholy out of him and Yunho jumped, hitting his head on the door frame. Jaejoong pressed his face up close to the passenger side window, huddled under a hoodie and pointing at the depressed door lock. Fumbling, Yunho popped the locks open, holding his hand out for Jaejoong to grab. Helping his lover into the car, he pulled the sodden sweat jacket from Jae's body and tossed it into the back seat.

"The rain is cold," Jae said, a shiver racking his body. His lips were edged with blue and alarmingly, he seemed whiter than usual. "It almost feels like snow."

"Come here," The bucket seats didn't allow much room to cradle his lover and Yunho cursed, turning around to pull the wet jacket onto the floor. "Get in the back seat. I'll turn on the heater and join you in a second."

Crawling between the seats, Jae tumbled into the back, holding his hands over the heater vent as he used his heels to work his sneakers off. Frowning at his damp socks, he yanked those off as well, moving out of the way when Yunho crawled behind with him.

"Okay, now come here," Yunho said, pulling Jaejoong in close. The singer was too thin, in Yunho's opinion. His wrist bones were too visible and when Yunho slid his hands under Jae's shirt, he could feel his ribs. "You need to eat more, baby."

"I eat plenty," Jae grumbled. "I'm just working harder than I'm eating."

"I don't believe you." Cradling the singer in his lap, he settled a string of gentle butterfly kisses along Jae's lower lip. "We'll get you something to eat before we go to bed."

"Is it going to be a long time before we go to bed?" Jae tilted his head, resting against Yunho's shoulder. With his back against the other man's chest, he snuggled in, putting his hands on Yunho's arms when they wrapped around him.

"Yeah, I think so," Yunho said. "I think we need to talk... about a lot of things."

"Are you pissed off?" The rain made Jaejoong sleepy but the heat of his lover behind him woke up parts of him he rather liked.

"Yeah," He admitted softly. "Surprisingly, not as pissed off as I was a little while ago but still pissed off. How long have you known about Se7en and Minnie-ah?"

"Um," Jae counted off the weeks, losing track after a few months. Time blurred behind their activities and he had to stop and think about what day it was. "I don't know. A long time. Changmin doesn't know. The only reason Se7en does is ... because I called him to ask him what he was doing. I saw them and I got... scared for Changmin."

"Ah," Yunho drawled. "Deceit, your name is Jaejoong. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Ouch," Jae winced. "Because you'd act... crazy and drive off to kill Dong-Wook?"

"I didn't kill him," The other man countered. "Min probably laid him out. He looked pretty pissed off when I left."

"You left him there? Aish." Hissing, Jaejoong puffed his lips out.

"He wanted to be left there," Yunho protested when Jae hit his leg. "He's a big boy. He's been sneaking out and having sex with Dong-Wook! Well almost sex. I don't know. I don't want to know."

"You're going to have to get over that," His lover said. "Changmin... Se7en thinks he is in love with Min. I think Min loves him back."

"No." Shaking his head, he tightened his grip on his lover's slender body. "No, Min can't be in love with Dong-Wook."

"Because Se7en's a guy?"

“Yes,” Yunho yelled when Jae’s teeth sank into his arm. “Hey, I have opinions. And I’m still pissed off you didn’t tell me.”

“I didn’t tell you because... I wanted Min to have... a secret. His own secret.” Jaejoong explained, his tongue lapping up the wet he’d left on Yunho’s skin. “He needs some room to be... Changmin. Everything we are is boxed up into these preformed packages and Min... he doesn’t fit into his. He is looking to find himself and that means, maybe falling in love. Even if it is Choi Dong-Wook.”

“I don’t want it to be Choi Dong-Wook,” Yunho grumbled. “I kind of hoped Changmin would... find a nice girl who loved him. Someone sweet who nodded when he said something and acted like he hung the moon for her. I didn’t want him to fall in love with another man. I didn’t want that for Changmin. I wanted... him to love.. different.”

“Different than us?” Jae heard his voice falter, an icy sheet in the cold rain.

“Yeah.” Yunho kissed the back of his lover’s head.

“Are you ashamed of me?” It hurt to ask but the words needed to be said. They hung there between them, bloated heavy things that tore into Yunho’s heart with prickly spears. “Is that what you mean?”

“I had a lot of time to think when I drove around, lost because I couldn’t find how to get home. So I’m going to tell you what I think and how I feel,” He said, holding the stiff, too tight body of his lover. “And if I get the words wrong, please understand that... I’m trying. I’m trying very hard to be honest with you.”

“Okay,” Jae replied. “I’ll try.”

“Good, because it’s all we’ve got, baby,” Yunho said, shifting in the seat. “I mean, different. Different as in... a woman. Yes, I hoped he would love a woman. Not because I’m ashamed of you. I love you. We both know why we have to stay ... hidden. You agreed to that.”

“True.” Cocking his head, he moulded himself further into Yunho’s sloping form. “Okay, I’ll agree to that.”

“Too late. You already did,” He replied. “Lean your head to the side. I need a kiss.”

“If we start that, you’ll not continue explaining why loving Dong-Wook is wrong,” Jae said but he tilted his head anyway, moaning when Yunho’s tongue pushed past his lips and tangled around his own. His slumbering length woke up again, filling with want in response to Yunho’s fingers roaming over his chest. Yunho’s fingernails found Jae’s nipples, plucking them to a ripe peak as he took a deeper possession of his lover’s mouth.

“Ah, that’s better,” Yunho growled, licking at the edges of Jae’s mouth before pulling away. “I’ve been wanting to do that for hours now.”

“We could have been doing more than that if you’d stayed,” Jaejoong pointed out, a satisfied glow warming his belly. “Instead, you ran off to yell at Se7en but continue, I want to know why you think Min should love...differently than we do.”

Yunho debated telling Jaejoong about punching the other man in the face but decided to leave that part of the encounter out. Jae didn’t deserve to be the only one with secrets. “Changmin’s... private. He’s a private person. If he finds joy, I don’t want him to hide it. And no, I didn’t want him loving a man. I know how hard it is. I didn’t want that for him. I didn’t want him to feel the pain we feel.”

“His family isn’t...” Jaejoong twisted slightly, looking up at Yunho’s face. “His family is more progressive. They would never turn him aside...”

“Like ours have?” Yunho asked, unable to keep the bitterness from his tone. “It’s the first thing I thought of, Joongie-ah. I didn’t want Changmin to crawl back to his parent when Dong-Wook hurts him...when Dong-Wook hurts us.”

“You’re so certain that Se7en is going to expose us. Why?”

“Because he’s careless,” The man answered. “Because he loves people... not just women but men too. Tell me you’ve not heard the stories about him. You’re friends with Tempo and Ji. Can you tell me they haven’t boasted about Se7en’s fuck-and-dump stories?”

“No, we haven’t talked about...” Jaejoong looked guilty, hiding his face and Yunho pounced.

“You did talk about Se7en with them,” He bit back an angry retort. “You asked about him when you found out about he and Min hooking up.”

“A little bit,” The singer admitted, his hair falling into his eyes. “But that was a long time ago. He’s been...celibate for months now. Ever since he’s been seeing Min.”

“Months?” Yunho took hold of Jae’s chin and turned his head until he could stare into the man’s grey-veiled eyes. “*Months?* The whole time you knew?”

“I didn’t know for that long,” Jae pulled himself free of his lover’s grip, slapping away Yunho’s hand. “Stop being an asshole.”

“People probably wonder how I hold onto my sanity being around you,” Yunho kept his curses low, ruffling Jae’s hair with his words. His temper still burned a hole in his stomach. The presence of Jae on him made the world warmer, softened in the rain and blurred on the edges but his worries still floated in his mind. “I’m worried. I don’t trust Dong-Wook. He... he’ll know about us. Hell, he probably knows about us. About... shit, Jaejoong!”

“You tell lovers things. I do, at least. I don’t know about you sometimes,” He said, hissing when Jae pinched his the skin on his wrist. “Min will tell him things about the group... about how we are. Things we don’t want him to know. Things we don’t want anyone to know.”

“We have to trust Changmin,” Jae whispered, shaking his head. “I have to trust Dong-Wook. We do. He has as much to lose as we do, even if he is more cavalier about his loves than we are.”

Yunho sighed and shook his head, doubting Jae’s faith. “How do you suppose he has much to lose? He can break us apart. He can bring Dong Bang Shin Ki down.”

“No one can bring us down,” Jae replied, the fire of his soul burning in his eyes. “We’ll be the first ones to know if Dong-Wook betrays Changmin’s trust and we’ll be the first ones to act on that betrayal. I learned a lot of things from Kimura... from what he did but I found out how much I love all of you and how far I will go to protect you.”

“Me too, baby,” Yunho agreed, kissing the beauty mark on Jae’s throat. “Anything for you. Anything for the others.”

“Anything,” Jae murmured, resolute and firm. “And that includes making sure Dong-Wook pays if he hurts Changmin. I promise you, lover, he will be very sorry. We will make him wish he were dead. He will pray for it.”

“You frightens me when you talk like that, baby,” He grinned, pulling Jaejoong down until the singer was stretched out on the wide back seat. “And scarily enough, it kind of turns me on too.”

Thirty-One

The nightmare came without warning. It struck hard, lightning fast through Jae's dreaming mind. Cold hands touched his back, the inside of his thighs and moved quickly, forcing his legs open. He could feel his mouth was open but no sound came loose from his tight throat. Fear kept him silent and a strange fog filled his mind. Something sticky kept him from thinking and his limbs wouldn't cooperate. A sour film covered his tongue, an odd combination of vomit and chemicals, and no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't scrape the taste off.

Yunho woke with the first murmur. He'd spent nights lying in a half-dozing state, listening for the whimpering almost-scream of his lover as he fought with his dream-demons. Over time, the episodes became less frequent and Yunho almost believed they were gone when one would capture Jae's sleep and the terrors would begin again.

Jaejoong never woke from the horrors trapping him. A touch on his shoulder curled the singer into a ball, shivering and pleading to be left alone. Yunho's heart broke time and time again when he tried to shake the other from his nightmares only to be seen as his attacker. Soft words did nothing but quiet the murmurs down, a low sibilance as Jae begged into his clenched fists. He never struck out, not until the very end of the dream and even then, the flailing was graceless as if the man were trapped in water, without full control of his body.

It made Yunho wonder if Kimura drugged Jaejoong into senseless in order for the young man to stand his touch. It also sickened Yunho to wonder if Kimura was able to do more than Jae remembered and the dreams were the echoes of nearly-forgotten pains. Either way, Yunho wasn't going to poke at the nightmare more than he had to in order to break its grip on Jae's mind.

Risking Jae's fear returning full force, Yunho skimmed his hand over the other man's bare arm. "Joongie-ah, wake up."

He shook the man lightly and as he feared, Jaejoong tightened, pulling his knees up to protect his belly. His fingers clenched into fists, Jae tossed his head aside, trying to get away from Yunho's mouth and hand. Rocking in place, Jaejoong slid from his nest of pillows, the sheets tangled around his legs and imprisoned his body in a cotton cocoon.

"No." Words broke free from the unintelligible whimpers, escapees from the horror. "No...not... yours."

"Baby, please." If Jaejoong was trapped in a dream world he couldn't wake from, Yunho was caught in the thrall of a nightmare he thought would never end. Turning Jaejoong over onto his back, he desperately pressed his lips to Jae's, breathing a kiss into his lover's mouth. "Boo, please... let go. Wake up for me, okay? Please?"

"Yun?" A sob fractured Yunho's name and Jaejoong blinked, trying to focus on the face hovering over him. He recoiled, drawing back with fear, unable to see clearly. "No..."

"Baby... BooJae... please, honey," The man pled, his heart pouring into his sleep roughened voice. "Come back to me. Please."

Another blink and Jae's eyes flew open, black and consuming in his pale face. A scream lay on his tongue, partially formed and caught on the roof of his mouth, a hiccup of a sound he forced out with a whimper. Shaking violently, he tried to sit up but his body refused to respond, locking him still. Frightened and out of control, he fought the seizure, shivering and panting in a frenzied panic.

"I've got you," Yunho whispered, tucking his arm under his lover's knees. Supporting Jae's back with his forearm, he lifted him easily from the bed, dragging him up out of the sweaty sheets and into the cooler night air.

Jaejoong continued to squirm, sleep reluctant to give up its victim. The nightmare clung to him, spider web thick on his mind and he gasped, pushing aside the memories of a dead man's hands on his back. A terrible shudder ratcheted his spine, working through his frozen joints and twisting his muscles into firm knots. Lying in Yunho's lap, he jerked askew, a broken doll cast aside by a thoughtless, cruel child.

"Hey baby... baby," Yunho crooned, his words nonsensical and soothing. He kept the patter up, seeking to comfort the other man. His voice broke, shattered under the stress of trying to pull Jaejoong back from the edge of fearful insanity. Struggling with his own tears, Yunho shifted the other man and strained to find something to say... anything to anchor his lover into the present.

Yunho reached for something they shared, a memory of a sound that seemed so far away, something they'd sung to one another at a time when they denied their passions. For the life of him, he couldn't remember the beginning, murmuring the melody until his mind relaxed enough and the words flowered from his memory.

*I want to send you these feelings.... Oh baby,
For some reason, I can't tell you the truth, I can't say it
Even though it's just a feeling...If I say it aloud
Everything might disappear ...ooooooh
My arms are open wide, For yooooou
To be held
I want to hold you
But for me, Something is missing
I continue to shake, Because I'm unable to share my feelings
I love you*

"You had to sing it in Japanese?" Jaejoong murmured, folding his arms around Yunho's. He hugged the embrace, turning slightly to slide his hands around his lover's waist.

"It was all I could remember," Yunho admitted ruefully, rubbing his nose. "It's been in my head for so long now, I think it's the only version I know."

"It's okay," He replied softly. "I like that version better. Thanks."

"Wait here." Yunho slid out from under Jaejoong, flicking a scone to its lowest setting and padded over to the bathroom. He returned moments later, holding a cool damp cloth. "Sit up, babe."

Jae pulled himself free of the sheets, shaking them off of his ankle. Closing his eyes, he nearly purred as his lover ran the wet cloth over his back. Blowing on the wet swath, Yunho worked the washcloth over Jae's shoulders and over to his chest, moving around the young man's body until the flush was gone from his skin. The cloth was nearly dry by the time he reached Jae's feet, the terrycloth tickling the spaces between the singer's toes.

"No...no," Jaejoong's laughter sang in the room, soaring as Yunho covered his pinkie toe with the washcloth and rubbed it back and forth as if he were polishing a melon. "That tickles. Yunnie-ah!"

"Come here." Yunho tossed the cloth to the side, letting it fall somewhere on the floor. Opening his arms, he held Jaejoong against him, rocking the other man with a slight sway. "I love you, Joongie-ah. And whenever you need me, I'll be here."

"I know..." He mumbled, his face buried in Yunho's thin shirt. Wrapping himself around Yunho, he let go of the final sob he held in his breast, the broken harsh sob a fleeting sound under Jae's bitter laughter. "I just feel... dirty. Like I can't ever get clean."

"That's normal," The other man said. Jae looked up at his lover, curious at the statement. "Don't look at me like that. I... um... read some things."

"Eh?" Jaejoong looked at the man dubiously. Yunho was not known for his extensive reading, preferring more physical activities although lately, he'd been picking up more and more literature to keep himself occupied. "What did you read?"

"Some... booklets," He responded with a shrug. "And a book. About..."

Jae pressed in, "About...what?"

"I thought it would help if I understood what you were going through," Yunho shrugged again, trying to shake off the embarrassment of his lover's curiosity on him. "I read!"

"I know you can read," Jae teased. "I just didn't know you did."

"For you, I did," He responded with a teasing indignant sniff. "There wasn't a lot I could find. And I was stuck with mostly Korean but... Chunnie helped me a bit. There was more in English but I didn't... I couldn't make out the translations."

"You read about... me?" The young man sat up, cocking his head to study the blush across Yunho's cheekbones. "How so?"

"About how men deal with... monsters like Kimura," Yunho kept his voice low. Admitting his helplessness hurt and telling the man he loved that he had been useless to help him stung his pride. "I needed to understand how you felt and... what I should...what I could do to make you feel better."

"What did the books say?" Crossing his legs at his ankles, Jae hugged himself, unsure if he was willing to listen to his lover talk so openly about the horror he'd experienced. Ever curious, his flaw got the best of him and he pressed in closer to Yunho's side, encouraging the other man to continue talking. "Tell me. What?"

"That you'd feel like you weren't... good enough to be around the people who loved you." Yunho shook his head. "And see, that's stupid because you were too good for me to begin with. If anything, this made you even stronger. I look at how you survive everything the world has thrown on your shoulders and I... can't think... I can't imagine what you went through. I can't."

"I don't want to even think about it," Jae admitted, his voice softened with tenderness. "I... I'm not that strong. Why did you... go looking?"

"Because of nights like this. Because I needed to know what to do when you couldn't scream when you wanted to...when you needed to," He said. Reaching up, he cupped Jaejoong's face, holding the other man's chin up so he could gaze into his lover's warm brown eyes. "Because I needed to understand. I needed to know what happened to you...inside so I could help you."

"Just being here helps me."

"No, it doesn't," Yunho replied, stroking at the man's jaw with the flats of his thumbs. "Not if you still are afraid to go to sleep because Kimura comes to you in the dark. I wanted to kill him, over and over again every time you made a noise in the middle of the night and I couldn't do anything but lie here and hold you...whenever you let me."

"I read everything I could. Some of it, I threw away because it was written by someone stupid enough to blame the person who... was attacked. Like they did something to cause it. I know that's not true," The man rejected Jaejoong's nodding agreement. "It's not, Jaejoong. It's not true. You...and everyone else who this happened to didn't ask for it. You didn't ask Kimura to touch you...to force you to give him a part of yourself. You didn't give yourself to him. It makes me sick to think you believe that."

“I... I should have been stronger...”

“You were strong enough to tell him no,” Yunho replied. “That should have been all there was but no, he was sick and needed to... overpower you. To push you into something you didn’t want. That’s not lovemaking...that’s not even sex, Joongie-ah. That’s what rape is. It’s the taking of your body to hurt you...to break your mind and heart. It has nothing to do with your body or how beautiful you are. Because you are beautiful, Joongie. You’re even more beautiful because you told that son of a bitch to fuck off and even after everything that he did... you turned around and said...no.”

“I couldn’t stop him, Yun...” Jae bit at his lip, breaking from Yunho’s hands to look away. “I can’t even stop him in my sleep.”

“It will take time,” He confessed. “All of the decent books said it would but that it would be okay if you were willing to try.”

“Try what?” Looking up, Jae’s anger glittered alongside his fear. “What the hell else am I supposed to try to do?”

“Forgive yourself,” Yunho replied. “Let yourself be forgiven and know that you couldn’t stop Kimura if you tried. He maneuvered you into where he needed you to be. You weren’t the first one he’d attacked. I think he drugged your water with something... there are things that make you unable to react... and people like him can probably get it pretty easily. But even then, he used his position as our manager... our protector... to abuse you.”

“I knew better... I’d seen boys...down at Itaewon,” Jae explained, refusing to let go of his guilt. “I knew that he was trying to get me to do something. Not at the beginning...but later when it felt... wrong. I knew, Yunho. I just felt... like I couldn’t stop him.”

“That’s because he knew what he was doing. It’s called *grooming*, baby. That’s when someone gets you to trust them then they abuse that trust by molesting you.” Taking Jae’s hands, Yunho kissed the other man’s fingertips, looking over his knuckles until Jae looked back. “You are innocent in this, Joongie. He took advantage of your nature and then your body. Then tried to keep you quiet because you weren’t...because you didn’t break down enough for him. I think he was afraid of you, Joongie, because you’d be his downfall... because you were stronger inside than he thought.”

“I don’t feel stronger.” He clutched a pillow to his chest, then smiled when he realized it was Yunho’s battered plush deer. The oversized toy smelled of the man, sharp green teas and musk with a hint of the vanilla soap they shared. He inhaled its scent, holding it in. “I feel like I’m always clinging to you. Like I need you to make me... feel worth something. And sometimes I think about... what it would be like to be anyone else... anyone other than me.”

“That’s normal, Boo,” Yunho replied. “Or I think it is. I started reading when... you would cuddle up against me and then push me away. I needed to understand why. Or at least, tried to figure out why. So, I read. And I tried listening to you but I wasn’t good at it. I’m sorry, Boo that I didn’t... work harder to help you. I failed you there.”

“I don’t want to talk about it anymore, okay?” Rolling over onto his side, Jae hugged the toy tighter, squeezing its elongated body. “I just want to get some sleep and... maybe tomorrow...”

“Maybe tomorrow we can talk some more,” Yunho turned off the light, splashing the room into darkness. The street lamp outside provided a soft amber wash from the window and he touched Jae’s shoulder. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Jae mumbled into the deer’s fur. “But... if it’s okay, I just want you to hold me right now. I just need to feel you right now.”

“Sure, baby,” Yunho murmured. He slid down, tucking his legs up into the back of Jae’s thighs and pulled lightly on the other man’s hips until Jae nested into his curve. “I’m right here, Joongie. I’ll always be right here.”



The phone rang, a sharp trill that jarred Jae from his restless sleep. Dragging himself up, he blinked at the alarm clock but couldn't find its bright green lights on the stand. Growling, he remembered they'd packed it, thinking they'd need it in Okinawa. Buried someplace in the bottom of their luggage, the unplugged clock was useless as was looking out the window. At some point, Yunho woke up and shut the curtains, probably to block out the eastern rise in case the sun actually chose to show its face.

He struggled to find the phone, answering it then realized it wasn't open yet. Sliding it apart, he repeated, "Hello?"

"Hey."

He'd have expected to hear Changmin or even one of the Bunny Brothers but certainly not Se7en. Looking at the time on his phone, he wiped at his eyes to try to bring the numbers into focus but they remained a blur. "What do you want? Haven't you done enough tonight? What time is it?"

"What is with you Dong Bang boys? So concerned about the time." The man slurred his words, sounding deep into his cups and Jae sighed resigned to the drama unfolding in his life. "I don't know what time it is. I don't care. I already told them I couldn't make it today."

Muttering to himself, he nearly fell off the bed as he rolled over to give himself some room on the mattress. Yunho snored lightly, stretched out nearly diagonally over the covers and Jae pushed at his lover with his foot. "Move over, pig. And Se7en, I'm hanging up now."

"No, no..." Se7en murmured. "I wanted to make sure Minnie-ah got home safe."

"He's probably asleep. If he came home." Yunho refused to give him space and the other side of the bed lay nearly empty. If he timed it right, he could slither over the other man, stop for a kiss and then go back to sleep as Yunho woke. It would serve him right to wake up hard and find Jaejoong already passed out.

"I tried calling him. He's not picking up." The other man definitely sounded drunk. Possibly even insane to Jae's ears. "Go check on him for me. See if he's in his room."

"Hyung, you need to go to sleep. Or maybe take a shower."

"I've been calling him for hours. I fucking hate this, Joongie-baby. I hate that I'm feeling like this. I want my head back to where it was. I don't need this kind of shit and here I am, calling after him like some lovesick fangirl that hangs on his every goddamned word."

"God, don't let Yunnies hear you call me baby, Go to sleep, hyung." Jae replied. "I'll have him call you later."

"I'm going to keep calling you until you check on him. And if you don't answer, I'll head over there and start pounding on the door. And right now, the way I feel, I'm going to puke on the door too."

Se7en sounded drunk enough and crazy enough to do exactly that. Giving in, Jae pulled himself out of the covers and opened Min's bedroom. The youngest's bed sat pristine, its covers crisp and the pillows plumped. Sighing, he looked at the time and found it too early in the morning for Min to have gone out. Frowning, he returned to where he left his phone, hearing Dong-Wook mumbling on the other end.

"Didn't want to hurt him. Fucker. Son of a bitch." Se7en was loud, echoing from the cell's speaker. Yunho lifted his head, staring at the phone glowing on the night stand. Jae shushed him before he could speak, picking the phone up.

"Who's that? Minnie-ah?" Yunho asked sleepily.

"No," Jae covered the phone then wondered why he bothered. "It's Choi Dong-Wook."

"Hang up." Yunho mumbled into his pillow, turning over. "Are you still mad at me?"

"A couple of more hours, maybe but just for going over there. Right now, I'm too tired to be mad so you're in luck." Jae said. "Se7en, hyung, you need to sleep this off."

“He left me. Son of a bitch decided that he was just going to take a walk.” Dong-Wook said. “Then my face started hurting, and then my hand started hurting. So I thought I’d just say screw it and drink it off. Now, I’m sitting here sick to my fucking stomach because the little son of a bitch won’t answer his phone and tell me he’s okay.”

“Why does your hand hurt?” Jaejoong asked. Shaking Yunho, he prodded his lover awake. “I thought you said he didn’t hit you?”

“What? Yunho sighed, turning over onto his back. “You can’t be serious! Either you’re mad at me and not talking to me or you’re not mad at me and we’re going to get some sleep.”

“Answer me, Yunnie-ah,” Jae poked at him, wedging the phone between his chin and his shoulder. “Why does Se7en’s hand hurt? Did he hit you? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. He didn’t lay a hand on me. Bastard better not have hit Changmin.”

“Choi!” Jae barked into the phone. “Did you hit Changmin?”

“What? No! Why the fuck would I hit Minku? Sorry, Minnie-ah.”

“What does Minku mean?” Jae whispered at Yunho.

“I don’t know,” Yunho complained, covering his head with the pillow. Another poke from Jaejoong and then the singer yanked the pillow away. “You’re asking me? Your Japanese is better than mine. Ask Changmin. He’d know.”

Giving up on Yunho, Jae asked Se7en, “Why does your hand hurt?”

“He probably rubbed it raw jerking himself off.” Yunho muttered. Seeing Jae about to punch him, he rolled out of the way. “What? He’s the one who woke us up. Why are you hitting me?”

“How hard did you punch him?” He tried to follow Se7en’s mutterings but the other man was too far gone to understand. “He sounds like he’s brain damaged.”

“Maybe he’s drunk. His virgin got away.”

“He is drunk. But he’s not calling for that.” Jaejoong poked at Yunho’s chest. “He’s worried about Changmin. And Minnie-ah isn’t home.”

“Joongie, love, hang up.” Yunho moaned, rolling over and grabbing back pillow. Clenching it tight to his head, he fortified his fortress with the deer, balancing its body over his neck like a sentry.

“Se7en,” Jaejoong interrupted Se7en’s rant. “Choi Dong-Wook, listen to me!”

“I’m going to try calling his cell phone again.” Se7en murmured. “And maybe get some thing else to drink.”

“I think that’s the last thing you should do right now.” The singer replied. His headache was back, throbbing along his temple. “God, Yunnie and I didn’t have this kind of drama and we’re the worst ones of the group.”

“Changmin is always competitive.” Yunho murmured. “Probably felt like he had to one-up you in this too.”

Jaejoong debated arguing with the sleepy man but decided it would be easier to inform Yunho he’d lost the fight before it began. The leader grumbled, turning over and made noises about his displeasure but Jaejoong ignored that too. “Be sure you’re dressed, Dong-Wook. I’m coming over.”

“Oh no no no. That son of a bitch Yunho popped me twice because Minku was here. Do you have any fucking idea what he’ll do to me if you come over? What do you want to do to me? Get me killed?”

“He knows I’m coming over. Try not to drink yourself into a stupor. I’ll need you to open the door when I get there.”

“I’ll drive you.” The leader grabbed his lover by the leg, bracing himself for the cold air and even colder floor. “Let me get dressed.”

Shaking his head, Jaejoong pushed Yunho back down on the bed. "I need you to stay here. Wait for Changmin to make sure he's okay and if he calls, someone should be here to answer the phone. He might call the house phone."

It was hard to look threatening when he was talking to someone who could bring him to his knees with a hooded glance and a moist pout but Yunho tried just the same. Throwing the pillow back onto his face, he mumbled curses into the linens, knowing he'd lost another argument he hadn't even had a chance to start.

"I don't want you over there with Se7en, especially alone." Yunho grumbled, falling back into pillows that smelled of Jaejoong. "God, you know how much I hate him."

"Pfah," Jaejoong scoffed, heading to the master bathroom. "He's not going to do anything. My boyfriend will come and kick his ass. Besides, you only hate him because he's exactly like you."



He spent more time searching for bandages in Se7en's bathroom than he did getting up the elevator but Jaejoong eventually found enough gauze, tape and disinfectant to stock a hospital. A broken glass did some significant damage to Se7en's palm, leaving slices along his skin. The blood splatters on the floor made it look like a murder scene and Se7en's battered, bruised face didn't help matters. If anything, it made the man appear roguish.

"Do you really love Changmin?" Jae asked as he washed the cuts out with saline. He tried being gentle but shards were caught under Se7en's skin.

"You do use that pretty face to just worm your way into things, don't you?" Se7en asked, charmed by the shy, sweet smile Jaejoong had on his face. He could see how Yunho was smitten by the exotic androgynous beauty. Up close, Jaejoong could take a man's... or woman's... breathe away.

Dong-Wook thought on the question, seriously turning it over as he touched on his memories of the awkward, gangly young man who he'd first seen. The young man who in his eyes, blossomed to a thoughtful philosopher with a wicked, sardonic sense of humour and an even nastier, prettier mouth. "Yeah, I love him. I wanted to be in love with him because I thought; here's my friend. Changmin can make me laugh and show me things that I've already seen thousands of times before and until he pointed them out to me, it meant nothing."

Jaejoong nodded, wrapping up the hand as they chatted. He cleaned up the bandages, tucking one corner around to tie into a bow. "Cover it when you shower and if starts bleeding again, then you're going to need stitches."

"What? You can't do that too?" Se7en teased.

"No, I cook. I don't sew." Jae wandered into the kitchen, looking around until he found a coffee maker. "Tell me you have coffee beans."

"Somewhere," He mumbled from the couch. "Why?"

"Because I'm going to make you some coffee so you'll be sober when Min comes over." Jae opened one cabinet and stared at its empty shelves. A lone packet of mayonnaise sat forlornly against the cabinet's side, its end gelled yellow from age. The next cabinet was even more desolate. The freezer finally yielded bags of ground beans, their ends folded over and affixed with ties. Choosing a dark blend, Jaejoong measured out enough to make ten cups into the filter and poured half of the amount of water needed. The coffee would brew strong, hopefully strong enough to kick the whiskey out of Se7en's system.

The drunk singer stumbled back into the kitchen counter, nearly upending the bottle of shoyu Min left on the counter. Catching the glass container, he bobbed it, nearly spilling the soy sauce over the tiles. Jaejoong swiftly caught the bottle before it could topple and ordered Se7en back to the couch.

"I tried," Se7en mumbled, "But I had to go pee. And now, I don't think I can zip my pants up."

“God help me.” Rolling his eyes, Jae came around the counter and pushed Dong-Wook back. “If you tell anyone I did this, I’ll kill you.”

“I think you doing this is going to kill me,” He replied, closing his eyes when Jae fumbled for the zipper of his jeans.

“Dong-Wook,” Jae muttered, cursing the man roundly. “Your jeans have buttons.”

“Oh,” He looked down, his focus blurring then snapping into focus. The silver discs appeared out of the blue, emerging from the slit in the denim. “I don’t think I can zip those either.”

“Weren’t you wearing sweats before?” Jae left Se7en in the kitchen, retracing the other man’s steps through the apartment.

The most likely place for clothes was the bedroom and Jaejoong headed to what looked like the best possible door, stopping when he reached the threshold. The bed filled the large room, seeming to stretch from one end to the next. If anything, it was larger than the one the management company provided for he and Yunho and Jaejoong knew from experience, it fit the five of them comfortably.

Bed linens lay rumpled, an intimate peek into the men who’d slept there. A book lay open on the nightstand, face down until the pages were bent back. Jaejoong walked over and turned the book over, sliding a piece of paper between the pages. Setting the book back, he smoothed the cover down before turning around to find Se7en staring at him from the doorway. Like the sad package of mayo in his cupboard, the Korean leaned into the frame, slumping over dejectedly.

“That’s Min’s book,” He said softly. “You should probably take it back with you.”

“Nope, he’ll be back for it,” Jae replied. “Change your jeans back to the sweats. Why did you change out of them to begin with?”

“Because he likes them,” Se7en said, running his hands over the threadbare thighs of the worn denim. “They’re his favourite jeans. He liked how I looked in them. I wanted... to look good for him.”

“Well, change back,” The other man said as he slid past Se7en. “And come back into the living room. I’ll get you some coffee and we can talk.”



The coffee was hot and thick with evaporated milk but the white liquid barely lightened the pour. Jaejoong spooned a hefty amount of sugar into the coffee, carrying two mugs over to where Se7en lay on the couch. From the look on his face, the alcohol was beginning to burn through his head, leaving a headache in its wake.

“Here,” Jae said, passing a cup to the other man. “Get some of this into you.”

“God, what did you make this from?” Se7en nearly spit out his first sip. “Dog piss?”

“Drink it. It’ll clear your head.”

“My head?” Se7en gasped, taking another sip. “This is going to make sure I never get Changmin pregnant. Shit, forget I said that.”

“Ke ke.” Jae threw his head back, his robust laughter turning his cold pretty face warm. “Minnie-ah says that all the time.”

“Yeah, he does,” He said, nodding. “I must have picked it up from him.”

“Probably,” Jaejoong said, stifling his yawn. The day was wearing him down but he wasn’t going to head back until he was sure Se7en wouldn’t damage himself. “Do you know what you’re going to do?”

“I’m going to wait until I hear from him,” He said, shrugging helplessly. “Then I’ll beg him to come back to me or tell him he pissed me off then kiss him senseless.”

“Huh,” Jae murmured, sipping at his coffee. “Is that what you want?”

“To kiss him senseless?” Se7en looked up surprised. “Yeah, that and a few other things.”

“Maybe you should,” The singer replied, setting his half-drunk coffee down on the table. “More importantly, you should tell him that he needs to treat you better. Changmin needs to respect you... as a man and as a lover. Take it from me. Don't get into a relationship with a headstrong man unless you're on equal footing. Or you'll spend the next couple of years trying to figure out a way to be on top once in a while...and I don't mean sitting on him.”

Thirty-Two

“What the hell?” Yoochun snapped, turning to look at his best friend. “You knew all along and you didn’t tell me? Fuuuuck.”

The young men lay on the bed in the hyungs’ room, hiding from the dreary rain. Time passed slowly behind the grey veil and neither singer wanted to go out, choosing to spend the evening curled up around pillows and talking. Several tall pillar candles provided enough light to see by, the white columns lined up on the long dresser. With Yunho’s deer plushie against his belly, Jaejoong made a face at his best friend, curling his lip on one side.

“I couldn’t. Min didn’t know I knew.” Jae ran his palm over his eyes, cutting his yawn. “It’s too complicated. I am glad Yunho knows. Now I don’t have to hide it from him any more.”

“How’s Minnie-ah?” Yoochun turned over, snuggling the blankets up around his shoulders. They covered his temple, hooding his eyes and face. The burgundy linens turned his golden skin pale, the soft light catching on his round cheeks. “Is he doing okay?”

“No. Se7en kicked him out,” Jae groaned, stretching his long body and cracking his back into place. The seemingly endless dance routines beat him up and his feet ached from being pounded into hard floors. “He told Changmin not to come back unless he called him.”

“Hoooo, he must be pissed,” The other man whistled.

“Min or Se7en?”

“Minnie-ah,” Yoochun replied. “I don’t know Choi Dong-Wook well enough to say if he’s pissed off but Min *hates* being ignored. He’d rather be yelled at than ignored.”

“I know,” Jaejoong nodded, studying the edge of his thumbnail.

“And that’s what you told Dong-Wook, isn’t it?” Chun peeked under Jae’s face, catching the other man’s eye. “Shit, does Min know you meddled?”

“No!” He snorted. “And I didn’t meddle. He was angry enough on his own. I didn’t have to do anything. Se7en kicked him out on his own. I promise.”

“I don’t believe you. You can make people do things with a couple of words and that stupid smile of yours. It makes me puke.”

“I do not!” Jae slapped Chun hard on the shoulder, leaving an imprint of his fingers on the man’s arm. The sting faded nearly immediately but not before Yoochun could wail indignantly. “Stop that. I barely touched you.”

“What are you yelling about now, Chunnie?” Yunho leaned against the door, regarding the pair lying across his bed. Dressed only in loose pants and faded tanks, both Jaejoong and Yoochun were draped over each other, arms tangled together and ankles crossed. With the cover across his head, Yoochun looked like a strayed monk, either debating debauchery or coming to face the wicked prettiness of the man laying on top of him.

Waving Bambi’s leg at Yunho, Jae grinned. “Hi! We were just talking about you.”

“No, you were probably talking about Changmin,” Yunho crawled on his knees across the bed, lying behind Jaejoong. He nudged the man with his hip, wordlessly telling him to roll over onto his side. When Jae moved, he scooted closer, fitting against his rear. A shimmy of Jae’s back seated the young man into Yunho and the leader slid his arm around Jae’s waist, his fingertips playing with the gold ring in his navel.

“Okay, I know that look on his face.” Yoochun wrinkled his nose and pulled the blankets from his head. “I’m out.”

“You don’t have to go,” Jae said, turning his head slightly to look at Yunho. “Does he?”

“Well... if he does...” Yunho frowned as his pocket vibrated. He dug his phone out of his jeans, moving his knuckles up into his pocket to nudge Jae’s rear. The singer gave him lover a wicked grin, shaking his head in mock disgust. “Or maybe in a little bit. I’ll get rid of whoever this is.”

Yoochun rolled over and slid off the edge of the bed as Yunho flipped his phone open, patting his best friend on the leg. “I’ll talk to you later. Remember, we’re supposed to try that seafood place tonight for dinner. Yunho promised to pay for crab.”

“Nuh-uh!” Yunho slapped at Yoochun’s ass, tagging him as he passed. “Get out of here.”

“Answer your phone,” Yoochun stuck his tongue out at his leader, skipping out of reach. “And it’s your turn to pay.”

“Hello,” Laughter lifted Yunho’s tone, a bright sparkling rumble. Stroking his lover’s belly, he listened to the echo coming from the other party. There were street sounds, a honk of a horn and the rush of traffic but other than indistinct babble of people talking, he couldn’t hear anyone on the line. Speaking louder, he repeated his greeting. “Hello?”

“Yunho.” The man’s speech was rough, a harsh echo of Yunho’s own voice. “Do you have time to speak?”

“Yes,” He sat up, nearly flipping Jae over onto his stomach in his haste to straighten up. The other man yelped, flailing to catch himself when he slid to the edge of the bed. Yunho made a grab for his lover, snagging Jae’s pants. “I’m here, Father.”

Father? Jaejoong mouthed. He extracted himself from Yunho’s hand, motioning first to his chest then to the door, asking the other man if he wanted Jae to leave. Yunho shook his head, frowning and held his hand out to Jaejoong, hooking his fingers through his lover’s for support.

Stay. Yunnie pointed at the bed, patting the space next to him. Jaejoong slithered closer, sliding into the man’s embrace as Yunho lifted his arm. Cradling the slender singer, he took a deep breath to compose himself and said in a calm, steady voice, “I have time, Father. What is it you need?”



“Ah, you were abandoned by your soulmate and have come looking for me?” Junsu snorted, swerving his shoulders to the right in an attempt to get around a taxi cab.

On the television screen, his cherry red sports car hit a curb, flying over a squat blue mailbox and landing on its roof. Large yellow kanji flashed a too familiar mocking Game Over across the screen, scrolling up to show the game’s high scores. *Hyung Min* dominated the top ten, the lower fifteen scattered between the other three members. Junsu’s name flashed once, far below the top then the game cycled back to the beginning, offering to begin another round.

“Oh, I hate this game.” He gnashed his teeth, hitting the pause button. Grabbing the other controller, he held it out to his lover. “Do you want to play? At least give me a fighting chance to get to the top twenty?”

“You’re only playing it because Minnie-ah is good at it.” Yoochun said, stepping over the corner of the coffee table and sitting on the couch. “Hell, even Joongie-ah is better at it than you are and he sucks at video games.”

“Don’t remind me,” Junsu growled, hitting the start button after he plugged in the second controller. “He’s just lucky. Really, I should be scoring higher. I’m faster than he is.”

“Yeah but you’ve never been in a car with him driving. I think they used him to base this game on,” The baritone laughed. “Do you still want the red car?”

“Yeah,” Junsu nodded. “I’ve been having luck with it. Last game, I got seven blocks with it. The yellow one is no good. The police see it too quickly and pull me over.”

Yoochun watched Junsu’s face as he plowed his car into the back of the tenor’s vehicle. The singer gunned his engine, running over a trash can on the sidewalk to get away from the car trailing him. A truck careened in front of Junsu’s car, cutting him off and Yoochun swerved to get in front, slowing down then slamming on his brakes. Unable to avoid the other man’s avatar, Junsu’s car crashed into Yoochun’s back end.

“Hey!” He shouted, keeping his eyes on the screen as he tried to slap Yoochun. Missing the first two times, he connected with a half-hearted tap on Yoochun’s thigh. “Why’d you do that? You’re in my way!”

“Really?” Yoochun grinned, avoiding the other man’s hand. He captured Junsu’s wrist, dropping down and sucking at the singer’s wrist. “Mwah! Vaaaampire!”

“Hey! Teeth! Teeth!” Junsu lost control again, his car catching its wheel on a wheelbarrow. Flipping over, the sports car went end over end, grinding into the computer generated asphalt in a smoking mess. “Aish! Chuuuunie! Look what you made me do!”

“Yep!” He grinned at the smaller man. “What are you going to do about it?”

He was prepared for the man to hit him or even pout but Junsu had other plans. Lunging at his lover, Junsu toppled Yoochun back on the couch, reaching his hands under Yoochun’s shirt until he found the tips of the man’s sensitive nipples. Pinching the nubs between his fingers, he held on tightly, twisting slightly as Yoochun howled and struggled to get away.

“Ouch! Ow! Let go!” Chunnie screamed, a loud girly wail echoing in the living room. “No, come on! No! Ouch!”

“You’re going to do that again?” Junsu squeezed, nicking the flat of Chunnie’s nipple with his nails. “Huh? Again?”

“No! Okay! Let go!” Yoochun pulled away when Susu released his chest. Rubbing at his nipples with the flats of his hands, he made fish lips at Junsu as the young man crowed with victory at Yoochun’s surrender. “I lied! Lied!”

“Hah! You are mine! I won!” Grabbing Yoochun’s shoulders, Junsu pushed him back.

They fell, puffing accent pillows into the air. A cushion burst, cotton batting spilling out from under Yoochun’s long legs and Junsu spit out a mouthful of the fluffy white fibre. It drifted, caught on the breeze from the patio and landed on the coffee table, skittering over the glass then falling on the floor.

“We shouldn’t do this here,” Junsu murmured. Yoochun’s mouth caught his, straying from the corners and down to his jaw and the tenor tilted his head back, giving his lover space to roam over his throat. The man traced Junsu’s collarbone, following the trace of skin down to the hollow under his apple. A nip of his teeth made Junsu clench his fists into Yoochun’s shirt, the man’s already plumped nipples tightening further when the fabric rubbed against them.

“Come on, babe,” Chunnie said, standing up quickly. He grabbed Junsu by the waistband of his jeans, hoisting the lighter man up. Junsu’s bare toes caught on the floor and he stood, reaching for the other man’s hips. Hooking his fingers into a loop on Chunnie’s drawstrings, he nearly pulled them down his legs. Tsking his lover, Junsu tugged them back up, tightening the loop.

“You’re too skinny.”

“Now you sound like Yunho talking to his Boo,” Yoochun grumbled. “I don’t want to hear anything like them. Just you and me.”

They were three steps into the hall when Changmin came out of his room, the younger man’s hands full of empty glasses he’d found in his room. Narrowly avoiding the couple, he snarled as they passed, voicing his disgust. when Yoochun pushed Junsu against the wall and held his wrists firm over his head. Lowering

his mouth, he took Junsu's lips, teasing and licking with the tip of his tongue until Junsu opened his mouth and let him in.

"Not the hallway. Not the couch. Room! Go! Down the hall!" Min muttered, a pair of chopsticks nearly escaping from a mug as he turned to avoid Yoochun's tangle of legs. Ignoring the pair, he headed into the kitchen, trying to tell his broken heart that the pain he felt was an upset stomach and not the anguish of missing Dong-Wook.

Changmin might not have even existed as far as the men were concerned. After he got a full taste of his lover's sweetness, Yoochun's world stopped being anything beyond Junsu's mouth and lithe body.

Pushing Junsu along the wall, Yoochun shoved open the door to their room, their haven softly lit by the early evening dusk and chilled from the wide open windows. Junsu shivered as Yoochun stripped off his shirt. A button popped, hitting something hard before bouncing over the floor. It rolled, the thin threading sound of plastic on wood getting quieter as the disc spun then fell flat.

"This is one of Jaejoong's shirts, I think," Junsu whispered, losing his train of thought as Yoochun explored the dip of skin under his throat. "Or maybe..."

"I don't care, Susu," He replied, taking a mouthful of the man's flesh into his mouth and biting down hard enough to make Junsu gasp. "I don't care if I rip it into shreds and use them to tie you to the bed. I just need it off of you."

There was rarely time for passion. Their lives were scheduled and regimented, each second controlled and measured until Yoochun was sure he would meet himself coming out of the door when he should be heading in. Some nights, there was barely enough energy for a soft kiss before sleep claimed them and not enough time to do more than eat quickly and touch hands before they were off again. Days sometimes went by when Yoochun would swear he never saw Junsu's caramel honey eyes, the singer leaving before he did or having fallen asleep by the time Yoochun got to drag himself home.

What few hours they had were normally spent with the others, relaxing and complaining about their schedule or their inability to master a song or dance. Their lives centred around being a group, each member a supporting pillar for a larger, bigger thing none of them could describe. Being together meant being greater than just themselves and even in times when they weren't on stage, in interviews or rehearsing, their focus was on one another and how to succeed in a world that seemed determined to tear them down with every step they took forward.

With Jaejoong and Yunho occupied with one another and Changmin mourning the could-have-been of his ill-fated relationship, Yoochun found himself wondering why he and Junsu were smashing cars along a street made of pixels and light and not reaching for stars they knew were hidden within themselves.

"God, I love having you here with me," Yoochun murmured, clasping Junsu's face in his palms. The other man's eyes were dark, his pupils wide with lust and excitement.

"I'm here all the time," Junsu laughed, the silver peal of joy shaded crimson with want. The sleek sensual creature hidden within the bubbly young man emerged, a velvet smooth hedonist with a taste for Yoochun's body. His lover's drawstrings pants were easily removed, a swift tug on the fabric and Yoochun was deliciously bare to Junsu's gaze.

"No, I think you're only here when I close my eyes and dream," He sighed, closing their kiss.

The bed was soft beneath them, giving way to arms and legs wrapped around lithe torsos and pale skin. Yoochun felt the press of the mattress under his back and sighed, hooking his fingers around Junsu's waist to pull him down. Balancing on his knees, the tenor worked his jeans loose, sliding free of the confining denim and releasing his hardened sex. It danced, thickening with each moment Yoochun spent stroking at the silken head, growing longer in a shy burst of need.

Naked except for the leather thong strung with a bead around his neck, the American-raised Korean stared up at the man straddling his hips, lifting his fingers to touch Junsu's angelic face.

"I sometimes want to wake you up when I come home," He whispered, sliding his thumb into the wet of Junsu's mouth. The man's pout parted and Junsu sucked him in, wrapping his tongue around the tip to soak it. "I want to wake you up just so I can hear you say my name... when you're sleepy and breathless so I can imagine I was inside of you, loving you until our bodies were slick with sweat and you're shivering, unable to take any more."

Pushing his thumb further in, Yoochun let his lover moisten his finger then freed himself, using his other hand to wrap into Junsu's thick hair and pulled him down. Junsu's tongue rolled and tasted, darting over Yoochun's mouth then stilled when the other man used his own spit to dampen his entrance, pressing against the edge tentatively, teasing Junsu until he squirmed around Yoochun's forearm.

"Can I, baby?" Yoochun swirled the pad of his thumb around the kiss of skin.

They were careful, always being responsive to each other's needs and wants. Neither paid attention to any stigma inherited from a position on a bed, each enough of a balance between sensitive and masculine to be aggressive and caring. Yoochun's romantic nature led him to ask, delving into his lover's desires with a simple question. If Junsu needed anything other than the other man buried deep inside of him, he would have acquiesced. Desire and pleasure were all Yoochun needed, provided the other man was his seraphim-souled Junsu.

"Please," He whispered, raising himself up with his thighs until he balanced on his knees. Junsu cast his head back, waiting for the man's touch to intrude then with a gentle push, Yoochun was inside of him, stretching him slowly with a turn of his thumb.

Panting, Junsu leaned forward, his hips moving up and down in a small rocking motion. With his palms flat on the bed next to Yoochun's shoulders, he mewled and keened, unable to get more than a bit of Yoochun's digit inside of him. Fumbling for one of the small break-open packets on their end table, Junsu cracked its neck, popping the opening and reaching with his fingers to coat his fingers in the gel.

"Let me..." He moaned, begging Yoochun to stop so he could help. "I need you, Chunnie. I can't wait."

Yoochun leaned forward to catch at Junsu's full cheeks, holding them apart so the singer could delve his fingers into his depths. The baritone's sex twitched and sang with want as he watched his lover open himself up, stretching and scissoring his body apart. Junsu's mouth lay parted, his breath coming in fast pants as he stroked into his passage, his fingers not quite long enough to touch the hot need buried there. His index finger barely brushed on the nodule and he jumped, shivering when Yoochun put his hands on his hips.

"Baby, I've got to have you soon," Chunnie locked eyes with Junsu, gritting his teeth as he gouged deep into his control, holding back from flipping Junsu over and taking him. "God, you are so sexy."

Using the rest of the gel, Junsu wrapped his slick fingers around Yoochun's shaft, moving over its head until it glistened with seed and lubricant. Guiding the man forward, he slid down, slowly enveloping the tip with the tightness of his body. They stayed there, their bodies breathing in tandem, hard heaving gulps of air as the air filled with the musk of their sex.

"Take it slow, baby," Yoochun murmured, his hands splayed over Junsu's thighs, feeling the power in the young man's muscles. "Take me in slow."

Junsu took his lover at his word, easing onto the hard pierce by rocking his hips. Falling in inches onto Yoochun's sex, he teased the man's need by pulling back up with small jerks until Yoochun growled deep in his throat.

"Now, Susu..." Yoochun pushed his lover down, closing his thumbs over the jut of Junsu's hipbones and canted the singer back until he filled the man's passage.

The heat swallowed him, a tight sucking feel of soft satin and velvet. The swirl of Junsu's body gave and took Yoochun, the Korean's sex working up into Junsu with each thrust of the singer's hips. The slow pace quickened, their bodies falling into a beating rhythm filled with their murmuring pleas and soft moans.

Unable to feel Junsu fully around him, Yoochun pulled Junsu onto his side, hooking one thigh over his arm and pushed in, burying himself up the hilt of his body.

Crying out, Junsu twisted under Yoochun's hands, his fingers closing over his lover's wrists as the man pounded each thrust home. Rocking his hips steadily faster until he touched the spark hidden in Junsu's warm passage, Yoochun stretched up, covering his lover's mouth with a fierce kiss. He inhaled Junsu's screaming moans, stroking long and hard with each panting gasp from Junsu's lips.

Trapping the tenor's sex between their legs, Yoochun rubbed and twisted over the man's length as he moved, bringing Junsu's control to its brittle edge. Rubbing his thumb over his own tongue, Yoochun wetted his finger and spread the pout of Junsu's sex open, lightly scraping at the too sensitive skin. He kept each stroke in time with the thrusts of his hips, drawing Junsu apart from within. A tightening of his lover around him warned Yoochun of Junsu's impending release and he let the young man fall into the nearly painful grip of his orgasm, the ripple of breathless agonizing pleasure working up from Junsu's sac. Yoochun opened his palm, catching the spill as Junsu shuddered and clenched, gasping for air when his release broke him open.

Yoochun followed, unable to hold back any longer when Junsu's body spiraled in around his sex. He felt it first flush his face, his cheeks burning hot then the shiver of desire closing his throat came next, a sure sign of the tingle beginning along his belly. Roiling, his seed coiled in its nest then burst forward, filling Junsu in long streams of milky threads. Plunging into the other man, Yoochun slowed his motions to a soft rocking, leaving himself mostly embedded deep in the man he loved while Junsu intimately held him within.

They lay there, shifting slightly as Yoochun slid away, cradling one another as they fought to find their voices. A peek of the moon slid around a cloud, the thin crescent reminding Yoochun of the sticky mess on his fingers. Smiling, he licked Junsu's seed from his hand, savouring the salty citrus taste of his lover on his own skin. Swallowing the mingle of his spit and Junsu's spill, Yoochun purred, snuggling down into the sheets.

"I love you, you know," Junsu whispered, faint in the rush of the soft rain still pouring down from the night sky. "I love having you with me, Chunnie-ah. I love having you in me."

"Same here, babe," Yoochun smiled, looking over his shoulder at his lover lying next to him. They lay against one another, elbow to elbow and knee to knee as their lethargy took away the frantic pounding of their heartbeats and the blood began to flow back into their brains. "This is the best part, you know."

"What?" Junsu was too worn out to move, unable to do more than weave his fingers into Yoochun's, joining with the man in the one way he was able to at the moment. "What's your favourite part?"

"Lying here. Smelling of you," Yoochun whispered, his voice soft with affection. "For me, the best part is being here, listening to you breathe. Because God, Susu-ah, I just love hearing you breathe."

Thirty-Three

“Let’s go out,” Yunho slid off of the bed, closing his phone up. Frowning, he searched for a pair of clean socks, finding a ball of whites in his dresser. Behind him, Jaejoong lay where his lover left him, curved into a crescent, moulded into a Yunho-shape that was no longer there.

“Why?” Jae asked quietly, sitting up and crossing his legs. He played with the silver ring he wore on one toe, turning it around as he stared at his fingers absently. “Why do you want to go out?”

“Because if I get out of the house, I can’t cry,” Yunho tightened his mouth, his nostrils flaring as he fought the melancholy wave riding over him. “Because Asian men don’t cry in public and don’t tell me no. Yoochun doesn’t count. He cries at anything. I *do not* cry in public.”

“Yunnie-ah, you don’t need to run from this... from me.”

“I’m not running from you,” He said, pulling the socks on his feet. Staring at the floor, Yunho mumbled. “I just need to get out and get some air. Are you coming with me or not?”

Jaejoong followed. Even with his long stride, it was difficult to keep up with the other man. Yunho plunged into the Tokyo sidewalk, his dark hair and pale face hidden under a baseball cap pulled low over his eyes. His jeans pockets, already torn from wear, jutted out where his knuckles were pressing against the seams and Yunho kept his head down, leaving his fists tucked away. Tension brought the leader’s shoulders up, nearly hiding his neck as he hunched, not making eye contact with anyone around him.

They walked for what seemed like forever to Jaejoong, wandering aimlessly around the cold, wet streets until Jae felt a twinge in his knee. Ignoring the sharp pang, he kept up, a few steps behind Yunho until the icy temperature cut down into the bone and he stumbled, the joint giving out from under him. Catching his hand against an old art deco lamp post, Jaejoong bit his lip to keep from crying out from the pain. A fire broke out under his kneecap and he struggled with the need to stop and rest or to continue with his lover.

Looking up, he spotted Yunho walking ahead, caught in an unseeing daze. Bracing himself, Jaejoong took stepped forward, forcing himself to continue. The burn started slowly, working up from his knee to the middle of his thigh then looping back down to his calf muscles. A steady anguish settled into the area, seizing up the muscle until it was nearly a ball but Jae pushed himself, his hair beaded with misting rain.

He made it another three blocks, jump skipping a few steps to catch up to Yunho’s longer stride. Showing no signs of slowing down, the young man kept silent, letting loose one shuddering sigh before crossing a busy street. A hair too slow, Jaejoong trotted after him and was nearly a pace behind when he felt something snap inside of his leg.

The Korean went down hard. Water splashed up around him when he hit the asphalt, his shoulder jarring on impact. The lights changed, red to green and a cacophony of horns started up as Jaejoong tried to stand. Pushing himself up onto his hands, he ducked his head when a taxi veered around him. Cars moved around him, some patiently slow while others gunned their engines as he shakily got to his feet, favouring his injured leg. Cast adrift in the middle of the crosswalk, Jaejoong stood helpless in the stream of metal and sound, unable to lurch the few feet to safety of the curb.

Strong arms grabbed his waist, supporting him as he stood. Yunho’s cap was gone, knocked away when he ran through the tight downtown crowd to reach the stranded singer. With his dark hair framing his face, his soulful eyes filled with remorse when he ducked his head down and lifted Jaejoong’s arm over his shoulder, helping him to the sidewalk.

The cement under his feet nearly made Jae weep with relief and he sagged against the other man's tall body, letting Yunho drag him to the side of the building and out of the rain.

"Shit, you're soaked through," Yunho looked around, spotting a hole-in-the-wall ramen house a few doors down. "Come on, we need to get you something warm and I want to take a look at your knee."

"You better get me into a love hotel then," Jae teased around his tears. Every step sent new rings of fire outwards from his kneecap, the ripples searing up and down his leg. "You're going to have to strip me down to my underwear and not a lot of ramen shops would think that's good for business."

"Pfah," His lover scoffed, worry creasing his forehead. "Have you seen yourself? They'll be selling tickets to people trying to through the door."

His Japanese faltered when Yunho asked one of the waiters for help but a Korean woman came up from behind the kitchen wall, her round face beaming with pride when she spotted the two singers. Lapsing into a formal Seoul dialect, Yunho begged for access to one of their private rooms, politely requesting privacy for their meal and so he could look at Jaejoong's injury.

He'd just gotten Jae into the wide divan of a small shuttered-off alcove when the woman reappeared holding two tall glasses of soju and cranberry juice. The waiter glumly dropped off a tray of panchan, the small dishes filled with a variety of Japanese delicacies and pickles. Apologizing for the lack of Korean foods, the woman bowed deeply and thanked the boys for their arrival, promising to check back on them once they'd had a chance to recover. Thick white dish towels were left on one of the chaises, their pristine and soft folds still wrapped with a band from the manufacturer.

"Heh, a Dong Bang fan in Tokyo and we find her shop," Yunho grinned as he leaned Jaejoong carefully back on the shallow backed couch. "Hold onto my shoulders. I'm going to take your jeans off."

"Can this wait until we get food?" Jaejoong complained, his hands covering Yunho's when the man reached for the zipper pull of his jeans. "Yunnie-ah!"

"Lift!" Yunho tugged off the wet denim, carefully working them free of Jae's legs. Taking one of the towels, he tossed it at his lover's head. "Here, dry yourself off. Use a couple to cover yourself."

Jaejoong barely had time to spread two of the towels over his lap when the shoji door slid open and the cook poked her head in. Handing Yunho a tied-off plastic bag of ice, she asked if they wanted ramen or something Korean. Telling the woman they'd like anything she wanted to cook, Yunho bowed his head several times and thanked her, sighing with relief when the door closed behind her.

"Here, hold the ice while I look at it." Yunho carefully lifted Jae's leg, noting the man's wince when his knee bent slightly. "God, I'm sorry, baby. Why didn't you yell at me?"

"Because you... needed to walk it off." He hissed when the other man laid the last towel on his knee and gently placed the ice bag on the injured joint.

"No, next time, you have to tell me you're hurting." Stroking the damp hair back from Jae's temple, Yunho crouched next to his lover. He worried at the bruises forming along Jae's knee and the glimpse of one shaping up to a purple splotch on his upper arm where a car glanced its bumper against him. "You could have been killed."

"Mostly, I'm soaked," Jaejoong complained, his teeth shattering. "I know ice is good for it but I'm cold."

"Drink," Yunho tasted the soju cocktail, satisfied with its tart taste. "You'll like this. Not too sweet. I'll pour you some hot tea. That'll get you warmed up."

"If the soju doesn't, the tea's not going to help." He sipped at the drink anyway, the rush of alcohol hitting his belly. Jaejoong didn't know what time it was. Never one for watches, he depended on Yunho for that kind of information but the other man left his sturdy steel wristwatch behind in their room. Another press of Yunho's fingers on his knee made him stiffen and his limbs jerked out with nervous pain. "Yunnie, ah... too soon yet. Let it go down."

"She brought some aspirin. That will help with the swelling."

"I'm not taking those with soju." He complained, staring at the small drugstore packet of pills Yunho shook out into his hand.

"They're not sleeping pills. They're aspirin. Take them," Yunho insisted. He waited until the other man swallowed the pills with a gulp of tea before inspecting the area again. Frowning, Yunho straightened up and slid over to sit besides Jaejoong, keeping the other man's leg stretched out with his foot resting on the other divan. "Let's see how it looks after we eat. If it's still hurting badly after you rest it, I'm taking you to the hospital."

"No! Manager-sshi will kill me." Jae shook his head.

"No, Shizu-chan will not kill you. He'll kill me for getting you hurt," Yunho exhaled, puffing his cheeks, exasperated at being careless with the young man's health. "I'm very sorry, Joongie-ah."

"I should have said something when it first started to hurt," He ducked his head in apology. "But I knew your father's call... upset you."

Yunho opened his mouth to answer when the door opened to let the cook in, her face creased with a wide smile. Ushering the waiter in, she introduced dish to the singers as if they were her children and waited as they politely tasted each one. Jaejoong smiled warmly when she offered him a car blanket, murmuring thankfully as Yunho tucked the fleece around his bare legs. The singer took a mouthful of everything offered to him, congratulating the woman on her cooking. She beamed, thanking them profusely as she shoed the waiter out of the alcove and shut the doors again.

Taking another mouthful of bulgogi, Jaejoong leaned into his lover's warmth, chewing at the sweet-shoyu meat, glad to find tastes of home on his tongue. "This is good. God, so good. We'll have to bring the others here."

"She probably cooked this from her own food," Yunho said, guiding a spoon of rice into Jaejoong's waiting mouth. "She couldn't have had this ready in case some Koreans came in."

"No," The singer said, frowning slightly. "You're right. We'll have to send her a gift or something nice. To say thanks."

"Too Asian, no?" Yunho teased, kissing a speck of sticky rice from Jae's lips.

"Aish, someone might see!" Jae glanced nervously at the door.

"I just wanted to say thank you." He used his thumb to wipe at the spot, rubbing the brief kiss in. "For being with me. Especially now."

"Now. Whenever," Jaejoong said with a shrug. "Always."

"Yeah, I'm figuring that out," Yunho replied, sneaking a smile at Jaejoong. "Eat something, Boo."

They ate slowly, falling into a companionable silence as they picked through the panchan and each other's food. A marbled tea quail egg became a choice prize, Yunho fishing it free with his spoon and laughing when Jaejoong flirted outrageously at him with a fluttering of his lashes.

"Open up," Yunho ordered, plucking the egg from his spoon and holding it up for Jae to eat. The singer bit into the speckled surface, taking only half and leaving the rest for his lover. Grinning, Yunho popped the remaining half into his mouth, chewing on the salty treat. "I think I'm going to move in here. Will you come visit?"

"I thought you said you only would live someplace that I cooked for you?" Jae eyed him with a playful malevolence. "Now you're leaving me for an older woman? Hah, she's probably married too. Her husband and I will have to kill you."

"If you know how to make these eggs, I'll stay with you," Yunho promised.

"Humph," He mumbled around a mouthful of rice, taking a large piece of pickled daikon from a dish. Swallowing, he bit into the spiced radish. "Are we ever going to talk about your dad?"

“Aish, I’m eating,” Complaining, Yunho rolled his eyes and helped himself to more of the marinated meat. When Jaejoong refused to drop his gaze, he sighed, resigned to the topic. “What is there to talk about? He called and wanted me to tell Mother to come back to him.”

“Are you going to do it?” Jae pressed, putting his utensils down. “Are you going to do what your father wants?”

“No,” Yunho glowered at his food as if he could see his father’s face in the mix of meat, rice and peppers. “He thinks that if I ask her, she will say yes. He told me he’d forgive me and allow me contact with her again but that my sister was off-limits.”

“Fuck him,” Jae swore then apologized, contrite. “I’m sorry, Yunnie-ah. He is your father. I have no...”

“You have every right,” Yunho denied Jaejoong his apology, cutting the other man off. “Hyung... no.. Jung thinks that he can tell me who to love and when to love. I can’t live like that and I won’t live without you. He has to accept all of my relationships on my terms. From you to my mother then to my sister. I won’t be denied my family because of his hatreds. My mother and I agree on that. You are either a part of my life that my father accepts or I will no longer have a father.”

“Yunho! Don’t say that!” The filial ties were too strong to break casually and even estranged as Jaejoong was with his family, he still worked to regain their acceptance, sending notes and gifts that were sometimes returned. He hurt whenever a package bearing his hometown address arrived, unsure if it was something from a sister who remembered her only brother fondly or one of the others who felt Jae’s lifestyle was an affront to their family name. “He’s your father.”

“He is my mother’s husband,” Yunho corrected his lover. “He is not my father as long as he denies me my heart.”

Clasping his lover’s hands, the young man looked down, trying to gather his thoughts and explain to Jaejoong how he felt inside. Their culture demonized a son who walked away from his obligations, spinning moral lessons in nearly everything taught to them as children of foolish young men who turned their backs on their families. Often downtrodden and in despair, happiness was only restored once the son gave up his foolish ways and acknowledged his father’s wisdom by casting aside the temptation he’d been drawn into.

Looking up, Yunho saw the devotion in Jaejoong’s eyes, a shining willingness to sacrifice anything for Yunho and the young man swallowed hard, falling in love all over again.

“What my father is doing... is emotional terrorism,” Yunho said firmly. “He holds his love above my head and says that I will never have it unless I do what he says. If there is anything that I’ve learned in the past few years with you is *how* to love.”

“Eh?” Jae wrinkled his nose, fidgeting under the other man’s intense stare. His knee’s throbbing eased back but the flush of heat from Yunho’s touch inflamed other pulse points that he’d have a hard time hiding if the restaurant’s owner returned and came around to clear the dishes. “You taught *me* how to love, Yunnie-ah. No one... loved me before you.”

“Not true,” He replied. “Scarlet-nuna, she loves you.”

“That’s different,” The singer dismissed the objection with a flick of his fingers. “That’s not... love.”

“It is. For you, it is,” Yunho insisted. “For you, Joongie, you only know how to love one way. Fully. Completely. You throw yourself into your love like you do your music. It’s a constant stream of pleasure, joy, blues, life and everything. When you love someone, you celebrate who they are every day. Some days the only reason I want to wake up is because I know that when you see me, you’ll breathe life into me. It’s like I am soul-dead until your smile touches me. You’re like the sun on a night-drunk flower, Joongie-ah. All of us around you... we know love because you pour it on us like warm honey and it fills our hearts.”

“I need my father...not to love me like you do but to love me as you do.” He stole another kiss from Jae’s parted lips, keenly aware they could be discovered at any moment but he didn’t care. Yunho needed

to have his lover's taste in his mouth as he cracked apart the shell of pain his father had been determined to imprison him in.

"I don't ask that he understand me or my choices. I don't need him to embrace you in open arms and call you his son but what I do demand of him is that he acknowledges that you are in my life." Pressing his mouth on Jae's, Yunho breathed out a kiss for Jaejoong to keep. "I will hold nothing...not even the group... above you. I love the other members. I love them as my brothers but you, Kim Jaejoong, *are* my life and love. My eternal destiny, Joongie-ah."

Thirty-Four

Home was a welcome sanctuary, especially when Jaejoong eased himself onto their soft bed. Stripped down to his boxers by a worried Yunho, he let himself be stretched out onto the sheets, trying to keep his face placid when the other man jostled his swollen knee. Min busying himself with bringing in an ice wrap caught the grimace on Jaejoong's face and ratted him out. After a few minutes of arguing, Jae finally convinced them that an ice pack on the elevated injured joint and more aspirin would be welcome.

Especially since his other option was to have someone poke at it with needles to ask him if it hurt.

Happily carting away the leftovers from the restaurant, Min left the older members alone, retiring to the living area to watch a Japanese drama. Yunho returned to the bedroom with a carafe of weak genmaicha tea, setting on the end table.

Filling a glass, he handed Jaejoong a white scored tablet. "Here, Shizu-chan says that you should take this. It's an anti-inflammatory. It'll bring down the swelling. He says if it's not better in an hour, I'm to call him."

"Aish, I don't want to go to the doctor's," Jae sniffed at the tablet then popped it into his mouth, swallowing it with a gulp of watery tea.

"Then rest your knee," Yunho said, helping himself to a glass of tea before joining Jaejoong on the bed. Sidling up against his lover, he stretched out next to the lanky singer. He motioned for Jae to lean forward then tucked his arm behind his lover. "I'm calling Shizu in an hour, regardless of what you say. Just so you know."

"Fine," Jae grumbled, sipping at his tea. "But I feel better."

"You lie." Scoffing, Yunho leaned against the headboard. "But it's okay. I'm used to it."

The punch to his thigh didn't hurt as much as he'd expected it to but Yunho winced so Jaejoong didn't feel slighted. Listening to his lover grumble under his breath, he quirked a smile when the singer shifted and made himself comfortable in the curve of his arm.

"I want to talk to you about your father," Jae said softly.

"What about him?" He wanted to avoid the subject but Jaejoong was worse than a terrier once he got a hold of something. Jaejoong had been right when he said it would be easier to agree with him than argue. He eventually always lost. Or paid for winning. "What do you want to talk about?"

"Family," The young man responded, moving the ice pack around his knee until it wrapped over the sorest point. "We need to talk about... family"

"I... shit," Yunho swore. Pursing his mouth, he looked away, sour and bitter. Unease brewed under his skin, bubbling up and searing. "I'm angry, Jaejoong. And I'm tired of being hurt. I'm sick of trying to gain his approval and for what? Nothing. Nothing I achieve, no matter how great is going to be good enough for him. Nothing."

"I know," Jae placed his hand on Yunho's thigh, looking up at the man's hardened face. "But he's your father."

"What? Because he's my father, I should let him beat me down?" He gritted his teeth, trying to keep the heat of his temper from his words but it was hard. He risked everything he'd gained in his short life for the man sitting next to him... even losing the man he admired all of his life because of his love for Jaejoong.

Swallowing his bitter, Yunho washed the taste of his father's hatred down with a mouthful of tea. "I'm sorry. It's just difficult. I am so angry at him. He's destroyed everything...everyone. I thought we were done with him when he made me... when he separated me from the rest of the family."

"When he made you choose me over your mother," Jaejoong whispered, dropping his voice down.

Yunho's decision haunted him. The shame in Yunho's voice was hidden behind his anger but the young man heard the hurt there. There was too much pain to be hidden by a few shrugs and mumbled apologies. His lover missed the woman who quietly supported him from afar. Even the letters were a comfort, folded sheets of love and paper read and reread. Jaejoong knew where Yunho kept them, tucked inside an old book given to him by his grandmother.

The threads of family ran deep and strong in the man. Jaejoong felt them tug every time Yunho spoke of his father, even when his words were laced with cold anger, the connection was there.

"When I chose you," Yunho agreed. "But I don't regret that decision. I'll *never* regret that, Joongie-ah. Never."

"I hate it," Jae said. He swallowed, unsure if he should speak his heart but Yunho's anguish grew with each passing day until it festered in his heart. If he did nothing, he felt the other man would eventually learn to hate the decision he made. Plunging forward, he gave in to his heart, scraping his fears back to reach out to his lover. "I hate that you are... that you've turned your back on family for me. I don't think... I don't think it's the right way of things, Yunnie-ah."

"You'd rather I'd have chosen my mother?" Yunho swallowed, incredulous at what he was hearing. "Is that what you're saying?"

"I would gladly give up eternity for you, if you..." Jaejoong pressed his hands against his face, biting his cheek when Yunho pulled his arm out from behind him. "I don't want to give you up, Yunnie-ah. Never. But if you turn away from your family, you'll regret it all of your life. All of my life. Every time you look at me, you will see the life that you've turned from and you'll hurt. You'll wonder about what should have been your life instead of what it is... with me. I can't live knowing that I've taken that from you. I'd rather treasure the days I've had with you than you rue the ones to come."

"I can't listen to you when you talk like this," Yunho snapped, pushing himself off the bed. He paced to the door, his hand closing over the knob but the door remained closed. He lay his forehead on the wooden panel.

Jaejoong held his breath, waiting for Yunho to walk out of the room... and possibly out of his life.

"I... know I have to stay. I know I should listen to you," Yunho said, his voice broken and rough. "I've given you everything, Jaejoong. And now... now you tell me I shouldn't have bothered?"

"I'm saying that I love you," He tried to get up, hampered by the swelling on his knee.

Unable to bend, he slid, trying to scoot around the bed and touch the man at the door. The rustle on the sheet pulled Yunho from his misery, his eyes wet with tears. "Don't get up, Joongie. I swear to God, if I have to tie you to that bed, I will."

"Listen to me," Jae pleaded. "Please. Stay and listen."

"I can't. It hurts too much," Yunho replied but as he walked around the bed, he half-pulled Jaejoong back against the headboard, settling pillows to support the other man's back.

They moved, against one another until their arms lay around each other's waist. Sorrow drew them closer, binding with a ribbon drawn from one heart to the next. As try as he might, Yunho fought his tears, refusing to let his anger draw any more of his spirit from him but when Jaejoong's head fit tightly into the crook of his neck, the first drop fell.

Then, his grief poured a storm on his lover's shoulders.

Jae held Yunho as he cried, awkwardly crooked as his body refused to bend but the broken-hearted young man curled down, sliding into the spaces along Jae's chest and hips until they were close. The sobs tore through Yunho, breaking his breaths into short panting gasps. The bitter dregs of his pain rose, percolating to his throat and he fought them, swallowing the torn sounds as Jaejoong stroked his back and side. His tongue rasped with a sour taste from his stomach, the struggle to contain his cries churning his guts.

"Let it out, Yunnie-ah," Jaejoong pleaded. "Please, baby. You're going to make yourself sick holding it in."

Yunho clenched his fists, wanting to strike something...to hit something so it was in as much pain as he was in but the only person around was Jaejoong. He'd die before hitting his lover ever again. His tears were hot, burning as they fell from his clenched eyes. When he blinked to clear his lashes, he could see them splattering Jaejoong's shoulders, soaking through his t-shirt with constellations of wet stars.

Tight with pain, his chest ached with every breath he took. Then Jae's mouth covered his and the pain flowered, blooming into his lover's kiss then withered into dust under the brightness of Jae's soul.

He licked at the seam along Jae's lips, pressing the tip of his tongue against the bow of his lover's succulent mouth. Jae surrendered, opening for Yunho's intrusion. They took their time, slowly exploring one another as if it were something new between them. Yunho's tears spiced their skin, salted pain washing away under Jae's sweetness. There was a tinge of green tea on Jae's tongue, one of Yunho's favourite flavours and he lapped at the mingled pungencies, reveling in the woodsy tang.

Leaving a brush of a kiss on Yunho's lips, Jaejoong stroked his lover's face, tracing the scar under his eye. "It's okay to cry, baby. Even if you only cry here, it's okay to cry."

"My father thinks crying is weak," Yunho laughed. "And here I am always telling you're strong for crying but I still... I still do what my father thinks is... manly."

"We all want our parents to be proud of us," Jae murmured, "I think it's okay to want that."

"Turn off the light, Joongie-ah," Yunho whispered into Jae's chest. "I think I want it dark."

Twisting, Jae flicked off the lamp, plunging the room into shadow. A few moments passed and their vision acclimated to the diffuse glow. A faint light came from outside, washing them in a mingle of blue and white touched with the amber of a rain-dimmed street lamp.

They lay in the sounds of the rain, ankles tangled and knees touching. Yunho's fingers traced back and forth over Jae's hip, rounding the bone in slow circles. Jae rested his head on the pillow, inhaling his lover's scent and still tasting Yunho's tears on his tongue. Moving towards one another, they inched and shifted closer until they once again matched curves with dips, touching skin and clothes in a nearly seamless line.

"I miss my father," Yunho said finally, keeping his voice low as if speaking too loud would bring the world down on them. In a losing battle with his own anger, he sighed, unburdening his heart to his lover. "I miss having him to call when I feel lost. There have been times... when I wanted to call him just to hear him tell me that he raised a man, not a child and that I knew what to do but I just needed to do it."

"Have you told him that?" Jae asked, his words a soft feather touch on Yunho's anguish.

"No, I haven't really talked to him since... that night at the hotel when I walked away from him... from my parents," He admitted. "I expected my mother to... at least talk to me that night but it took longer to talk to her. Much longer. Now, I feel like too much time has passed and I... we... can't go back to how things were."

"Things are never going to be ... how they were," The singer said. "Even if you... even when you turn away from me, it will always linger there between you and your father."

"I am not going to turn away from you, Jaejoong," Yunho said, kissing the tip of Jae's butterfly pout. "You know that."

“At some point, Yunnie-ah, you’re going to want children,” Jae replied. “I can’t give them to you so, like Scarlet-nuna, I will be your lover but I can’t be your family. You come from a good name with a strong lineage. You need to continue that.”

“You are your father’s only son,” He continued to whisper. “He’s not just looking at himself. He’s looking at his parents and your children when he says that he wants you to be... a man. You’re needed to continue your family and its blood line. We might not agree with the things that your father has done but he’s done them with you in mind.”

“I am *not* going to push you aside, Jaejoong,” He insisted. The thought of tucking Jae away into the shadows hurt, nearly as much as the other singer telling him he would find a woman to marry. “There are other ways to have children. I don’t need to marry a woman to have her carry our children.”

“They won’t be our children, Yunho, not in your father’s eyes. Our society doesn’t accept that.” Jae held Yunho’s hand against his hip, pressing the flat of his palm over the man’s knuckles. “I would love them to be and I will love them as mine but they won’t be ours. They can’t be ours. More than likely they’ll carry your name and they’ll look to you for guidance. Me? They will probably look to for spoiling and food.”

“And what about you? You are the only son in your family,” Yunho replied. “Are you saying that you’ll be doing the same? Looking for a woman to have children with and then stealing time to be with me.”

“I don’t know. Probably not,” Jae shrugged. “I’m not... important to my family or any name. I try to reach them but my father... neither father... want out to me. I have my mother... my mothers... and a few of my sisters but I am their son, not the son of a father. The Kim... he threw me out before I became a trainee and my... mother’s husband, he only contacted me to secure money and once he found out that I didn’t have any, I never heard from him again. At least your father tries, Yunho. He tries very hard to pull you back into the family. If he isn’t doing it for love, then he is at least doing it out of obligation.”

“I don’t want to be loved out of obligation,” Yunho spat.

“No, no one does,” He agreed. “But when your father dies, you will be the head of your family. And then, you will be the one making the rules and traditions for your bloodline. You will be in the position to change things for your family. So the next time a Jung comes to say that he loves a man, he will see your face and hear your voice and not your father’s.”

“I don’t want to lose you.” The man cupped Jaejoong’s face, feeling the bone and skin on his fingers. “I don’t ever want to lose you. Not for my father. Not for my son.”

“You won’t,” Jae reassured him with a kiss, whispering his love with the brush of his lips. “We are going to have to love one another in ways that we can. Right now, we are together and that’s all that matters. We’ll deal with the future when it becomes the present.”

“I am telling you, Jaejoong,” Yunho stressed, hearing his voice break again. “I will *not* give you up for a life my father wants me to have. I refuse to. He will have to accept you in his life... as my lover. As my partner.”

“Then offer your father a compromise,” Jaejoong said. “I think he’s scared that you won’t give him... continuance. That by being with me, you won’t be giving him children he can spoil when he’s old. He needs to know that the name Jung will go on when he’s gone, like he promised his father it would. We’re Korean, Yunho. Our lives aren’t our own. They never were. Everything we do is for our parents and those around us.”

“Everything I do is driven by my love for you.”

“Same here,” Jae grinned, touching the swell on his knee. “And sometimes, thinking that way cripples us.”

“Oh I could beat you for not saying anything,” Yunho growled. “You have to tell me when you’re hurt instead of following me blindly.”

“Well then, Jung Yunho, I am telling you that you are hurting right now,” Jae gave his lover a sweet, gentle smile. “And you are following me blindly. Call your father. Repair the break in your heart and soul. Speak with him about your family and what you’re willing to do to bring them back in your life.”

“Do you honestly think he’d listen to me?” Yunho scoffed. “He’s not before.”

“You’ve not spoken to him before,” Jae pointed out. “Not as a man, only as a son. Show him that you are strong enough to lead the Jung family and still be someone I love. Go to him as an equal. That’s all you can do, Yunnie-ah but you’ll be doing it for your mother and sister... and for you as well.”

Thirty-Five

The air in Korea was colder than Japan, brisk and cutting through Yunho's jacket. He reached over to take Jaejoong's hand, confident the driver's attention was on the road instead of the passengers in the back seat. A ring around Jae's finger winked at Yunho's ownership, the white gold and diamond band a sign of their secret love.

"Do you think I could kiss you?" Yunho asked in Japanese. "Do you think he'd notice?"

"Eh?" Jae cocked his head, giving his lover a strange look. Whispering to Yunho in Korean, his breath tickled the other man's ear. "Oh, no no, wrong word. Try... suu, maybe? People use it for slang. It means to breathe in or inhale, to suck... like a kiss."

"That sounds too close to Susu," He grumbled, shifting on the leather seat. "I don't want to think of kissing you and find myself seeing Junsu. It would be wrong."

Yunho leaned into the other man, looking at the hotel as it appeared around the bend. Elegant and modern, it sparkled with lights, glowing against Seoul's skyline. Although they'd spent time in the hotel as lovers, it still resonated in Yunho's heart as the place where his father turned away from him. Not even the memory of Jaejoong's hot kisses could sear that pain from his heart.

"It will be alright," Jae said gently. "We'll be fine."

"Stay with me, Jaejoong," Yunho said.

"I'm here." The singer tightened his grip on his lover's hands, giving him a gentle squeeze.

"No, I mean, stay with me. Always." Staring out of the window, the future loomed before Yunho and he saw Jaejoong's ghost wafting through the possibilities. "I don't want to hear any more discussion about how I will take a wife and leave you to the side. I am not going to live my life like that. Not without you. I will promise you this; no matter what happens in our lives, you will always come first. Even above the members. Even above my family."

"You shouldn't make that promise, Yunho." Shaking his head, Jaejoong pressed his lips into a thin line. "And you should be quieter. The driver..."

"I don't care if the driver hears," Yunho responded. "We've been through too much together. I'm not going to let go. Not now. Not in the future. You better get used to seeing me in your life, Kim Jaejoong, because I'm not going to leave it."

The driver cleared his throat, interrupting Jaejoong before he could speak. "We're here, sirs. Let me get your luggage."

The sudden trip meant hasty packing but the young men were used to shoving their lives into small spaces, leaving on a moment's notice to somewhere far off. This trip meant coming home but the hurry had been the same. Let loose from their schedules for only a couple of days, the older members owed the other three an enormous favour, having left the brunt of interviews and radio appearances on their shoulders.

"I hope Yoochun's practiced his Japanese," Yunho said, tipping the driver. "They're going to ask him the most questions just because he stumbles a lot."

"Changmin will take care of it," Jae laughed. "He is your majordomo, the baby-Yun. Gakkun said he saw Min on a show and was impressed by how old he is. For a while, he thought Susu-ah was Changmin because he acted so silly."

"I'm not sure I like your Gakkun looking at our Min." Yunho strolled into the hotel, nodding at the uniformed man holding open an enormous glass door.

"He's not just our Min, Yunnie-ah," Jae said with a laugh. "He's Dong-Wook's as well."

The response on Yunho's tongue died, burnt to ashes when he spotted his father rising from a chair in the bar area. He barely heard Jaejoong say that he'd take care of their room, and the touch of the other man's hand between his shoulder blades spread a warm sweetness through his body, defeating the chill crackling over his heart. Unable to stop himself, he took a step forward towards his father then stalled, reminding himself that he would be met halfway at least. He wasn't prepared at all for the sight of his father striding over the marble floor and then the feel of the man's arm pull him into a quick, intense embrace.

"You look good," His father rumbled, the low pitch of his voice nearly a match for Yunho's singing pitch. Holding his son by the shoulders, he examined Yunho carefully. "Too thin. Don't they feed you over there? Why are you so thin?"

"I've been trying to lose weight," Yunho admitted, greeting his father with a slight bow of his head. The gesture was automatic, a courtesy bred in deep and it was returned, accompanied by a squeeze of the man's fingers into Yunho's upper arms. "I felt unattractive from eating poorly. I'm just eating smaller and better."

"It looks like you aren't eating enough," Jung insisted, patting Yunho's shoulders before letting him go. "Where is...um... the other one?"

"Kim Jaejoong?" Yunho strained to keep his voice even. "He is checking us in. Let me see if he needs anything. I will join you in the bar if you wish."

"Of course," Jung said, tilting his head up. Slightly shorter than his son, he still overpowered the room with a charismatic, dominating presence. "There is a private room in the lounge area. I have reserved it for us so we can talk without anyone overhearing."

"I'll ask the manager to take me there if you'd like to wait," Yunho replied. He understood his father's need for privacy but hiding Jae away from prying eyes rankled. Compromise, he reminded himself. This meeting was all about compromise.

Jaejoong was signing the final registration forms when Yunho joined him at the main desk. Greeting the hotel manager warmly, he took his keycard and slid it into the pocket of his suit jacket, smoothing down a wrinkle in the lapel. As a bellhop struggled to maneuver their luggage onto a rack, Yunho pulled Jae away from the small cluster of people around the desk.

"My father wants to talk down here. He's reserved a room in the bar." Yunho bent in close, nearly touching Jae's cheek with his own. "Do you want me to go up with you or do you want to let them handle the luggage and come with me to the bar?"

"I think you should first talk to your father alone," Jae whispered back. It was hard not to comfort the man with a touch. People watched the them, intent on stealing a few moments of their lives to take back to gossip on later. Recognizable to the average person in Korea, Jae realized how different their world was now that they were in Japan and were fighting to climb to the top once again.

"Are you sure?"

"Very," Jae replied. "I think it's important that you two discuss things openly. If you need to leave, then I will be waiting for you in the room. If you need me to come down, just call and I will join you but first, you must at least hear him. And he must hear you."

The bar was as he remembered it. Not much had changed in the few years since he'd sat across his mother, drunk from whiskey and mourning the death of his familial relationships. A white-shirted man bowed and led him to a door. The room beyond was as elegantly appointed as the rest of the hotel, a long wide picture window affording a view of the city below.

Comfortable looking wingchairs were arranged around a table bursting with dishes of appetizers to pick at. Nearby on a Queen Anne buffet, a collection of crystal decanters sparkled with various amber and clear alcohols, the soft overhead lights catching on the glass' facets.

Yunho's father stood at the window, a short glass filled with what appeared to be whiskey in his hand. Ice cubes clinked pleasantly when he took a sip, his eyes fixed on the city outside of the hotel. Studying the man's profile, Yunho saw the lines in his father's skin, deep set crevices around his eyes and mouth. It was a shock to see age on the man's face and the silver in his hair glistened under the lights, its creep much farther down on his father's temples than Yunho remembered. There was a hunch to his shoulders as if an invisible weight pushed him forward and down, carrying something heavier than he'd expected to but shouldered none the less.

"Hello, Father," Yunho said, giving the man a bow in greeting. Closing the door behind him, he walked over to the credenza, helping himself to a glass of whiskey. It took him a moment to find the sour mash brew, sniffing carefully at the other amber bottles until he found the fragrant charcoal filtered alcohol. Mixing it with a cold can of cola from the fridge below, he walked over to the chairs as his father settled in.

Sitting across of the man who'd shaped him, Yunho studied his father again, noticing the small cracks in the man's armour. There was a spot of something on his shirt cuff, a light stain near the fastening link. Notably impeccable, the blemish was evidence of the absence of his wife. Yunho's mother ran a tight household, never satisfied with good enough and demanding excellence from everyone, including the dry cleaners to washed her husband's shirts. Whomever took up the household duties in his mother's absence was clearly not up to the task.

But then, Yunho admitted baldly, if he had to run the group's household, he'd be screaming for Jaejoong in a matter of minutes.

"I'm glad you could come meet me," Jung said. "Will the other one be joining us?"

"Kim Jaejoong," Yunho said, gritting his teeth. "You can call him by his name, Father. And no, Joongie thought we should have some time to talk alone."

"Kim, then," His father replied. "Are you... both doing well?"

"No." Admitting troubles aloud was freeing although there was a spark of something unknown in his father's eyes when he spoke. "We're doing well together but the past few months have been... difficult."

"I am glad that Netsuke was of use to you," The man said, moving a dish of spicy tofu towards Yunho. "Here, eat. Something healthy at least but flavourful."

"Thank you." Picking a piece of the tofu out with a pair of steel chopsticks, he chewed the morsel, washing the heat down with a sip of chilled drink. "She was helpful. We were able to get things to rights because of her help."

"She told me that she offered to sleep with you." He gave his son a calculating look. "That was not my doing. She told me she found you attractive but that you were... not what she imagined my son to be."

Forestalling the conversation, Yunho tried a piece of fishcake, murmuring at the sweetened taste. "How is that? How am I not your son?"

"She thought you would be... harder," Jun replied. "More... ruthless. I told her that you had other things to consider besides your own wants and needs."

"Ah, much unlike you then," Yunho said. As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he regretted saying them. The hurt in his father's eyes was small, a flash of pain that disappeared under his rigid control. Remembering what Jaejoong said about being more careful with his words, he added. "I'm sorry. That was uncalled for. We're here to talk...to compromise."

"It is understandable." Jung nodded. "I am having a hard time accepting him in your life. Even though I can guess how much you think he means to you."

“Not I think, Father. How much he means to me.” Yunho turned his glass, watching the melting ice cubes swirl in his whiskey-cola. “I would give up everything to be with him.”

“You have,” His father reminded him.

“No, not everything,” Yunho responded. “I still have my career and my friends. My mother and sister are now a part of my life so my family is present, even if not intact. And most of all, I have Jaejoong by my side.”

“You still consider him yours?” Jung’s eyebrows lifted, wrinkling his forehead. “Even if he had sex with another man? What was that man’s name? Kimura? Even with that?”

“He didn’t sleep with Kimura, Father.” Yunho kept his temper tight, reminding himself that gossip had a way of changing a story as it worked through the grapevine. Keeping to honesty, Yunho exhaled, reminding his nerves that he was in control. “Kimura tried to rape him. He manipulated Jaejoong into a corner and tried to have sex with him.”

“Did he lead him on? Your Kim. I’ve seen how he... acts with other men,” Jung said with a shrug. “He is ...provocative.”

“No one is so provocative that they deserve to have someone push themselves onto them.” Yunho clenched the arms of the chair, telling himself to calm down. His temper raged, pounding at the thin glass of his control. He could feel himself cracking and his legs were tense, as if willing him to leap to his feet and stride from the room. Instead, he took another sip of his drink and spoke, “Jae is the only reason I am here. He urged me to meet with you... to come to terms with you.”

“What terms can we come too, Yunho?” His father leaned forward, crossing his hands at his wrists. “You are with a *man*, Yunho and a singer of a group of men who sell their bodies on camera. How much farther away can you get from where I wanted you to be?”

“I lead my group and no, we’re not whores,” Yunho replied. “Can’t you see how hard we work? How much we’ve accomplished?”

“I see your faces on the sides of buildings and I think; how shameful for our family,” Jung admitted. “Your mother was... is very proud. She cuts out articles and prints things from the internet about your group. She puts what she finds in a book with pictures of you...of you and your...I don’t know what to call him. Those books were one of the things she took with her when she left.”

“She accepts Jaejoong, Father,” Yunho said. “And you can call him my lover or my boyfriend. Or just Jaejoong.”

“I can’t call him your... lover,” His father said. “That word is too... intimate.”

“We are intimate...”

“I don’t want to hear about those things,” Jung interrupted. “None of those things.”

“Then let’s talk about something we can agree on,” Yunho replied. “Something like... our family.”

“What is there to talk about? You are with a man, an uneducated street whore...”

“I am telling you to stop right there,” He warned his father, holding up his hand. The band on his finger caught the light, silvering his resolve.

Turning his palm towards his father, Yunho displayed the ring proudly. “This... is a symbol I share with Jaejoong. My uneducated street whore is a better man than you’ll ever be, Father. He knows how to love and how to give of himself and is willing to sacrifice anything for my happiness. I’ve earned that love. And now, I realize that I *deserve* that type of love. Can you, a man who sits across of me without a wife, a daughter or even a son, say the same?”

Thirty-Six

Jaejoong looked up when the door to the suite opened. He wasn't surprised to see Yunho walk in but the oddly blank look on his face was curious. Putting down the book he'd been reading, Jae watched his lover unbutton the collar of his shirt, continuing down until Jae caught a glimpse of abdominal muscles. Shucking off his shoes, Yunho padded over to the bed in his stocking feet, kneeling besides the other man to give him a soulful kiss.

"Should I ask how it went?" Jae cocked his head as his lover pulled off his dress socks. Balling up his socks, Yunho tossed them towards his shoes, cheering himself when they fell short of his loafers.

"It went... badly," Yunho replied, leaning his head on Jae's shoulder. "I left him downstairs."

"Okay," Jaejoong drawled, hooking his elbows on the pillows behind him. "Now what?"

"I didn't walk out without tell him that we'd try again," He replied, kissing the beauty spot under Jae's jaw line. "He wants to have dinner with us."

"Us, huh?"

"Yeah, us," Yunho said, reaching under Jaejoong's t-shirt to run his palm over the man's belly button. He grinned when a metal loop caught on his ring, making the singer hiss. "I want to fool around. Do you want to fool around?"

"Well..." A knock on the door interrupted Jae and he grinned widely. "We have company."

"Oh Joongie-ah," Yunho fell onto the bed, hiding his face in the pillows when Jaejoong slid out from under him to get the door. "Who would you ask..."

"Ahjumma," Yunho heard his lover say when Jae opened the door. A squealing high-pitched shout echoed through the suite and he sat up, recognizing the little girl yelling his name as she ran through the living area and into the bedroom.

"Harabuhji!" His sister teased, jumping at him with open arms. Her flight was innocent and trusting, flying towards her brother in a huge jump.

He caught her in mid-air, hoisting up her slender body and caught her tight against his chest. Her squeals of joy nearly broke his hearing, but he didn't mind. She smelled of candy and a bit of the city, her once long hair chopped into a stylish modern swing cut he'd seen on a few of the female singers in his company.

"Ji-Ji," Yunho said, wincing playfully when she pounded on his shoulder with a clenched fist. "Oooooouch, you are brutal. I shall tell Umma that she is feeding you too much."

"That's because you're old now," She said, a wide smile on her face. "Umma is talking to your *keikeu*. He's still very pretty. I want to marry him when I get older. Tell him to wait for me."

"*Keikeu*? My Jaejoong is not a dessert," Yunho replied. "And don't you love your brother any more? Have I lost you to the cold pretty Jaejoong?"

"Hah, I can't marry my brother," Ji responded, tweaking his nose with her fingers. "Besides, he'll buy me a lot of pretty things. All I have to do is ask him."

"You don't know my Je-Je then," Her brother said, carrying her into the living room. "I end up paying for everything he wants."

"Don't believe him," Jaejoong retorted back. "Yunho-ah is notoriously cheap. I have to pry every won I need out of his fingers. I could make thread with it when I'm done; it's been stretched out that much."

Putting his sister down, Yunho crossed the room to hug his mother. Like his father, she bore signs of age he'd not noticed before; fine lines neatly hidden with a thin layer of makeup and a tightness around her mouth that relaxed when she saw him. Holding him tight, she muffled a sobbing cry by burying her face into his chest, cradling him closer as his arms crossed over her shoulders.

"Ji-ji-ah," Jaejoong bent over, murmuring into the young girl's ear. "Let's go downstairs and have Shirley Temples and cake. We can let your umma and brother talk, no?"

"Okay," She grinned flirtatiously at the older man, fluttering her lashes. "I am leaving you, Yunnie-ah. I have found someone else, someone prettier."

"Hah, you'll have to give him back when you're done." His mother released him and Yunho ran after her, sliding side to side when she ducked behind Jaejoong to hide. "Oh, hiding behind your boyfriend now! What a brat!"

"He's taking me to the lounge," Ji sniffed. "And I'm sure he'll get me a gelato too."

"Not too much sugar, please," Mrs. Jung said, reaching for her purse. Jaejoong waved her off with a brief bow of his head and a hand pressed to his chest. "Thank you. Ji, behave for Jaejoong."

"Oppa?" She wrinkled her nose and took Jaejoong's hand. "He is Joongie-ah! I can call him that."

"Try not to let her bully you into giving her everything," Yunho whispered into Jae's ear. He brushed his lips against the man's lobe, conscious of his younger sister's presence. "She'll wrap you around her finger if you let her."

"I'd have a hard time fitting since you're already there," Jae teased. "Come, Ji-ji-ah. Let's see what they have downstairs."

Mrs. Jung waited until the door closed then sat down, wiping at the traces of tears at the edges of her eyes. Set in the expensive elegance of the suite, she appeared to suit the surroundings; a society matron out for an afternoon with her daughter but the tightness in her face spoke of difficulties and Yunho frowned when he saw her sag.

"Umma, what's wrong?" He moved over to the couch and sat down besides his mother. "Are you alright? Do you need money?"

"Aish, a son shouldn't be burdened with his mother until..." She stopped, her hand going to her throat where a string of pink pearls lay. She played with them, unease in her eyes. "I was going to say married and old but that will never... happen."

"Jaejoong and I have... talked about this," Yunho admitted. "I say I will not marry and have children on my own terms. He's of the opinion that I should take a wife and live a more... traditional life. It would be easier but I don't think I could stomach the lie. I don't like hiding Jaejoong away as if he were something filthy that couldn't be out in company. That bothers me."

"It would," She said with a nod. "You're an honest soul. You were never one to stand for injustices. I don't see that changing now."

"And you'll always be welcome in my household," He said, kissing her temple. At some point, he'd become the adult, holding his mother up as she struggled. "I am serious about money. I will have the bank issue you some funds. I can send the accountant a text message. He can have it in place before I leave for Japan."

"I am fine, truly," The older woman demurred.

"I'd rather have it there for you as a safety net, okay?" Yunho frowned. "Just in case."

"If you think it would be a good idea," Mrs. Jung said, twisting the gold band on her finger. The skin under the ring was pale, shrunken from being covered and Yunho smiled despite his reservations about his father. From the looks of things, his mother still carried his father in her heart.

"I do. If you would excuse me for a moment." A quick jot on his phone to his Korean accountant was answered nearly instantaneously and Yunho tapped in his approval for funds to move into his mother's account. "There. Just in case."

"Just in case," She repeated with a nod. "I will return the money to you, Yunho."

"Umma, please." He shook his head, cupping her hands where they rested on her thigh. "Consider it a gift. I would be a poor son if I didn't take care of my mother."

"I... have not been a good mother in return." Her eyes pinked, a swell of tears threatening to smear her carefully applied makeup. "I should have stood up to your father long before this. I never should have let this mess get so far."

Wrapping his arm around his mother's shoulders, Yunho pulled her towards him. "Umma, it's okay. I think everything needed to happen the way it did so I could... learn what it means to be strong in times like these. I've learned a lot from what's been going on. I think it's made me stronger at least."

"And your Jaejoong? How much of this has torn at him, especially when he had... other matters to deal with?"

"Joongie-ah is a lot stronger than I am," Yunho said. "Sometimes I think he should have been the group leader, even if he is distracted and too blunt some times. He's better at guiding me than I am at guiding him."

"Is he... alright after..." Mrs. Jung stalled. Yunho understood her hesitation. Speaking of the incident out loud would make it all the more real and the idea of a man falling prey to another was something most people had a hard time dealing with. Swallowing her reticence, she continued, "Is he doing better after the attacks?"

"He's sleeping better," Yunho admitted, letting his mother go. Retrieving a bottle of water from the wet bar, he brought it and a box of tissues over for the woman, sitting back down on the couch. "It's been difficult at times but we have... a friend who's been helping and Shizu-chan, our manager in Japan, has a... partner that is a counselor. Jaejoong's been speaking with him sometimes but informally. Pride is a difficult thing to work around, even for someone as open-minded as Jaejoong."

"But he is doing better, no?" She asked. "I pray for him. I know that it sounds... strange since I am not his mother but I feel as if... it is the right thing to do. Do you think he'd mind?"

"No, I think he'd be touched. I don't think he's spoken to his mother...either one... about what's happened. And as for his father," Yunho said, dismissing the man with an eloquent shrug. "He's cast Jaejoong aside as spoiled rice. I don't understand how someone can love someone as their son and then in an instant, that love is burnt away like paper."

"Are you speaking about Jaejoong or you and your father?" His mother peered into her son's face.

"Right now, I was talking about Joongie-ah," Yunho chuckled. "But I suppose I could say the same about my father. I always thought he would be there as my support no matter what but here I am wondering if I'm fighting as useless a battle as Jaejoong is."

"Your father loves you," Her response was automatic, cued by culture and breeding but Yunho felt the sting of an apology in them as if his mother could only express the barest of truths when speaking of her husband.

"I know he loves me as he thinks he should love me," Yunho admitted, stretching back on the sofa. "But I need him to love me...differently."

His mother shifted, uncomfortable at even the remote confrontation between her son and her husband. Nervously, she twisted her ring again, focusing on the bright gold band. "It is... difficult for him."

"I know. And I'm trying to understand that. I am trying to compromise, Mother. But I can't... I won't compromise on Jaejoong..." He was about to continue when a knock on the door interrupted him. "Hold on, Umma. I'll bet money that it is Joongie. He always forgets the keycard."

There were two passcards on the entrance table and Yunho grinned, sure his lover had found himself locked out and probably, the singer thought, without his wallet. Grabbing one of the keys, he opened the door, flicking the hard plastic rectangle up for Jaejoong to take and swallowed the teasing words on the tip of his tongue.

“Appa!” Yunho took a step back. On guard, he eyed the older man, feeling once again the child before his father. “I... wasn’t expecting you.”

“May I come in?” Jung’s chin lifted as if expecting a refusal and Yunho felt a flash of guilt burn through him, ashamed their relationship disintegrated to the point of expecting animosity instead of acquiescence.

About to let the man past him, Yunho stopped, remembering his mother in the suite’s living room. “Appa, I have to...”

“It is alright, Yunho.” His mother stood at the end of the short foyer, her diminutive frame held erect and proud. “Your father may come in.”

“I don’t want you to be uncomfortable...” Yunho stammered, literally caught between his parents. “Or leave.”

“I am not leaving,” She sniffed, turning on her heel. “I was here first. Besides, perhaps it is time that all three of us sat down and discussed a few things. Not the least of which is your lover, Kim Jaejoong and how your father expects to apologize to him.”



“What’s a Shirley Temple?” Ji asked, resting her chin on the bar.

Jae quirked a smile at the bleached-blond bartender when the older Korean man looked at the singer appraisingly. The man’s dark gaze travelled slowly over Jae’s face then trailed down to his chest and arms before returning Jae’s grin with a slow, welcoming smile.

“Lemon-lime soda, cherry syrup and cherries,” Jae winked at the bartender. “If you give the bartender a big enough tip, he gives you a lot of cherries in your Shirley Temple.”

“Can I give the tip?” She held her hand out to Jae, grasping the won he put in her palm. Standing on the tip of her toes, the slender girl stretched over the bar and slid the money into the tip jar, giving the bartender a dazzling smile. “Is that enough?”

“More than enough,” He winked back at Jaejoong. “I’ll bring your drinks out to you if you want to sit down.”

“Will he bring the gelato too?” Ji selected a table against the stretch of glass that served as the outer wall of the bar. Jutting over the hillside, the window gave the bar the illusion of floating in mid air. Positioned at the apex of the room, their table gave them a clear view of the city and the Han river winding through Seoul. Pulling out Ji’s chair, Jaejoong tucked it under her and took up the other seat, pointing out the park that the members used to live by. When the drinks arrived, Ji squealed her thanks at the bartender when she spotted the clouds of maraschino cherries bobbing at the bottom of her tall glass.

“Thanks,” Jae smiled, signing their room number to the tab. “You’ve made her day.”

“I could be persuaded to do other things,” The man said, leaning on Jae’s chair, his hands gripping the high wooden back. “I don’t even need a tip.”

“Really?” Ji piped. “Do you have a menu? Oppa said he would buy me gelato while we wait for my brother and mother to finish talking. They’re boyfriends but they don’t want anyone to know.”

“Aish,” Jae covered his face with his hands, a flush of red pinking his ears. “Ji-ji-ah...”

“Boyfriend, huh?” The man straightened, grinning widely. “Are you sure you’re not saying that so you can have him for yourself?”

“Well... I do get to keep him for a bit,” Ji twinkled. “So yes, mine for now.”

"Thanks," Jaejoong responded as the man left to retrieve a pair of dessert menus. "You're going to get me into trouble with Yunho, brat."

"Ah, he won't mind." The sing-song pretty voice she affected was gone, replaced by a solemn little-girl version of her brother's serious tone. "Yunnie-ah will understand that I was only doing what he would be if he were here. He won't mind at all."

Shaking his head, the young man hissed in his throat, taking the menu from the waitress who joined them. Glancing over the selection, he asked for a glass of water and some time as Ji pondered her decision. They'd just decided on splitting a tower of hot chocolate cake and vanilla ice cream when a familiar voice echoed in Jae's ear.

"Hello, baby," Se7en said, sliding into the seat between Ji and Jaejoong. Nodding his head to the young girl, he held his hand out. "Hello. How are you? I am Choi Dong-Wook."

"Ah, you are the bastard Yunho dislikes," Ji said artlessly. "He speaks of you sometimes. Usually with curse words I shouldn't overhear."

"Yet you hear them anyway," Jae commented, widening his eyes at her to mimic her mock innocence. "And then you use them. This princess is Jung Yunho's sister, Ji. Ji-ah, properly he should be your oppa so try to remember that."

"Yes, baby," She repeated the affectation in English, poking Jae back. "Do you mind if I order now? And maybe get another Temple-u."

"No, go ahead. But please don't go far." Jae nodded, putting the menu down. The rest of the bar was deserted and the waitress lounged by the entrance, folding napkins to be used later in the evening. Lights from a long sea water aquarium reflected on the tables and her hair, giving off flashes of blue and green as she turned. "If you want, you can look at the fish. They might have a shark in there."

"Oh yes," Ji stood up, making a quick courtesy of a bow to the older men before heading to the fish tank.

"Are you sure it's safe for her to be over there?" Se7en asked quietly.

"It's only a few feet and she's old enough to watch out for herself. She should be fine. It's just a fish tank." Jae looked at him curiously. "The shark is small. I don't think it's going to bite her if she thinks about sticking her hand in."

"I wasn't worried about the shark. I was worried for it," He replied. "She's as much of a predator as her brother is, just in a cuter, smaller package."

"Hah," Jae mocked. "Funny. How did you find me?"

"I'm meeting Tae. There's a racquetball court here and he's going to teach me to play," Se7en shrugged. "I personally think it's just an excuse for him to hit me with a ball but I'm going to give him the benefit of the doubt. What are you doing here? Are you stalking me? Is the rest of the yakuza here and this is a hit?"

"No, only Yunho and I came over but he'll be glad to accommodate you. I was hoping for the Jungs to reconcile," Jaejoong motioned to Ji who was engaged in a serious conversation with the waitress. "I took Ji-sister with me so Yunho and his mother could speak then I spotted Jung heading upstairs but I don't think he saw me. I thought we could hide out here until it either blows over or they melt the windows with their screaming."

"Ouch, it's going that well?" Se7en winced. "So then Yunho comes by his stubbornness through his parents."

"Be cautious when speaking of Yunnie-ah." The sweet beauty of Jae's face chilled. "He is my lover."

"Trust me, BooJae. That's not something I'm likely to forget."

"How are you and Minnie-ah doing?" Jae asked. "Better? Have you called him?"

"I'm waiting for him to call me," Se7en replied. "I thought I'd ask him... silently ... to chase after me for a while. Up to now, I've done all the chasing and look what it got me?" He held up his hand, a slight pink line marring his palm. "He can pick up the phone too."

"He won't. Not if you told him to give you time. He's stubborn. He likes being right," Jae said, inspecting the healed over cut. "And you can't blame him for that. You did it to yourself. You might be able to blame Yunho for hitting you but I'm still not so sure on that one."

"Hah," He exhaled, leaning back in the chair. "So if he won't give in, what do I do? Crawl to him? So he gets used to throwing a tantrum and having me fix things over? I don't want to end up like you and Yunho, circling around one another stabbing with pointed chopsticks and then kissing to make it better. Why not skip the chopsticks part and go straight to the kissing?"

"I've now decided Yunho was right in punching you," Jae said with a nod. "He should have punched you twice. Just to be sure."

"Now I know where Min gets his mean streak from," Dong-Wook snorted. "I'm serious. What now? Do I crawl back to him? Or do I make him crawl to me?"

"No crawling," Jae responded. An idea formed in his head and he passed a paper napkin over to Se7en. "Write down your flight information so I know when you're coming home. We're going to be here until late Wednesday. Sit down and write Min a letter about how you feel. If you can get it back to me before we leave, I can put it in his hands."

"Do you think it will work?" Se7en frowned. "Really?"

"What have you got to lose?" Jaejoong shrugged. "At least you would have tried and Changmin will know how you feel. He's been moping about you since you told him to get out. I think a letter from you would be like rain in a desert... assuming of course he's not broken into your apartment and gutted your mattress. He does still have your key. If I were you, I'd change the locks if you don't make up. Min has a very... inventive sense of revenge."



The quiet of his hotel room echoed around him and Se7en lay on the couch, tapping a pen against the wire spiral of his notebook. Small balls of paper littered the floor, blue-lined white tumbleweeds caught in the light breeze coming from his open windows. Night hovered on the horizon and he still had nothing to show for his efforts other than a few ink stains on his fingers and a headache where Tae hit him with a racquet ball.

Sighing, he chewed on the end of the pen, wondering again what he could say to Changmin to make the younger man understand how he felt.

"Shit, this would be easier if I knew what I felt," He grumbled, doodling in the margin of the sheet. "Or if I had a cat or fish or something so it didn't look like I was talking to myself."

Glancing at the silk plant he bought to replace the dieffenbachia he'd killed. So far his mother either hadn't noticed that the housewarming gift she'd given him had been murdered or she was, more likely, refusing to comment for fear of offending him. Since his apartment was being painted, he brought the silk plant with him, hoping something from his own home would make him feel better. All it did was remind him that he couldn't keep anything alive.

"Just be honest, Jaejoong said," Se7en sighed. "Honest? Nothing about me is honest. I have a lover that doesn't even call me by my name. Hell, I don't even *answer* to my real name any more but maybe that's where I should start."

Uncapping the pen, he started to write.

"Minku,

By the time you're reading this, I'll be...actually I don't where I'll be. I don't know where I am now. Well, I'm in the hotel but I couldn't tell you which one to save my life.

Se7en debated looking at the room service menu for the hotel name but discarded the idea. "He doesn't care where you are. Just tell him what you're thinking. God, this would be easier if you just called him. And now I'm talking to myself like he does. They're right. Spend enough time around someone and you start doing the same crazy things they do. Okay, calling..."

I thought about calling you. God, I think about calling you every day and night. I miss hearing you. I miss having you in my day. And I miss having you in my life. Right now is the hardest time for me because I know we both needed to think about what we said and how we said it. We hurt one another. And no one can hurt like someone you love.

I'm not a very good writer. If it's not lyrics then most of the time, I text everything. But I thought instead of a phone call that would make me want to be near you, I should write you a letter to tell you why I want to be near you. I don't think you understand that about me.

So here goes. Don't laugh.

His fingers trembled as he wrote. He'd scribbled down the words so often when writing songs. They'd become nothing more than a refrain or a chorus, something to emphasize a phrase or jerk at the heartstrings of his fans. When written to someone, the letters took on a different meaning, stabbing at him until his heart bled from the open wounds left by Min's anger. Swallowing the lump in his throat, Se7en continued.

I love you. That's the first thing I need to remind you. I loved you before I wondered if I'm in love with you. You make me think about how to feel. You make me wonder what is out there in the world that I've not seen. And you bring to me a view of the people and things around me that I've not even considered. I've spent a lot of my life being Se7en and sometimes I forget that I'm also Dong-Wook. I don't even know who that is anymore. And you've made me realize that I should know who I am.

God, he thought, isn't that true? You've made me... Choi Dong-Wook again, Minku. I even introduced myself to Yunho's sister that way today. Without even thinking about it, I was Choi Dong-Wook.

How weird is that?

God you make me ache. You do. I see you and I want to crawl up inside of you and stay. Not just sexually because I want to do that too but because I want to see the world through your eyes. It's so different from what I see. It's like you have a prism that you peer through and everything is more brilliantly coloured. I like seeing the world that way.

"I miss your rainbow dreams, baby," Se7en murmured. "Damn, how I miss your dreams."

Without you, my world is grey and bleak.

That's how I first knew I was falling in love with you. Not because you make me laugh or because I like the blush you get when I embarrass you. It was because when I'm not with you, I still can see the colours you've left behind in my eyes.

Resolved to risk everything, Se7en took a breath and continued, committing himself to one last chance with Changmin. If the young man was willing to have him, he'd try again. His heart was already fractured. It could stand to wait a few more days before being fully broken.

I'm coming back in a few days. On Friday afternoon, I think. I don't know what condition I'll be in when I get back because I'm dead tired now and I still have a few more days of this crap to go through. But it's important crap. That's another thing I like about you. You understand what I go through because you go through it yourself.

If we decide to do this thing, because we keep calling it a thing, we're going to have to work to regain the trust in each other. I know this. I'm willing to do this. I hope you are too.

I'll leave my cell phone on Friday night. If you want to call. I'm leaving this up to you, Minku. Because I promised I would let you decide how fast we move. I'm still here if you want me.

He stared at the page, wondering how to finish it then thought of the last time he'd seen the young man and the want that flared in him even as his anger set his thoughts on fire.

Love you. Even when you piss me the fuck off, I love you.

Se7en.

He left the letter as it was, doodles in the margins and splatters where the ink ran from the pen's leaking ball. Blowing the paper dry, he folded it then slid it into an envelope, including pictures of himself in Hong Kong when Tae joined him. His face smiled back at him, cheeks puffed out with food but his eyes were forlorn, saddened by the lack of a certain Minku in his life.

Sealing the envelope, Se7en kissed the flap, sending his love to Changmin one final time before turning his attention back to the love song he'd left unfinished, its tragic words suddenly too painful to bear.

Thirty-Se7en

It was Jung who carried the sleeping Ji to the car, her face slightly smeared with the remains of her dinner and her hand still clutching the bright pink elephant Jaejoong bought her at the gift shop. It dangled by its trunk, making squeaking noises as her fingers tightened on her toy when her mother tried to put it away. The driver smiled as he held the door open for Jung, nodding to Yunho's mother as he said he had a blanket in the back they could use to cover Ji for the ride home.

Yunho kissed his mother goodbye, her cheek still as soft as when he was a child. She wrinkled her nose at him, having to crane her neck back to stare up into his handsome face. Cupping his cheeks, she held Yunho's face, staring at her only son as if to memorize every centimetre of his skin and every lash.

"You will call me, yes?" She asked, giving her son a hug before letting him go.

"Are you okay? With this?" Yunho glanced at his father, looking meaningfully back at his mother.

"It will be difficult but we will try," She murmured, patting her son's shirt and straightening his lapel. "I have to try. I do love him, Yunho. It is hard to love someone who only thinks of himself and the world he wants. Keep that in mind when you are loving your Jaejoong."

"I will," Yunho promised. He walked his mother to the car, helping her in.

His father stood to the side, discreet and shadowed as he paid the driver for his wife's ride. A last bit of conversation through the open door and he closed it softly, tapping the roof to let the driver know it was time to leave. Stepping back, he watched the car wind down the road, its red lights disappearing around the bend. In a moment, his family was gone... except for the young man standing behind him.

Turning, Jung faced Yunho. With his hands in his slacks pockets, the singer looked older, more mature than the little boy who'd left the Jung household only a few years ago. Small things changed; things that Jung wished he'd been able to give his son. The jut of his tooth was gone, a small enamel imperfection that lifted his smile and Jung realized he missed the crooked grin of a certain little boy who'd run from the house when he came home. The suit Jung wore now could have paid to fix the crooked smile but the timing was too late. His fortunes reversed too late for his son.

But it didn't take away the memory of his sweet little boy who stood in front of him as a man.

Behind Yunho stood another man, slender and androgynous. From what Jung could see, he was a cold beauty, unmoved and untouched by the family he'd torn apart when he seduced Yunho. Then something shifted and the ice cracked to release a blazing star-streaked sweetness.

It was a brightness to behold when he'd come across of Jaejoong telling silly stories to his daughter. Ji's face was wrinkled with laughter, her smile nearly wide enough to touch her ears. If possible, her grin grew even bigger when she saw him, squealing with an open-hearted glee as she ran up to her father. Jung couldn't help but remember the same wild, flailing run of his son when his daughter zipped around tables to launch herself at him.

His cheek still was warm where she kissed it and declared herself; *'delighted to see him'*.

His gut was still cold where his son's words settled before he'd steeled himself to find Yunho's room and apologize.

As things stood, Jung had one thing left to do, and he wasn't certain he was up to the task.

"Do you have time for a drink?" Jung asked as he approached Yunho. "I am certain they would hold a table open for us if we require it."

“Joongie-ah?” Yunho glanced at his lover standing a foot or so away. “Do you mind if...”

“Actually, Yunho,” Jung cleared his throat. “I’d like Jaejoong to join us.”

Yunho choked on his breath, catching his tongue on his palate. Jaejoong’s surprise was smoother but no less abrupt. Frozen with surprise, he nearly didn’t see the car easing into the loading zone until the driver tapped patiently on the horn, waving in apology for Jaejoong to move. Bowing deeply for delaying the man, Jaejoong stepped onto the curb, speechless when Yunho tugged on his arm. Recovering the younger man smiled at his father, guiding Jaejoong towards the door with a gentle push.

“We’d love to join you, Father,” Yunho said, his formal tone distinct and proper as he accepted the man’s offer. “Please, after you, Jaejoong.”



They were led into a smaller alcove set away from the now bustling bar, intimate and shrouded by plates of glass and ferns. A white cloth covered the table and three chairs were arranged equally around it. Yunho hooked his fingers into the back support of one, sliding it closer towards another. Sitting down, Yunho draped his arm around the chair next to him, cradling Jae’s shoulders.

Jung paused, frozen by the image of his son and his lover. There was no mistaking their relationship. They sat as lovers did, the intimacy of their movements not blunted by the space separating them. Strong and masculine, the men were... beautiful. It was the only word that Jung could use, the only one that came to mind. Elegant, refined and worldly, they seemed to be different people from the young boys he’d seen perform only a few years ago.

Their obvious love and affection made him feel small... and mourn the love he might have lost with his words and actions.

“I’m glad you could join me,” Jung said, settling into his seat.

A waiter came by, one of the faceless, white-shirted men the hotel employed to be silent but Jung couldn’t help notice the young man’s glances towards the young men across of him. The man’s eyes lingered on Jaejoong’s face and Jung searched his expression for any overt sign of sexual interest, wondering if the men realized the overt eroticism of their display.

He was shocked to discover he could find nothing other than a placid interest, possibly recognition of a pair of famous singers and he leaned back, re-evaluating his thoughts.

Am I seeing things that aren’t there? Jung asked himself. Am I creating something out of air? Have I been wrong in this? Can I trust them to be... careful?

“You look thin as well, Kim Jaejoong,” He said, studying the slender man. “Are you and Yunho both dieting?”

“No,” Jae replied, shaking his head. “I’ve not... felt very hungry of late but it’s getting better.”

“Good. Good,” The older man said. “Maybe you two should get something to eat? Did you have enough at dinner? I know Ji kept you talking. You couldn’t have gotten enough in you.”

“Now you sound like Umma,” Yunho laughed, picking up the menu. Glancing through the drink list, he ordered a Tsing Tao and jjinmandu. Jaejoong repeated the order, swapping out the dumplings for pajeon, asking for the green onion pancake to be made extra spicy. Passing the menus to the waiter, he leaned over to whisper something in Jae’s ear as Jung asked for a dark stout.

Jaejoong’s unaffected laughter brought a smile to Yunho’s face and the young man reached for the glass of water in front of him, taking a long sip. He met his father’s gaze with a cocked eyebrow, as if to ask Jung if something was troubling him but the older man looked away, answering the waiter when the man asked if they wanted panchan.

Jung sat quiet as their server left, humbled in his own thoughts. Leaning forward in his chair, Yunho set his glass down on the table, waiting for his father to say something... anything to break the crackling silence between them.

"I needed... I find I need to apologize to Kim Jaejoong," Jung said softly, his tone formal and direct. Glancing first at his son and then at Jae, he bowed his head briefly, his back tight as he moved. "I have... damned you as a pervert and something... my son should not allow to touch him. I am sorry I have said those words to him."

Jae contemplated the table, turning his water glass around until the condensation soaked a thick ring into the cloth. Exhaling the breath he felt he'd been holding in since Yunho's mother left, he replied softly, "I understand how... you feel. How you're thinking. It's never been my intention to shame your family by... bringing our *friendship* out in the open."

"My son is not a man to hide how he feels about someone," Jung replied. "I know my son. He will want to tell the world that he loves you and damn the consequences to himself or his family."

Yunho started forward but Jae's hand on his chest kept him back. Turning again to the older man, Jae nodded. "I know. I've asked him to keep our... relationship to ourselves. It is no one's business who I love and there are people who would harm your family, either with words or actions."

"You're wrong, Jaejoong," Yunho protested. "People..."

"Have you forgotten the incident with your water bottle?" Jae's sad smile touched Yunho's heart. "People... do strange things sometimes, Yunnie-ah. I can't risk you or your family because I love you."

Hearing the young man speak those words... so openly and unabashedly... startled Jung and he looked around wildly, searching to see if anyone nearby heard those damning words but the world continued on its way. Waiters continued to serve other tables and conversations rose and fell, a waterfall of sound trapped inside of the bar's glass-lined walls.

"No one is going to stone us where we sit, Father," Yunho said softly. "No one heard Jaejoong but yes, I wish they had."

Under the table, the young man caught Jae's hand in his, holding him tightly as if the moon would steal him away. They exchanged a glance, heavy with intent and promise and Jung's heart ached at the longing in his son's face. If he could, he would have erased every ounce of pain from Yunho's life. It was the love of a father for his son and by extension, the hurt echoed in Jae's eyes stung nearly as deep.

"We can't live... as I'd like to live," Yunho remarked casually, keeping his voice low when the waiter appeared with their drinks and food. Thanking the man, Yunho tasted his beer, rolling the clean brew over his tongue. The waiter left and he continued, "The only reason I'm... not openly loving Jaejoong is because he's asked me... to live behind a curtain. And Father, it is a thick, black curtain that hurts every time I touch it."

"I don't want that kind of pain for you," Jung said. "I also don't want... I don't want the world to look at you and see... something..."

Jaejoong looked away, unable to bear what Jung might say next. Yunho frowned, his mouth a straight taut line and he cocked his head in warning. "Be careful, Father."

"Yunho, I need... your patience," Jung responded.

Jae's eyes glittered, capturing the city's lights in his tears and Yunho squeezed his hand tighter as if his touch could anchor the young man in their own reality, a world where they could hold hands above the table and no one would blink an eye. Hidden behind the white cloth, Jaejoong tightened his grip in return, hugging what little part of Yunho he could touch, holding his lover as intimately as he dared.

"I know," Yunho hissed, turning his head away from the window.

He couldn't stand to see Jaejoong's reflection mirrored back at him. He knew what shimmered in his lover's eyes — past beatings, blood splatters on tiled floor, the creak of bones scraping broken ends

together, the sharp pain of a heart shattering with hateful words flung at him by someone he expected to love him forever — all of those things were there, and sadly for the both, Yunho had a part in all of those things and more.

“I just need you to understand that we love one another.” Stroking Jae’s wrist with his thumb, Yunho swallowed and whispered across of the table, a stone rounded under the rushing water around them. “I love you as well and I never... wanted you to... I never wanted to turn my back on you, Father. Jaejoong... has always said that I should love you...honour you.”

Jung stammered, flustered by the rush of emotions in his chest. “I don’t know what to say to that, Yunho.”

Jae kept staring out of the window. He couldn’t trust himself to look at the men at the table. It was too painful to see, a drop of time caught in amber that would either solidify into a priceless, memorable gem or ooze away in a roll of sticky filth. The moment was too precious and one he himself lost long ago.

“You can say that he is your son and tell him you love him, Mr. Jung,” Jae murmured, his gaze still on the cityscape outside. “He loves you very much, Mr. Jung and is the man he is *because* you are his father. I can admit that because any man who raised Yunho strong enough to love me deserves my respect.”

Thirty-Eight

“Jaejoong, it’s two in the morning,” Yunho heard the whine in his voice but he didn’t care. Seoul was dead asleep around them and he was lost in the middle of what looked like a forest line. The only bright spot in the darkness that he could see was Jae’s pale t-shirt and *that* he kept losing in the shadows.

A branch hit his face and Yunho felt its sting leave a welt behind. Groaning, he could almost hear the stylist grumbling already. He had a hard enough time when Jaejoong’s sharp teeth left tiny bruises on his shoulders and neck. A red mark on his cheek meant there would be hell to pay.

He smelled the water before he could see it, rich and wet, rising up around the green. Winter left an icy kiss in the wind, spring not yet brave enough to challenge her sister’s grip on the city. The dark surrounded him and Yunho cast about, realizing he’d just lost Jaejoong among the trees.

A little annoyed at being left behind, he called out, “BooJae, where the hell are you?”

“Over here,” Jaejoong called out, still hidden by a copse of trees. “Just walk a little bit this way.”

Turning, Yunho followed his lover’s voice and emerged out of the darkness into a blanket of stars.

The Han river pulled the night sky down, reflecting swirls of lights and twinkles onto the water. A large rock jutted out over the river’s current, its flat surface covered with the thick quilt Jaejoong brought with him from the hotel. Humming sparkles swept around Jaejoong, fireflies dancing a heady mating ritual around the beautiful young man. Jae flattened out a corner of the quilt and looked up, his eyes dark with want when he saw Yunho come through the trees.

The water’s sweetness filled the air, carrying the green of the woods and the perfume of night blooming jasmine with it. Jaejoong stood at the edge of the rock, his hand stretched out to Yunho as he walked carefully down the slight bank towards the river.

Jae’s hand felt warm in Yunho’s, rough where his calluses ran along his palm. The slender man smiled when Yunho stepped out onto the rock, his grin widening when his lover puffed his cheeks out in wonder at the expanse of water and sky around him.

“I... don’t even know what to say.” Yunho exhaled,

He’d not known where Jaejoong intended to take them when they’d rented a car from the hotel. Laying back in the seat, he’d closed his eyes for what seems like a moment only to be shaken awake with a sleepy grit in his eyes. The car had come to a stop and Jaejoong was already outside, unloading the comforter from their hotel they’d snuck out. Renewed by the short nap, Yunho stretched, hitting his fist against the window he’d left up. Barking his knuckles in a glancing blow, he yelped and sucked on his injured skin then opened the door to work the knots out of his legs. Shaking the pins and needles from his feet, he stepped out and looked around, wondering where the other man parked them.

They’d spent an hour drinking quietly with his father, keeping their talk to small things like schedules and future plans. He’d shifted in his chair when Jaejoong stood to find the bathroom, watching his lover disappear around the wall. His father followed his gaze but the older man’s face remained placid, assessing the young man as he walked away.

“He loves you,” Jung said, signaling the waiter to refill his glass. “I can see that now.”

“What did you think he was doing with me?” Yunho asked, accepting a beer from the waiter and giving up his empty. The panchan was also replaced and he picked at the fish cake, finding a piece of burdock root to eat. “Did you think it was just sex?”

His father shuddered visibly, his fingers gripping his pint. "I don't know how...Yunho, how is that ... pleasant?"

"It is," He said with a shrug. "I don't know how... I mean I know a little bit about how Jaejoong feels but I've not... done that with him."

"So you are the.. .man in this... relationship?" Jung swallowed a gulp of beer. "At least there is that."

"It's not a man and woman thing, Father," Yunho said, unable to stop a smile from touching his lips. "We're both men. I just haven't...I don't feel comfortable talking about this with you. Actually, I don't feel talking about this with anyone but Jaejoong."

"No, I... wasn't asking," His father said, shaking his head. "I just don't understand how...this thing works."

"It works fine," Yunho replied. "We work fine. Well, for the most part. Sometimes we have problems but we try to fix them. This thing with Kimura..."

"I am... sorry for that," Jung admitted. "If I'd known...believe me, Yunho, I would have done something if I'd known what that man had been doing. Even... as tight-minded as I was feeling then... I wouldn't have stood by while someone..."

"He didn't... he didn't get everything he wanted," Yunho said delicately. "I think he drugged Jaejoong with something to make him easier to handle but Kimura still couldn't... finish what he started. While I'm thankful for that...for Jaejoong's sake... it still damaged him. For a while, he couldn't remember fully what happened and when his memories finally surfaced, he had to relive that... son of a bitch touching him over and over again. I swear, I never wanted to kill someone in my entire life until I found out about Kimura."

Jaejoong joined them at that moment, eyeing the two men as they murmured a welcome. Sliding into his chair, he thanked Yunho for getting him another beer. The conversation continued on its meandering way but the tension eased out of their words, a steady banter building between them.

Now, standing on the rock where Jaejoong often stole away to when they'd lived in Seoul, Yunho was amazed at the strength inside the man before him.

"Thank you for sharing this place with me," Yunho said, stepping onto the stony platform. It was larger than he imagined, definitely large enough to hold more than just the two of them. The comforter was stretched out, its edges flat on the rock and Jae sank to his knees, slowly lowering himself down while he held Yunho's hand.

"Sit," Jae murmured. "Or better yet, lie down."

"Okay," Yunho grinned, joining Jae on the rock. He left a kiss on Jae's mouth before he settled in. "This is nice."

"Nicer now that you're here," Whispering, the young man's lips tingled where his lover touched them. "Lie down and look up."

The world plunged out of view when Yunho lay down. When he blinked, the universe filled his mind, ribbons of lights streamed around the edges, an ambient glow from the city's buildings but the black dominated, ripples of stars blinking through the darkness.

"Oh... God," Yunho whispered, unable to contain the awe in his voice. "Joongie... oh... God!"

"I know," His lover said, wrapping his fingers in Yunho's. "When I come here and open my mind.. I sometimes think I can hear God... sing to me. I just have to ... listen hard enough but it's there... in the wind, in the water and sometimes even in the lights."

"It's so big," The other man said. "I feel opened to everything. Like I can feel everything inside of me at once."

"I think it's the black," Jae whispered. "It reminds me of you, staring up into the sky like this. This is how I feel when you're inside of me, at that moment when you fill me and I take your warmth. That's how I feel."

Yunho choked on his emotions, unable to speak when Jaejoong edged closer to him. Their shoulders touched, then their elbows and knees. The intimate brushing of their bodies grew until they lay against one another, side by side with hands and ankles touching.

"I discovered I was in love with you," The slender singer said, his words rolling with the pulse of the river moving around them. "I was lying here when it hit me that I loved you."

"Did you tell Yoochun? Was he here with you?" Yunho turned, seeing the sky reflected in his lover's dark eyes.

"No," Jaejoong snorted, his laugh almost joyful with a hint of bitter in it. "It was during training. You'd just spent the day with Heechul and I... got so angry. We were supposed to have practiced but instead you ditched me to go to the movies with your friend. It hurt and so, I came here and stared up at the sky."

"I remember doing that," Yunho admitted softly. "I'm sorry. I never meant to hurt you."

"Yes you did," Jae said. "Then you did. You were more selfish then, focusing on what made you feel good or bullying me into doing what you wanted me to do. And the funny thing is, all you had to do was ask and I... I would have died for you. I was that sick in love with you."

"And now?" He couldn't help but ask, resting on his shoulder and staring at Jaejoong's bemused smile.

"And now, I would live for you," Jae turned his head, lifting up to kiss Yunho. "I am that sick in love with you."

It was tender, a meeting of tongues and lips with tentative touches, butterfly wings catching the slightest gust of winds. At some point, Yunho shifted to cover Jaejoong's body, careful not to settle his weight on his lover. The rock beneath them was softened by the quilt but it was still granite and pain was the last thing Yunho wanted to give Jaejoong.

Their hands moved slowly, exploring the curves of muscles on one another's shoulders. His body hardened when Yunho slipped a knee between Jaejoong's thighs but it still, kept in check with the languid movements of their legs. The tip of his shaft tingled, a welcoming reminder of how much Jaejoong turned him on but it was a pleasant burn, one he could stand without the need to bury himself into Jae's hot passage. Taking his time, Yunho kissed and suckled at his lover's mouth, whispering for Jaejoong to let him in so he could taste the sweetness beyond his lips.

Parting with a sigh, Jae arched his back and surrendered to Yunho's aggression, moaning and clenching his lover's shoulders when Yunho's teeth bit down into his pout, worrying and pulling the plump flesh. He felt a sting then another when the younger man worked his way over to the corner of his mouth then across his jaw, finding the round of his lobe. A flick of Yunho's tongue left a wet mark around his earring then it was followed by a longer swipe, the edge of the man's teeth snipped at the piercing, rolling the onyx stuff around with the tip of his tongue before releasing Jae's ear lobe.

"I love you, Boo," Yunho said, pursing his mouth and blowing on the damp trail he'd left on Jaejoong's skin. "I love you so much that it aches inside of me. There are times when I want to spend the day buried deep inside of your soul and I have to force myself to get out of bed because when I wake up and find you lying next to me, I can't think of anywhere else to be but there, with you."

"We can't have sex all the time," Jae teased.

"I wasn't talking about sex, baby," Yunho said softly. "I was talking about being there... just being there with you. Listening to you talk and laugh or sing. I love to hear you sing and when our voices join, it's like I'm making love to you in the air."

"I feel that too," The other man whispered, his mouth caught on Yunho's lips. They spoke into one another, burying their hearts into the breaths they shared. "I feel like you're... there, holding me when we sing and the rest of the world melts away. It takes me here. It brings me here where I can be with you alone, just with the stars over us."

“When we sing together, I feel like we’re flying and you’ve wrapped your angel wings around me while I am inside of you.” Yunho rubbed his nose against Jae’s, stealing a small kiss before whispering. “There’s no other way to describe it. You feel that good when I hear you in me...in my voice. It’s all I can do to not cross the stage and kiss you then. It’s all I can do to not walk over there and steal your breath into my lungs so we never fall.”

“I will always love you, Kim Jaejoong,” Yunho’s eyes glittered then a single drop escaped, a starlit wet diamond splashing onto Jae’s porcelain skin. “Our love is so beautiful.. and I want you never to be afraid, ever again because I will protect you, heal you for as long as my soul burns inside of you. And that will be forever, *cheonsa*... we will be under these stars...inside of one another...forever.”

Thirty-Nine

Strange as it seemed, Japan felt like home when the plane touched down, its tires hitting the asphalt without a bounce. From the airport, the couple travelled through the city in a company car, its windows tinted with a dark film. Tokyo glistened despite the shadowed glass, dressed in neon and silvery lights. Halfway through the downtown entertainment district, Jaejoong called out to the driver, urging him to stop.

“What? Joongie, what is it?” Yunho craned his neck, trying to see out of the window where Jaejoong pointed behind them. The driver miraculously found a spot to pull over and the Korean singer was out of the car before it was fully stopped, the door swinging slightly in his wake. Sliding across the leather seat, Yunho followed, and stared, his mouth wide open in shock.

“It’s... us,” Jaejoong whispered, barely audible over the traffic.

Yunho stepped up behind him, his fingers whispering over Jae’s shoulders. “God, it’s... huge.”

The banner hung from the edge of a skyscraper, unfurling down nearly ten stories. Their faces dominated the intersection, spotlights playing over their black suited bodies then catching on their Japanese name below. The words were silver, outlined in a glossy black and reflected the city’s sparkling lights.

“Su-su looks... mad,” Jaejoong covered his mouth and laughed, turning to momentarily bury his face into Yunho’s chest.

“Changmin is fierce,” Yunho said, studying their youngest. “He looks... mature.”

“Mature enough,” Jae leaned into Yunho’s chest, resting his back against his lover. “To be Se7en’s.”

“You just had to bring that up, didn’t you?” The other man scowled, frowning at his own image. “Min’s ears are so big. No wonder you like elephants. They remind you of him.”

“Aish, don’t say that, his ears aren’t big!” Jaejoong slapped Yunho’s arm. “Okay, maybe a little bit.”

Whispering voices drew Jaejoong back to his senses and then a chattering giggle from a young woman pushed them both back into the car. Closing the door behind his passengers, the driver circled the town car and pulled out into traffic, leaving the growing crowd of fans behind.

“It’s so... big,” Jaejoong said, watching the banner fade into the distance.

“It’s nothing compared to how big we are going to be, Joongie-ah,” Yunho laughed, his robust voice deep and cheerful. “With you next to me and with the others, we shall show Japan our best.”



Two days later, Yunho fell onto his bed, face down into the mounds of soft pillows Jaejoong liked to gather around them. Sniffing, he wrinkled his nose, finding a scent he wasn’t familiar with. Closing his eyes, he took another breath in and turned his head to stare at his lover coming out of the bathroom.

“Did you and Changmin sleep together or something?” Yunho pursed his mouth, rolling over to make room for Jaejoong to slide in next to him. “The pillows smell like him.”

“They smell like him because we lay here talking.” The singer yawned, stretching his arms out above him and rolling his wrists around. His taut muscles flexed and bulged, his joints cracked loose and releasing the tension in his body. “He needed to talk about Dong-Wook.”

“I saw him there,” Yunho replied. “Se7en said for me to tell the wife hello.”

“Oh?” Jaejoong lifted his eyebrows, making a mental note to geld Se7en when he had the opportunity. “I shall be sending him my love back. It would be good for Min to be the only man in that relationship.”

“That’s what I love about you, Joongie,” Yunho smiled, reaching for his lover. “You are wicked. I’ll hold him down for you.”

“Hah! I will have Min do it,” He snorted. “It would be good for Dong-Wook to remember that we are never divided and what you do to one, you do to all.”

Lulled to a happy place with the thought of Se7en being delivered his comeuppance by his lover and friend, Yunho hooked his arm around Jaejoong’s waist, pulling him in. “What did you talk about?”

“Se7en, or rather, how to love another man as stubborn as his hyung, Yunho,” Jaejoong teased, laughing when he drew a harsh chuckle out of his lover. “I told him; *It also doesn’t matter how you love. So long as you do.*”

“Good words,” Yunho replied.

“Nuna told me that.” He shuffled down, fitting into Yunho. They found each other’s spaces instinctively, hip to hip with their legs hooked around the others. The leader’s hands skimmed over Jae’s belly, playing with his navel ring as they fell into a single breath, their hearts slowing to the same beat. “She told me that I would love you, and even if you did not love me back, that I was at least knowing love. That it was the most glorious, painful and wonderful thing I could ever feel. And God, I hated you for it.”

“Ke,” The other man laughed, “I wasn’t too fond of you for it either. Remember how much we fought?”

“I wanted to pull out your eyes and feed them to you in a stew,” Jae admitted. “But then you shifted the sands under me and I fell. Sometimes I still feel like I’m falling in love with you. Every day I wake up and think, can this go any deeper? Will I ever find the bottom? But I never seem to.”

“I’ll catch you,” Yunho promised. “Or better yet, I’ll catch you and we can fly away. Two birds looking for someplace tropical to live.”

“Aish, I get sunburned,” The other man reminded him. “Remember how red I was?”

“Yeah.” Yunho’s face softened. “I spent hours rubbing lotion into you and trying to get you to drink water. I hurt watching you move.”

“We had fun there though,” Jae grinned. “Although I think Min was trying to drown me.”

“I think Min was trying to drown everyone,” Yunho admitted with a chuckle. “He was still mad about going from hyung to dongsaeng.”

“I don’t think he’s ever going to stop being mad about that.” They laughed together, cuddled against the cold outside. Their youngest was predictable, a steady linear thinker with a fierce temper and sharp wit. “He’s not coming back tonight, Yunho. You know that right?”

“I feel about as comfortable talking about Min and Se7en as I do talking with my father about us having sex.” He grumbled at Jae, shifting on the bed linens. The pillows were warming, taking on the singer’s familiar scent.

“It’s crazy that your father asked about sex,” Jaejoong laughed, his belly aching with the idea. “I would have paid a lot of money to see your face. Or your father’s.”

“I’m pretty sure I blushed redder than Min does when he walks in on us,” Yunho smirked. “But I kept my cool and told him... politely... that it wasn’t any of his business. Well, not in so many words but I’m sure he understood.”

“I wish...” The man’s voice trailed off, a wispy thing lifting up from his pout.

“Wish what?”

“Nothing. Never mind,” Jaejoong dismissed the thought with a wave of his hand.

“Did it have to do with your dad?” Yunho asked, nuzzling into Jaejoong’s hair. “That you wish he were with you sometimes?”

“Yeah,” He said, letting himself be cradled by his lover’s tightened arms. “He and I were never... really close. I think ... sometimes... that he didn’t really want me. He only agreed to my mother taking me in because she wanted a son and funnily enough, he found himself with another daughter instead.”

“Don’t say that, Joongie,” Yunho reproached the other man gently. “You’re as much of a man as the next. Hell, a better one in most cases.”

“I am sorry my father doesn’t... see me that way,” Jaejoong murmured, lost in his thoughts. “I listen to Min and Junsu talk about how their fathers are with them... so proud...and as if their sons are everything to them. I... sometimes am so jealous of that. It hurts inside to want something that I’ll never have but now, I feel better knowing that your father is here for you. That you feel that love. It’s a comfort for my heart.”

“You...” Yunho turned Jae’s chin so he could kiss the man soundly. “You are my comfort.”

He sipped at the nectar of Jae’s mouth, a hummingbird dipping in to a flower to slake a long winter’s hunger. Jae turned, laying on his back and returned the kiss with a gentle purse of his lips. Sliding his palm over Jae’s cheek, Yunho kept his lover’s skin warm with his hand, stroking at the soft hair coming of Jae’s ear and playing with the black piercings dotting the ridge of the man’s cartilage. Covering Jae with his body, Yunho pressed his lover into the bed, sliding his legs down between Jae’s knees to lessen some of his weight.

“Your mouth is like a gift from God,” Yunho whispered. “I could spend my life drowning in your kisses.”

Lowering his mouth down over Jae’s, Yunho didn’t hear the stomp of feet out in the hallway or see the shadows lurking at the end of the bed until it was too late. A high pitched banshee scream was all the warning either man had of their impending doom but it wasn’t enough time to prepare for the assault.

Yoochun landed first, his long weight slamming into Yunho’s legs and back. Howling, the older man twisted, wincing when he felt a pull along his back muscles and shoved at the baritone but the other man barely moved. Junsu catapulted in on top of them, burying Jaejoong under a mound of pretty muscle and voices. Laughing, the tenor fell into pitched giggles when Yunho tried climbing out from under them. Hooking his fingers into the ticklish spot under Yunho’s ribs, Susu wiggled at the other man’s skin, pushing Yunho from his mild disgust to a wild flailing screaming fit.

“Stop! Stop!” Yunho tried to find Junsu’s hands to slap them away but buried under the others, he couldn’t discern who was who. His first attempt elicited a yelp from Yoochun and while it wasn’t his original target, he was wickedly satisfied with the result. “Get off of us, you idiots.”

“I can’t breathe,” Jaejoong said quietly, gasping. “And someone’s hurting my leg.”

The pile immediately stopped wiggling and the men peeled off one another, Yunho stretching for his lover’s hips and tenderly running his hand down Jaejoong’s knees. Yoochun sat up on his haunches, worry creasing his sensitive face. There was a hint of tears lurking in his soulful eyes, emotionally pulled free from his own concern over Jaejoong’s troubled knee. Junsu rolled away, ready to fetch anything Yunho needed to ease any of Jaejoong’s aches.

“Are you okay, Joongie-ah?” Yoochun asked, his deep voice trembling. “We didn’t mean to...”

“No, no,” Jae said, catching his breath and sitting slightly up. “I was just angled wrong and had the wind knocked out of me. Let me breathe a little bit. I’ll be okay.”

“Don’t you idiots know how to knock?” Yunho glared.

“The door was open,” Junsu said brightly, the shadows in his eyes gone in a whisper of sunshine now that he knew Jaejoong was alright. “You never leave the door open if you’re going to...”

“Well, they do,” Yoochun corrected, slithering down to cuddle against Jaejoong’s side. The singer looped an arm around his best friend, resting his chin on Chun’s shoulder. “There was that time Yunho didn’t close the door when we lived in Seoul and...”

“How the hell do you know it was me that didn’t close the door?” Yunho sniffed, grumpily settling down on the other side of Jaejoong.

“Because Jaejoong’s hands were bound to the bed with those little black ties they made us wear once.” The baritone burst into laughter when Yunho’s face turned bright ume red. “Wardrobe was wondering where they’d gone. I should have told her.”

“I am going to beat you,” Yunho muttered, putting his flaming cheeks against Jaejoong’s cooler skin. “Beat you until you bleed.”

“Don’t,” Junsu said. “He whines when he gets a paper cut. I don’t want to hear him complain all night because he’s bruised.”

“Aish, come here babe,” Grumbling playfully at his lover, Yoochun held his hand out to Junsu.

The tenor slid around Jaejoong’s feet, a flicker of emotion playing over his exquisite face. Catching at Junsu’s wrist, Yoochun pulled his lover down, sliding back to snug Junsu between himself and Jaejoong. Surprised, Junsu stared up at the baritone, his elegant mouth gaped open.

“Stay here with me. Joongie and I will keep you warm,” Yoochun said. Peering over the others’ shoulders he nodded at Yunho. “What time are we going to raid Se7en’s apartment and kidnap Changmin back?”

“We’re not,” Jae said firmly. “We are going to let him be.”

“Aw, that’s no fun,” Junsu lifted the corner of his mouth and whimpered when Yunho pinched the curve. “Ouch!”

“Umma has said that Min and his love-toy is off limits,” The leader said. “I don’t agree with him but I like eating.”

“That’s not all you’d lose if Jae’s mad at you.” Trapped on the bed by Junsu’s ankle lodged between his calves, Yoochun couldn’t avoid the hard punch to his shoulder from Jae’s clenched hand. “Ouch, you’re always hitting me. You and Min. The two of you are like kangaroos. Always boxing.”

“Are you guys ready for Budoukan? I know it’s months away but...” Junsu asked. “Everything seems to be happening so slow but then... so quickly. I’m... not sure...are we good enough? Will they like us?”

His fear was palatable, a sneaking creeping thing that edged into the others’ hearts and minds. The room dropped to silence, the enormity of what faced them in a few months lingering like a ghost among them. Yunho cleared his throat, stepping into the role he’d first assumed when he joined the group.

“They’ll love you, Susu-ah. Everyone loves you,” Yunho stroked his friend’s hair, calming the younger man down. “They’ll scream when Jaejoong comes out, yelling for him to take off his clothes or something. And they’ll scream when Yoochun cries...”

“I’m *not* going to cry!” The baritone protested.

“You always cry,” The three other men replied together, shaming Yoochun into hiding his face.

“The only question is...when?” Junsu said, snorting. “And which one of us are going to cry with you.”

“Not me,” Jaejoong said with a shake of his head. “I’m not going to look at him.”

“Hah, you’ll be looking at me and I’ll be biting my cheek so I don’t cry.” Yunho grinned.

“It’s manly to cry,” Yoochun sniffed. “I am just comfortable being sensitive and... a man!”

“Pfah,” Their leader dismissed the other man’s proclamation. “We’ll see. The first one who cries after Yoochun should have to do something for the others.”

“Like what?” Jaejoong narrowed his eyes. “The last time we played a betting game, it ended up with you being naked and having to roll in the snow. You bitched about having a cold one and I had to warm it up with my hands.”

“He only said that because it was your hands,” Yoochun cackled. “He probably said he was still cold when he was plenty warm enough!”

“Shut up,” Yunho threatened the baritone with a glare. “Or you’ll be crying now.”

“Okay, so... first person who cries after Chunnie has to do something for the others,” Junsu declared. “But who gets to decide that something?”

“I know,” Jaejoong grinned wickedly. “The member who cries last... or who doesn’t cry at all... gets to choose. And if there is a tie, then we kai bai bo for it.”

“Shit,” Chunnie swore under his breath. “Then you better all hope that Changmin starts bawling or whoever loses is going to be very very sorry the day after. He’s the one who made Yunho roll in the snow.”

Forty

"But I didn't cry!" Changmin grumbled, hefting his half of the heavy futon up onto his shoulders. "I didn't! Why am I helping them with this?"

"Because you're the youngest," Jaejoong replied, juggling the cloth shopping bags he'd lugged up the long flight of stairs. "Don't drop that or you'll hit the others with it."

"I don't know what you're complaining about, Minku," Se7en muttered, grunting when the futon slid over his forearms. "I wasn't even singing at the damned concert! Shit, this thing is heavy!"

"Hey, language," Yunho snarled when Se7en bumbled backwards, striking the leader in the shoulder. He and Junsu were struggling with the second futon, the smaller man on the lower stairs shuffled, trying to keep the weight of the thick mattress steady. "Joongie, open the damned door already!"

"And he tells me to watch my language," Se7en fretted then chuckled when he heard Min laugh in response. "BooJae, did you leave the keys downstairs?"

"Don't call him that," Yunho growled. "Mine."

"What's the hold up?" Yoochun asked, dragging plastic bags of pillows on the floor behind him. "These are heavy."

"Oh shut up," Min shouted back to him, grunting when the futon shifted dangerously and he was nearly forced down on one knee to keep it straight. "We wouldn't be in this mess if you hadn't started bawling like a baby. And why am I doing this again? I wasn't even there when the bet was made!"

"Ah, here we go," Jaejoong said gleefully, fitting the key into the door. It clicked and he swung the access door open, letting the late summer night breeze into the tight stairwell. "Come on. Shizu-chan said we can stay up here as long as we like tonight."

"I don't know about the rest of them but I intend to sleep in a bed tonight," Se7en whispered to Min. "Preferably one with you in it."

"Please to be remembering that you are a *lot* closer to me than you are to him," Yunho muttered. "I don't want to hear about your perverted plans for our younger brother."

"Really?" Se7en replied, biting his lower lip as he gently eased the futon down to the ground. "I would have thought you'd want to take notes seeing as Jaejoong is looking a bit unsatisfied there."

"Hey, none of that," Yoochun stepped around Junsu quickly, placing himself between the two older men. "We're on the roof now. Part of the bet was that everyone played nicely."

"This is a sucky pay-off," Min proclaimed. "Really? This is the best you can do, Joongie-ah? We have to be *nice* to each other and spend time on the rooftop? What kind of punishment is this?"

"Pretty bad one, I think," Their leader unceremoniously dumped the futon down after warning Junsu with a nod. "The inside of my cheek is going to be raw from biting it if I have to be nice to Dong-Wook for more than ten minutes."

"Being nicer might be easier if you worked more on opening the futons and less on grumbling," Jaejoong said sweetly.

"Just be glad he didn't drag us down to the river," Yunho whispered to Se7en. "We could have been doing this on the wet grass and fighting the stray cats for our food."

"How did you lost rock-paper-scissors to Jaejoong?" Se7en asked as he helped Changmin unroll the futon over the cement tiles. "Aren't you supposed to be a master at it?"

“He cheats,” Changmin replied.

“How do you cheat at kai bai bo?” Junsu edged the futon he’d help carry over, struggling to pull its girth. Lining one corner up with the side Se7en was working on, he maneuvered around the other man carefully. “Did he read your mind?”

“He asked me how Se7en was in bed,” Changmin confessed, ducking his face when Se7en howled with laughter. “Don’t do that. You sound like one of the hyena brothers. And it wasn’t fair. I was doing fine before that. We were going three out of five and we were tied two-two when he said that. I threw rock. I *never* throw rock on the fifth round. Only children throw rock on the fifth round.”

Jae leaned against the retaining wall that ran around the sides of the building, watching the others tug and pull at the enormous futons he’d borrowed from their manager. Shizu readily agreed with the eldest’s plan, offering up the pillowed mattresses and cushions to Jaejoong as well as the keys to the rooftop. After clearing their excursion with the building supervisor, Shizu cleared the weekend for the group, leaving Jaejoong plenty of time to entrap the others with his plotting.

Yunho and Se7en grumbled and snarled at each other, the two alpha males among the men but the snapping was mostly air and often punctuated by laughter with some playful shoving. They’d fallen into a patois of their own, half insults and half admiration, grudgingly given but still admiration. Changmin hovered near by, unsure of who to be in the dynamics of the older men. On one hand, he was Se7en’s lover and equal but on the other, he was Yunho’s dongsaeng and a defiant one at best. Shifting from one side to the next, Min fretted with a pillow then dropped it, heading back downstairs.

“He probably remembered we haven’t brought the food up yet,” Junsu snickered.

“He lies when he said he didn’t cry,” Yoochun sniffed. “I saw him blink a lot then look away at Yunho. I think he teared up and doesn’t want to admit it.”

“Minnie-ah will never admit it,” His lover replied, picking up a pillow to plump it up. “He hates losing more than anything.”

Yoochun nodded in agreement, straightening up to stretch out his back. He met his best friend’s eyes and smiled, sharing the private moment. Jaejoong spent the hour he’d had free that afternoon hanging paper lantern strings up on the various poles and lines on the roof, carefully shielding the trails of cords with dark grey duct tape. Plugged in, they glowed with gentle reds and yellows, illuminating the barren roof top. A boom box played soft ballads from America, the slow, seductive rhythm and blues drowning out the distant sounds of traffic from below.

Standing in the hushed sounds of music and banter, Yoochun let himself relax, opening himself up the peaceful of his noisy family and their teasing. When Junsu patted him on the waist and told Chunnie he was heading downstairs to help Min with the food, the baritone could only nod, unwilling to trust himself to speak in case the sting in his eyes would dew into tears. Jaejoong’s voice calling out to him drove him over, and he felt a drop fall, hitting his cheek and rolling down to his jaw before splashing on the Domo-kun t-shirt he’d stolen from his best friend.

“*Domo, konnichiwa,*” Jaejoong teased, hooking his arm around Yoochun’s waist. “Don’t cry, Chunnie-ah. Isn’t it good to see *Aniki-chi* and *Kuma-no-ko* getting along?”

“Hah, wait until *Minkurō* comes back upstairs and we’ll see how that goes,” Yoochun said, wiping at his face. His tears were more common place than the stars over the Han river but sometimes, he wanted the illusion of his own dignity. “It’s nice up here. Reminds me of home.” Scanning the surrounding buildings lit up with swirling neon signs and flashing lights, he amended, “Except for all of the Japanese.”

“It’s our second home,” Jaejoong whispered into his friend’s ear. “Like this is our second family.”

“No matter what...” Turning his head, Yoochun let the glisten fill his eyes, weeping silver down his face. “I never want to lose this... them... us. Never, Joongie-ah.”

“You won’t,” Jaejoong reassured him, turning his friend around until they faced one another. Yoochun resisted the pull, refusing to let the others see him fall apart but the older man wouldn’t be deterred. Holding his friend close, Jaejoong rocked Yoochun as he wept into the crook of Jae’s neck, soaking the man’s shirt as he clung to his friend. “Remember, Chunnie? Hope to the end and always keep the faith... the faith in us.”

“This is what made me lose, baby,” Junsu said with a laugh, joining Jae and Yoochun at the edge of the roof. “When you cry, I cry. Don’t make me cry now. Not in front of Min. He’ll never stop teasing me.”

“He won’t stop teasing you anyway,” Yoochun replied with a hefty sniff. “He’s like a bee to a flower. Tears draw him like pollen and he won’t stop picking until he’s bloated with it.”

“Ah, but bees make honey,” Susu answered his lover, using his palms to wipe at Chunnie’s wet cheeks where he could reach. “Let him go, Joongie-ah. I need to kiss away the tears. My hands aren’t working.”

“Okay but he’s salty,” Jae warned. “Like a umeboshi.”

“Never,” Junsu said with a smile, wrapping his arms around Yoochun’s hips. “Umeboshi is sour in the middle. There is nothing but sweet inside of my Yoochun.”

“Only when we’re together,” The baritone whispered. “When we’re joined, *then* I’ve got sweetness in me.”

“Aish, they make me sick sometimes,” Changmin muttered as he laid a stack of bento boxes on a crate. “It’s like rolling in candy.”

“Candy is good,” Se7en said, coming up behind his lover.

“No, it’s too sweet and sticks to your teeth.” Min sidestepped Se7en’s reaching grasp. “Eh, no doing that here.”

“Why not?” He looked at the couple, swaying slightly to music only they heard. “They are.”

After months of listening to Min talk about people watching, he’d picked up a few things. Yoochun was definitely the romantic of the two, his eyes capturing the stars with a dreamy gaze. Junsu listened to the singer’s poetic murmur, the rise and fall of the baritone’s silky voice erotically innocent. Se7en could barely hear Yoochun’s words but they rang velvet smooth and rich, softened peals of love for the man he held in his arms. Under the soft lights, the couple would appear as shadows against the skyline, silhouettes of love trapped in the mirrored buildings.

“Suppose... the others... say something?” Changmin whispered hotly, glancing around. “I don’t want... they’ll tease me.”

“I don’t think they’ll tease you,” Se7en replied sagely. “I think they’ll believe you’ve found someone to love.”

“I duuunnnnoooo....” Min said in English, ignoring the little voice in his head that screamed at him to go over to Se7en.

“To quote a wise man I once heard; Come here, babe,” The older man said, grabbing Changmin by the belt loops of his jeans and pulled him hard, toppling them both back into one of the large metal condensers. The steel rattled slightly, singing and creaking as Se7en wrapped himself around Changmin, laying the tall young man back onto the cold metal and chewing at his neck. Growling, he left small nibbling bites along Min’s collar and apple. “Nom, nom...”

“No!” Min’s cool composure evaporated under the other man’s silliness, his aloofness burnt away by Se7en’s lips making squeaky noises against his skin. “Shichi! That tickles. Stop! Come on, stop! God, no!”

“Keep that up,” Se7en said against Min’s kiss-warmed skin, “And the others are going to think I don’t know what I’m doing over here.”

“You know what you’re doing,” The voice answered for him, spilling out in a seductive purr. Min clamped his mouth shut, slapping his hand over his lips. “Oh God...why... the... why do you do this to me?”

“Because I’m good for you, Minku,” Se7en replied, rolling slightly to the side and cradling his young lover against his body. They slid down together into the futon, a tangled mess of kisses and swearing. Laughing, Se7en waited patiently for Min to right his shirt, the sleeve caught in his elbow. Attempts to help only made the situation worse, especially when the older man pulled when Min was trying to tug himself free. With the shirt hem slid nearly all the way up his belly, Changmin roared slightly at Se7en, falling into laughter when the other man took the opportunity of a half-dressed Min to blow a raspberry kiss on his belly. Murmuring, he said softly, loud enough for only Min to hear, “And you are good for me, baby. So so good for me.”

“Love you, Shichi,” Changmin touched Se7en’s cheek with his fingers.

It felt strange, openly holding his lover among the others. The world was new again, sparkling bright and clean. Despite being in the middle of a city built high enough to scrape the sky’s belly and clouded with the noise of life, Changmin felt enveloped in a secret oasis of their own. With Se7en’s long arms around him, he grew shy, unsure of how to act in front of the other members. Being with his lover reassured him, bolstering up his confidence.

“I love you too, Minku.” The other man grew serious. “I have something for you. Something I want you to have.”

He dug into his pocket, coming up with a piece of golden tissue wrapped around something solid and small. Lengths of clear tape held the tissue shut, seemingly miles of it mummifying the gift. Laughing softly, Min picked at the edges, unable to find the end to open up the small gift.

“I’m going to have to chew through this,” Changmin muttered, looking up bashfully at his lover through his lashes. “Did you use all the tape on the roll?”

“Almost,” Se7en admitted. “I didn’t want it to fall out.”

Biting at the paper with his canines, Min tore apart a corner, shaking out the gift inside with a careful flick of his wrist. Catching at a spill of glitter with his other hand, he set the tissue tomb down between them and cautiously opened his fingers to stare at a simple gold cross strung on a chain.

While the chain was new, the slender marine style links a masculine serpentine curl on his palm, the cross was old. Its age showed in the shadowed pits along its edges and the worn Korean etched into its back. The calligraphy was elegant and obviously hand done, scratched deep into the soft metal. Curious, Changmin looked up at Se7en, unsure of what to say.

“I know you’re not...Christian,” Se7en said softly. “For me... for us, this isn’t a symbol of religion but rather of faith.”

Picking up the chain, the older man untangled the cross and held it up to dangle between them. “This... is... was my grandmother’s. She fell in love with a South Korean soldier during the war and since she lived in the North... right on the border... it was hard for them because they could not see one another. That man... was someone she loved so much that she snuck across the border to be with him at night, just to talk or sometimes drink. Before the war got really bad, he gave this to her and told her to have faith that they would be together. To always have faith.”

“What...happened?” Min touched the cross, sending it spinning into slow circles. “Did she see him again?”

“The war tore everything apart and one night, my grandmother was shot trying to get across of the border to see him. A Northern farmer looking for one of his goats found her and took her home but she was sick from the bullet and by the time she was better, the border was closed.” Se7en whispered, his deep voice saddened with his grandmother’s memories. “Because her family converted, they were being driven out by the Northern soldiers. She tried to reason with her father that her lover was somewhere close by and if she could only get a hold of him...tell him where they were going but my great-grandfather wouldn’t listen. Her love for this man endangered her...endangered the whole family and she was forbidden to see him.”

“When they arrived in Seoul, our family was poor,” He continued, closing his palm over Min’s fingers, trapping the cross in their joined hands. “And they had to live in one of the lower districts but they were alive, even if my grandmother’s love was now lost to her. A few years later, she was going to the market to buy rice for the family and a man called out her name.”

“Was it him?” Changmin asked, his mouth trembling with emotion. “Was it the man who gave her this cross?”

“It was,” Se7en replied softly, kissing the quiver from his lover’s lips. “He’d spent every day praying that he would find the woman he’d left behind and stole across the border after the war, asking anyone he could find if they had information about my grandmother and her family. It took him three years but he finally found our family in Seoul. My great-grandmother felt his love was so great, she told him where he could find her. That man... was my grandfather, Shim Changmin, a Buddhist who bought my grandmother a symbol of her faith so she would have something from him to hold onto until they could be together once more.”

“I...can’t... take this, Shichi,” Min murmured, losing his voice under the tightness in his throat. “It’s... so much...”

“I told my grandmother about you,” Se7en said softly, still holding Min’s hand. “Do you know what she told me?”

“No,” He whispered.

“She told me it was time that someone of my grandfather’s religion held onto a symbol of love and faith... a symbol that speaks of love separated by distance but never by more than a breath or a heartbeat.” Se7en leaned over, gently kissing the younger man. “That as long as this is near you, I am near you and that I will always return to it... because I love you. Not matter how far apart we are... my love will be as close as this cross is to your heart.”

Holding hands, they kissed, bound by their hands closed over an old love and a new chain.

A few feet away, Yunho watched the lovers, his eyes hooded at the sight of their youngest savouring the taste of another man. With an unreadable expression on his face, he turned to his own lover standing near the edge of the other futon and held his hand out to Jaejoong, a flick of his fingers urging the other man to join him. Jae sank down to his knees, then on all fours and leaned into Yunho’s mouth, taking a sip of the man’s waiting kiss.

“It’s...nice,” Yunho said, softly nipping at Jae’s bottom lip. Leaning back onto the scattered pillows, he waited as Jae made himself comfortable, arranging his long legs around Yunho’s until they were a sprawl on the futon. “Out here. It’s nice.”

“I thought you were talking about my kiss,” Jae teased. “I guess I’ll have to try again.”

He drank from his lover’s mouth. There was no other word for it, Jaejoong realized. Yunho’s lips were a heady wine for his soul, spinning away any hint of sobriety he might have had lingering in him. The subtle taste of man spread over his tongue, worked in hot by Yunho’s probing tongue. They fought briefly, the tips of their tongues licking and tasting each other’s heat but it was a languid battle, slowing down when the other needed breath or even sweeter, when one found an angle of body that rode the lust across each other’s skin.

“You are so much mine, Kim Jaejoong,” Yunho whispered. The young singer felt right in his arms, right against his body and slid in perfectly into the breadth of his hips. “I needed to tell you that. I think I need to tell you that every day.”

“Good,” Jae grinned. “I’d like to hear it every day.”

“Do you ever think about where we’ll be in a few years?” Yunho asked, staring up into the sky and wondering where Jae’s Han river stars had gone to. Lowering his gaze, he found them, shimmering specks of lanterns caught in his lover’s natural brown eyes.

“I don’t care. As long as you are with me,” He said with a shrug. Yunho waited, listening for something that never came. Jaejoong looked up at his lover, expectantly and asked, “What?”

“I was waiting for you to ask me if I thought we’d be together,” He admitted. “You usually... you always used to.”

“Nope,” Jaejoong shook his head. “Not ever again.”

Stretching, he pushed Yunho onto his back then lifted himself up to lie on his lover’s belly and chest. Jae stroked at Yunho’s palms, silently asking the man to open his hands so they could touch. When his fingers were wrapped in Yunho’s, Jaejoong stole a kiss, inhaling the breath from his lover’s mouth and swallowing it, pulling in the man’s strength with a sigh.

“God, I love you, Joongie,” Yunho sighed, cupping the back of his lover’s head. “I don’t have the words to tell you how much. I wish I did. I wish I could give you enough stars to hold so you can feel how hot you make me...how much light you give me.”

“I don’t need poetry or stars or anything else to know one thing for certain, Jung Yunho.” Jaejoong stared down into the other man’s face, his lips skimming Yunho’s mouth in feather strokes as he spoke, leaving heart-skipping kisses along his lover’s sensual mouth. “I am yours. No matter if we’re sleeping on a wide bed or having to cuddle for warmth on an old red couch... I am your destiny. And you are mine. I love you, Yunnie. I am going to always love you, even when they lay us down into the dirt so we can sleep forever under it, I’ll still be loving you. You are...forever mine. Just as I am forever yours.”

Commentary

Thank you for following the story. I appreciate all of the time you spend with me. I truly do.

For any of you who know me, and read me, you know I don't like straying into controversial story line plots like MPreg or Non-Con sex. I just don't like it and often I don't like how it's portrayed.

It was a hard decision to include Kimura in this piece. I wasn't going to do it but it played an important part of what broke YunJae up and played into Jaejoong's already fractured psyche. I had to think if this was a piece that could hold up the story and truthfully I thought about what I would want someone to walk away with if they read this.

In the end, I thought it was important to get something out there. Seriously look at how someone feels after something that tragic has happened to them... even if it's considered a sexual assault and not a rape, it still is an assault on someone's heart and mind. I wanted anyone who ever read anything to know that THEY are the ones who are strong and that they have nothing to be ashamed of. That there are people who understand and no, they are not to blame.

While this is fiction, the issues that I try to talk about in the SMM universe are real. From hiding what you are because of hatred...to sexual assault... to learning to love yourself for who you are; all of these things are out there and should be talked about. If you can't talk about them with those around you then please, find someone to talk to. Find someone who will listen.

Please.

Thank you.

Wedspawn ♥