

So Much Mine

wedspawn

This is a work of fiction.
This is not meant to portray any actual relationship.
Any similarities to actual events is purely coincidental.

So Much Mine.

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One

A drop of sweat caught a flash of pulsating light as it trembled on the young Korean's curved jaw. The driving thump of a bass line vibrated the floor beneath his feet, shuddering the catwalk he'd shimmied onto. Ripples of shadow marbled the laminated sign hanging from the velvet rope that barred the entrance to the walk, warning men that the steel grating was strictly for the female dancers. Jaejoong ignored the sign, curving his lithe body around the wide bouncer, tossing off a charming smile. The man's broad hand slipped under the rise of Jae's thighs, cupping at the warmth of the young man's ass for a brief moment before helping Jaejoong over the velvet rope.

Jae let the press of fingers slide along the inseam of his pants, ignoring the rise of sick in the back of his mouth. The lemon soju he'd tossed back earlier still burned his tender throat, nearly raw from the hours he'd spent practicing. Its potent sting did little to dull the ache beneath his breast bone, a curl of tender pain nothing seemed to ease. The faces around him swam into a paisley sea of pale adoration and sparkling fabrics. Hip hop beat out of the club's overhead speakers, drowning out any chance of Jae overhearing the murmur of voices around him. Throwing his face back, he inhaled deeply, drawing into his lungs what little cold air the vents were pushing out.

Nothing mattered in the space of that breath, the music pounding through him, an abusive lover he'd found lurking in the dark corners of a dance club. Jae's body was wound tight, taut muscles bunching beneath his thin white shirt, the cloth soaked transparent from his sweat. The primal drumbeat behind the music called to his blood, his lean body curving onto itself as he hooded his dark eyes, driving the crowd around him further back into the haze of alcohol and need that crawled beneath his skin.

The woman dancing next to him edged closer, her hips twitching seductively as she circled around Jae's writhing body. Her hands were hot on his shoulders when she finally worked her way in, blood-red fingernails vibrant on Jae's pale skin. He twisted, face closed off as she tried again. Jaejoong debated for a moment, at war with the anguish in his heart and the deaden weight in his belly. It would be easy to fall into her moist heat, lost in the velvet of a woman's touch but the dancer's

musky scent left him cold.. a flatness he could taste on the back of his tongue, mingled in with the fumes of the potent soju.

His legs were beginning to ache, a familiar strain in his knee. Jae glanced down at the girl, drawn back in horror at the lust in her face, a scarlet painted mouth whispering his name in a soundless moan. The music shifted, something deeper in emotion rising from the depths of someone else's lost love.

He caught the sob before it escaped from his full mouth, sharp white teeth digging into his lower lip. Jae swore that he wouldn't cry... that he wouldn't let the need he couldn't chase away with alcohol or exhaustion. The skin on his belly tingled, remembering Yunho's touch. Their practice session devolved into a shouting match when that touch... that single skimming of fingertips over the low-rise of Jae's jeans brought him to a standstill.

Jaejoong's hands found that same spot, curling over the flesh and closing his eyes. Yunho's sharp words echoed, lost in a loop until all Jae could hear was the admonishment. Each drop of sound drowned out the world, pushing the club's ear-splitting raucous to the background. His overheated body responding to Yunho's touch feuded with the heart-sickening spitting disgust the group's leader shouted at him when he stumbled. Each time he failed, Yunho's eyes hardened and Jae drove himself further into the depths of his misery.

Club NB staff had grown used to the singer sliding past the main door, a hooded sweatshirt pulled down over his too-pretty face. The bouncers had long waived the 15,000 won cover charge, whispering to the attractive woman that the lead singer of TVfxQ often fell into a dancing trance on the catwalks, stalking free of the steel panels with a thirst for alcohol. They giggled behind raised hands when he smiled at them, a bright plastic beacon of reassurance when he motioned to the pourers that his shot glass was empty.

A hand reached through the haze, familiar and intimate. The females-only rule, broken only by the lithe, heartbroken male beauty who sought solace in the music, had been violated by another. Standing at the crux of two panels, Yunho stood against the light, a corona of red flaring behind him. The stage lights shifted, dousing black then rising into yellow bands rippling over the Korean man's coldly stern face.

Fingers gripped tight on Jae's upper arm, digging deep into the tender flesh. With a yank, Yunho dragged at the young singer, ignoring the feminine yelps of outrage when he muscled through the catwalk two-

deep in women. Stronger of the two, Yunho felt Jaejoong's initial resistance, pulling harder as the other singer dug his heels into the ridge of the catwalk's partitions.

"I've had enough of this, Kim Jaejoong." Yunho kept walking, Jae's struggles barely noticeable in his ire. "Don't fight me, Jaejoong. We're going home."

Two

Jaejoong shook at the chill in the night air, a frost working across his battered soul. His arm had gone numb long before they reached the back door of Club NB, the smirking grin of one of the dance club's bouncers burning a hole between his shoulder blades. Shame blushed Jae's face, drenching his fairness in a hot rose, petals scorched with anger and fear. Yunho's cold face rivaled Seoul's winter breeze, glassy still and frozen over with menace.

The leader's dark brown eyes held no warmth, marble passion hardened against Jae's soft cries of protest as he stumbled over the low steps leading to the alleyway behind the building. Yunho released the singer when his feet tangled, sending him sprawled onto the rough stone bricks lining the tight space between the club and a nearby restaurant. The sounds of the club muted, the heavy steel back door slammed behind them, shutting Jae from the solace he'd meant to find in its pulsating depths.

A snippet of glass, rounded edges worn smooth from rolling truck tires, dug into Jae's hand, working into the crease of his palm. Run-off from the gutters held the stink of the sky, a sewerage of human waste and cast off food. Staring down into a puddle of dirty water, Jae stared hard into the face he found reflected there, a phantom of a young man barely illuminated by the ambient street lights.

"Don't say anything." A voice whispered in his ear, a fragment of his heart that had broken off and lodged itself into the crook of his neck. It had drifted there when Yunho rested his chin on Jaejoong's shoulder, the young singer holding his breath tight when the photographer instructed the band leader to pull in tighter. Another touch cemented the emotional stile on Jae's body, a marker of regret placed when the air cooled away Yunho's warmth when he stepped away. His chest ached now, frozen more from Yunho's coldness than the air he fought to drag into his tortured lungs.

The face mocked him with its imperfection, a nose too wide for his liking... a mouth that ran full across a thin face. The artfully draped shock of hair he'd started off with now lay as a tangled mess across his cheekbones, matching the disheveled confusion in Jaejoong's mind. His

words were muddled, more so than the water that marred his hoodie, the filth slowly creeping into the fabric, stiffening the cold against his bruised arms.

Yunho's fingers left a stain on Jae's skin, the bitter soreness of bruises slowly forming, invisible beneath the thick fleece. Another shudder racked Jae's body, creasing his spine as he struggled to regain his footing, refusing to give Yunho the satisfaction of seeing him as fractured and ripped apart as he felt. Still they felt...welcome. The aching touch of the other man's hands on his arms were... like home tucked into a small sheltered crest. He wanted to rub Yunho's marks into his bones, pushing them down until they were etched into his marrow, wanting them to disappear only when they burned his body at his death.

There were so many words Jaejoong wanted to say... things to shout and spit into the other man's face but as Jae tilted his chin up, his heart failed him, whispering nothing other than reminders of the laughter he sometimes shared and the sibilant touch of fingers on his thigh or chest. There was nothing of that playfulness in Yunho now, just a rigid statue of control, large fists tight against his thighs as he fought not to strike out at the young man struggling to stand in front of him.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" The slap of words didn't come as a surprise... Jaejoong had been expecting them. Nor was he shocked at the virulence in the broken heated anger barely held back in Yunho's shuttered voice. Jae expected this, if not more. They'd been dancing around a fire too closely, one stoked by every step the singer took away from the rest of the band in the hopes of distancing himself from his attraction to Yunho.

A nearby dumpster, its steel body battered with dents from garbage trucks traversing the narrow alleyway, provided Jaejoong some support, the soju finally creeping into the front of his throat. The sour of lemon gave him warning followed by the bile of his stomach rebelling against the trauma of emotion and too much alcohol. Swallowing, Jae turned, face hidden from Yunho's view as he fought to regain some composure before answering.

"What do you ...?" The smoothness of Jae's voice was shattered as his belly finally gave a final push, upending itself into the puddles at his feet. Exhaustion claimed his balance and he reached out, trying to grab at anything before he tumbled into his own vomit. The dryness of his heaves were followed by the purge of soju, the clench of his stomach muscles tightening the skin around his ribs.

The night swam around Jae, a sparkle of nothingness amid the lights. Yunho stood quiet and judgmental as the singer wiped at his full mouth, the sourness of his sick barely a whiff of bitter in the stench of the alleyway. Reaching out, the band leader grabbed at the other, wrenching him nearly off his feet. Twisting Jae around, Yunho slammed the smaller man into the building's back wall, a burst of flaking stucco showering Jae's dark hair.

"I am sick of you doing this to yourself." Yunho hissed, his fingers digging into Jae's forearms. They struggled for a moment, a cataclysmic battle of wills weakened by Jae's ebbing resolve at Yunho's nearness. All Jae could find in his throat was his own disgust and the trembling threat of his body finally giving way beneath him.

Yunho pulled the other man up, slamming him up against the wall for a brief moment then shaking him hard. A solid meaty thunk echoed between them when Jae's head struck the siding, grains of white sand and cement trapped in his hair. Stars momentarily danced a seductive light show for the singer, then faded back into the cold of Yunho's angry face. All hint of discipline had been lost in that moment, a furious storm raged in the leader's eyes, his mouth twisted beyond nearly all recognition as he quietly leaned in.

"Do you have any idea of how you affect the rest of us? Any at all?" Yunho's breath smelled sweet, plum jam scented with a hint of vanilla. Amid the tragedy of his life falling around him, Jae nearly giggled at the inanity of what his mind noticed amid the wreckage. The laughter was chased with fear as more bruises were made, Yunho's hands gripping tighter and the space between them became nearly nothing.

The brush of Yunho's thighs on his hips brought madness, the thin fabric of Jae's shirt made hot from the other man's body. Sweat chilled from the night air became pearly salt, rolling into tiny grains in the crease of Jae's torn jeans. The air seared, trapped between the heavy jacket Yunho had worn to ward off the winter. Jae sucked in the welcome warmth, his body shivering from need more than the cold. Pressed up against the cold wall, the length of Yunho's chest and legs became a beacon, a light shimmering to capture the desirous moth Jae kept in his heart.

"If you can't think of yourself...think of the others... think of me!" The words kept coming, a wave of temper pounding at Jae with rapid fists. "Everything you do affects us. Every time there are whispers of you stumbling drunk from a club or draped over some table letting strange hands roam over your body... you affect how we're seen!"

“They call us, you know...the papers and magazines. They ask us when we’re in interviews if the stories about you are true.” The young man continued, mindless of the anguish captured in Jae’s face. “Every time I have to laugh off about how you spend hours out, flirting with others and drinking. How people talk behind our backs about your looseness and I have to tell them that it’s not true, that you’re just having a good time but always come home safe to us.”

“Then tonight when I am finally sick of wondering how many times I can lie for you, I find you here where you shouldn’t be, lost in yourself. I see the drunk on you and ... people who touching you and leaving the stink of their sex on your skin.” Yunho shook him again, a violent aftershock rattling Jae’s teeth.

“I didn’t...”

“You didn’t what?” Yunho spat back, his face pressed nearly into a mockery of a kiss with the young man. Jae’s gaze faltered, finding the rise of Yunho’s wrists rather than the other man’s eyes. “Look at me, Jaejoong! You didn’t what? Think? You didn’t think that how you act would affect how the world sees the rest of us? That you damage our reputation with your selfishness and your self-absorption?”

“I...” His words were lost, carried off by the wind that coursed into the alleyway.

“I can’t stand any more of this. You stumble during the easiest of routines. Everything that you fail at hangs on me as the leader.” Yunho hissed, his jaw clenched. “Do you think that makes it easy for me? When the others joke about you being my favourite...what they’re really saying is; Yunho, why don’t you hound Jaejoong like you do us? Why aren’t you being as hard on him as you are when we make a mistake? They all work hard to strengthen what they are weakest in but you... you don’t even put your heart into something that you should be thankful for...something you say you begged for.”

Jae’s eyes glittered with pain, tears running the edge of razors along his long lashes. The heaviness in his chest beat slowly, a threatening ache leaving him breathless and wanting. Clearing his throat, his body shook with the effort of speaking, his mind screaming with denial as his soul cracked open, words frothing into a bubbling cascade of want.

The whisper was so soft, a feather caught in the rising thermal of Yunho’s anger. The young Korean singer could barely speak, lost in the

misery of his pain. Looking up, Jae met Yunho's strong gaze with a wavering glance before speaking again.

"I put my heart into you. There is no one else I would beg more for."

Three

Specks of snow flurried on a gust of wind, dusting the length of Yunho's nose, tangling minute shards of ice in the curve of his lashes. Blinking furiously, the young man blew impatiently at the water clouding his sight, the evening fracturing into spans of icy crystals and a light-washed night sky. Far off in the distance, a rumble of traffic poured through Seoul's streets, streams of people passing by the end of the alleyway, uncaring of the drama unfolding in the darkened niche of the club's back door stoop.

"Jaejoong..." Yunho's pleas curled softly in the shell of the singer's ears, unheard in the daze he'd drunk himself into. More than his body ached, a strange thread of worry wound itself around his chest, tugging at a crack in his heart...something Yunho wanted no part of. Jae's broken-doll body seemed heavier than it should be, weighed down perhaps with the anger Yunho flung at him with uncaring ease. "What birds? What are you talking about? I don't understand what you're saying."

"Feel sick." Jae heaved again, a sickened, rigid convulsion that shocked Yunho. Another bramble of words followed, Jae's provincial dialect losing their meaning to the wind. Staring up with wide eyes, Jae waved Yunho off, a look of disgust and something else darkening the young man's beauty. Jaejoong wavered again and finally gave into the slumber his body demanded, lost in the ache of his thoughts.

Yunho's guts churned with regret and shame at the sight of the other's fallen body, the leader's hands burrowing under Jae's slender waist in a vain attempt to lift him free of the filth and water. Jaejoong felt too warm for Yunho's liking and the singer's mumbled Korean ... a bare feathery whisper under his breath ...made no sense. Jae's thickened Chungcheong accent slurred his words... a mumble of scented heat and pain poking at the tender rawness in Yunho's thoughts.

The rattle of dance music and voices rose as the back door opened, dim lights from the rear passage of the club softly illuminating Jae's ashen face. Glancing up, Yunho barely had time to cover his friend's body with his own, a trio of argumentative young men being ousted into the street by one of the club's hefty bouncers threatened to overrun them, heavy boots stamping too close to Yunho's thighs. The man stood in the door

frame, a silhouette of menace and shadow, the gleam of light behind him reflecting off his massive, shorn head. Leaning over, the bouncer stared down at the bundle of flesh and bone laying huddled at the end of the steps, narrowed eyes widening in surprise.

“Hyung..” Yunho wasn’t sure who’d spoken first, the man blocking all of the light or himself. All he could feel was the fear rising from the base of his neck, working through the skin on his scalp and shivering back down his arms. Jaejoong’s weight dragged at his arms, their bodies nearly matched in density despite the fragility of the other’s appearance.

“I need ... to call...someone, yes?” Yunho started, glancing down at Jae’s slack form, his full mouth working a soft protest when the band leader tried to straighten him. The responsibility of being Dong Bang Shin Ki’s leader once more hung on him. He’d stood angry and violent as Jae fell in on himself. His innards twisted again, tightening until he could feel his abdomen muscles clench in protest.

“He’s just drunk. Too much soju.” The bouncer leaned forward, his palm nearly wide enough to cover Yunho’s whole face. Reaching under Jae’s torso, the man lifted the singer easily, shoulders bunching with the effort. He knew the club’s owner wouldn’t take kindly to finding one of his better patrons passed out in the alleyway... his job called for brute strength and discretion. Now was definitely time for discretion. “Come. We’ll call you a cab...”

“I brought a car.” Yunho gathered himself up, rising to his feet and worried at his upper lip, teeth caught in thought. “Are you sure? I can get him to a doctor.”

“No. He should be fine. Did he eat before he came?” The bouncer strode quickly, moving over the rough cement of the sidewalk.

“I don’t know.” Yunho strained to remember if the mercurial singer had actually eaten anything from his plate. The pushing steel of a spoon’s edge was all Yunho could recall from the too-silent meal, the others taking their food either to the living room or back into the studio area, the doors closing quietly against the building storm. Yunho could recall placing food on his own plate but the tasteless dust on his tongue told him nothing of what he ate, a blind meal of unspoken words and bitten back accusations. “Probably not enough, if anything.”

Nodding knowingly, the older man hefted Jae’s weight more evenly in his arms, his footing more sure on the cement walkway. “Ah, that makes sense then. If you drink and there’s nothing in your stomach, you get

drunk quickly. He probably didn't have enough water and every time I saw him, he was dancing. That will make the alcohol seek out the skin, and you feel its numbness more. He should be fine once he gets some sleep. Maybe a hot shower to pull the soju out of him."

"I'll take him home then." Yunho worried at that idea, trying to find the keys to the car he'd taken in his pockets.

The familiar jangle of steel on his fingers were also chilled with a soft burnish of silver. Drawing them free of the confining fabric, Yunho gripped tight at the Byzantine cross earring he'd found on the living room floor of their shared apartment. He'd known it was Jae's, the young singer often slid it into his piercing once he woke up, an angelic counterpoint dancing to the wicked prettiness of his face. Despite his frustration at Jaejoong, Yunho had felt a thrill of ...something... when he spotted the flash of silver in the rug's weave, glad he could tell the singer that he'd not lost his favourite iconic treasure.

A round of uttered appreciation danced about before Yunho slid into the relative warmth of the sports car and eased onto the street. Glancing at Jae's prone form, Yunho resisted the urge to push back the sweatshirt's hood away from the singer's face. Horns blasted around him as Yunho drifted slightly to the right. Startled, he pulled his attention away from the slumbering singer and back onto the road, hands gripped tight to control the car carefully around a weaving bus.

Traffic thickened and thinned around him, the insanity of Seoul's streets nearly driving him off the road as he tried to make a turn into their neighbourhood, the ice-slick asphalt sliding the car's tires out from under them. Turning the wheel into the gentle curve, the car arced back onto the street, resting against the ridge of a broken sidewalk. His heart pounding, Yunho breathed out a heavy sigh of relief, trying to restore the calm to his nerves. The upper muscles of his arm throbbed, his hand pressed firm on Jaejoong's stomach where he unthinkingly reached out to prevent the young singer from sliding forward and striking his head.

Leaning forward, Yunho closed his eyes and rested his forehead against the hard leather padding of the steering wheel, listening to the shush of the snow outside and Jae's soft breathing. The interior of the car reeked, a curious blend of musky sex and sick. The bouncer was right, Yunho thought to himself, Jae's sweat was now mostly soju, the potent liquor melting from his system.

Tucked into the relative safety of a residential street, Yunho turned in the small confines of the car's interior, staring down at the complicated

mess of a young man he'd run rough-shod over. Guiltily, Yunho stared at Jaejoong, nestled up against the door frame. He'd seen the young man groomed to nearly an inch of his life before photo shoots and concerts but the rawness of his sensuality was never more apparent than now. Clad in the barest wisp of a t-shirt and jeans a size too big... probably purloined from Yoochun's dresser... Jaejoong slept soundly, the oversized white hoodie with its broken plastic zipper swaddling his torso.

Wrinkling his nose at the pungent odor coming from the warming fleece, Yunho leaned over and began to work Jae free of the confining hoodie, unbuckling the singer's lap belt in the hopes he could better maneuver Jae's lanky, slack body.

"What are you doing?" Jae's hot whisper stung Yunho's neck, breath skittering over the sensitive skin under the leader's jaw. "You want my jacket? You have your own jacket. Why do you want mine?"

"You're too hot. You're burning up. You'll be more comfortable with this off." Yunho worked Jae's limp hand through a sleeve, softly ordering the young man to make a fist, hoping that he would for once listen and make things easier. Naturally, Jae did nothing of the sort, choosing instead to lean his head back and stared up into Yunho's worried eyes.

"It's too warm. Roll down the window." Jae swallowed, trying to ease the aching dryness in his throat.

"Joongie, please... listen to me. Just lean forward so I can take this off of you. You'll feel better." Yunho pulled Jaejoong forward, cradling the young man's body into the curve of his own as he tried to work the fleece free of Jae's limp arms. Realizing how close Jae's mouth was to his own face, Yunho muttered a soft warning. "Don't bite my ear."

He was met with a soft snore in response, Jaejoong's body easing back into a more comfortable sleep once free of the sweat jacket. Sliding Jae back onto the seat, Yunho debated tossing the filthy thing outside, leaving it on the street. His hands clenched into the fabric as the image of someone finding the jacket and sliding Jae's scent around them, seeking warmth from the stained fleece. A mindless fury rose, nearly rivaling the one he'd felt when Jaeejoong stumbled during practice... a soft red tempest of anger blanketing his mind. Taking a deep breath, Yunho slowly released his fingers, reaching behind him to tuck the hoodie behind the seat.

The blanket of snow was nearly a solid white across the hood of the car, the engine a soft purr beneath Yunho's anguished breathing. A soft curl

of red fabric ribbon danced from the rear view mirror, weighted by a dangle of gold metal stars etched with their names. Yunho easily found Jae's name...Hero... among the others, the edges tarnished smooth from touching. The ribbon swayed as Yunho released it, a sparkle of bright painted across the dark city street outside.

Staring at Jae's face, Yunho saw the ravaged remains of the singer's temper ease back into a placid sleep. Murmuring, Jae stretched out, his long legs hooking easily over the console and over Yunho's knee. The air was still too warm for Yunho's liking, an adjustment of the heater bringing no relief as he debated which one of the other members he could call to help get Jaejoong back up into the apartment. It would have to be Yoochun, Yunho decided. Junsu had fled their shared living quarters to visit his brother and Changmin wouldn't be able to hold up Jae's weight, despite the youngest man's protests that he would be capable.

Jae moved, trying to get away from the hot air pouring onto his face. A soft sigh escaped his ripe mouth, the words lost in a dream. Beads of sweat shone on Jae's upper lip, his face flushed from the hot air pouring from the car's defroster, Yunho's unheard heart catching on the glisten.

Shifting uncomfortably, Yunho reached out and touched the drops, smearing his fingers with Jae's moisture.

"God, what have I done to you?" Yunho shuddered, trying to pull himself free of the darkness surrounding him. "I keep pushing then you break run... and then I chase. Why don't you say something...yell at me...scream louder until I hear you? How long are we going to be doing this? How long until you finally just push all of us away?"

Yunho stared at his wet fingertips, his own body smoldering despite having shed the jacket he'd hastily pulled on before storming out of the apartment. Bringing his fingers up to his mouth, Yunho tentatively tasted the sweetness of the young singer, closing his eyes at the sugar-salt of Jae's body rolling to cover his tongue. Hungry from the taste, he slid his fingers past his lips, greedily sucking them, frantically trying to draw every last drop from the ridges of his prints.

Swallowing hard, Yunho shivered, tasting the heaven in that small kiss of liquid and wondered at the confusion in his soul.

Four

Yoochun closed the bedroom door behind him, the soft click of a metal tab sliding past into the striker plate making him pause. His attention was keenly attuned for any sound from inside, a slumbering Jaejoong sprawled half naked on one of the beds, a coverlet loosely draped over his prone body. The rest of the apartment was filled with a welcome silence, a serene peace finally having fallen to settle over the fierce tension they'd all be avoiding. There was no light coming from underneath the door to the bedroom Changmin usually shared with Jaejoong and Yunho. Yoochun touched the wall of the hallway, turning the corner, reassured that the youngest of them had finally succumbed to sleep.

The living space shone bright, every lamp burning circles of white light onto the pale walls. Yunho stood in the kitchen area, an unwieldy bundle held up to his face. A tea towel, packed with broken chunks of ice cubes, crackled loudly, Yunho wincing visibly when he pressed it up against his jaw.

"That looks painful, hyung." Yoochun spoke softly, rubbing at his own face in sympathy. Yunho grunting in acknowledgement, padding into the living area. The bulky towel did little to hide the swell in the his puffed-up mouth, a thin split creasing his upper lip. More concerning was the purpling mark stretching a thin line over Yunho's jaw, the bruise just rising out from under his skin.

"It is painful." Yunho fought the instinct to nod, the slightest movement appeared to open up the slice on his lip. He'd just gotten the bleeding to stop, a drabble of crimson ruining another one of the kitchen's many towels. His tongue seemed to need to find the cut, tasting the copper of his body. "Our Jaejoong seems to always wake up at the wrong time. He came awake in the car and just seemed angry. I was afraid he was going to bite me."

"He definitely woke up mad." Yoochun busied himself for a moment, turning a can of mineral water around in his hand. "And for someone so slender, he's very heavy. I don't ever want to try to get him into the house like that again. My back hurts."

"I know. He hits hard too." Yunho nodded, hissing at the slight pain in his jaw. The skin felt tender and bloated, hot to touch when he ran his fingers along the edge of his chin. "One of the club's bouncers helped me to the car. I'm glad you were awake. I don't think I could have gotten him up to the apartment by myself."

"No, probably not. Changmin would have fallen down under his weight and Junsu would have told you to leave him in the car until he woke up enough to walk." Micky tousled his thick dark hair, easing the stress in his scalp. There were questions floating in the back of his throat, words begging to be spilled but caution told him to tread carefully with Yunho, the leader's face closed and tight.

"Did Jaejoong fall asleep?" The query was so nonchalant, seemingly innocent except for the twist of mild anguish hidden in the mention of the nearly unconscious young man they'd carried up from the car. "Or did he argue with you too?"

"No arguing and I put him in Junsu's bed. Su went to stay the night with his brother. After I got Jae's shoes off, he was easier to handle." Yoochun laughed softly. "Although he did say that you stole his jacket."

"Oh, I left it in the car. It smells." Yunho wrinkled his nose. "I should have tossed it away and told him he lost it but he'd just go back and dig around for it."

"There's no one more stubborn than our Jaejoong." Yoochun silently wondered if that were true. Yunho seemed to be just as pig-headed when they were trying to manhandle the singer's limp body through the front door. They'd nearly tumbled Jae to the snow-covered ground just getting him out of the car and their legs were damp from the fight to get him up the short flight of steps to the lobby of the apartment building, Jaejoong's twisting struggles sending them into the wet shrubbery growing along the entrance.

Crossing the threshold of their home, Jae woke, irate at something and struck with clenched fists. Yoochun escaped with a glancing blow to his temple, easily stepping away from Jaejoong's flailing by holding him at arms' length. Yunho had not been as lucky, drawing Jae closer for some reason, cradling the young man's waist and trying to coax him into the hallway.

Jaejoong responded with a mumbled stream of curses, rambling strings of words barely audible except for the clear pronunciation of Yunho's name amid more obscure country slang. Yunho's hushed pleas for Jae to

be quiet fell on deaf ears, the young singer baring his teeth, eyes slitted tight and struck out again, his fists whistling in the air. Their leader tried to duck, all the while not dropping his burden. Jaejoong's knuckles creased Yunho's upper lip, splitting the tender flesh on his front teeth. Another blow landed wildly on Yunho's face before Yoochun decided to take pity on their distressed leader and wrapped his arms around Jae's back, sandwiching the singer between them.

A few shuffles gave them room enough to close the front door behind them, Yoochun kicking it closed with his foot. Jae mumbled in Yunho's ear, the hot whispered words bringing a flush to the young man's cheeks. His breath warmed Yunho's neck, a delicate brush of lips against his earlobe brought a rushing thickness to his stomach, twisting a dance of butterflies through his guts. Yoochun nodded at Yunho's face, trying not to grin at the blush in the leader's cheeks. The first drop of blood struck Jae's white shirt, immediately spreading through the slightly damp fabric, darkening the seam with a vermilion kiss.

Yunho jerked loose, frightened that Jaejoong was bleeding then dismissing Micky's look of concern at his own bloody nose. He allowed Yoochun to guide the now placid Jaejoong into the smaller of the two bedrooms standing motionless in the main room, his fingers finding the warm spot of Jae's breath on his neck. It cooled much too quickly, leaving nothing behind but the remembrance of a near-kiss and the erotic brush of teeth on Yunho's tender throat.

Yoochun kept quiet, watching a pacing Yunho circle around a squat glass table before collapsing on the far end of the couch, the watery image of his face reflected back at him. The leader glanced at the silent young man sitting near him, unsure about so many things...especially the hurt that seemed to spread from his heart into the rest of his body.

With a heavy sigh, Yunho gripped the ice pack between his hands, not wanting to look up at Yoochun's face as he spoke. The past few weeks wore him down, each misstep Jaejoong took aggravating him until he finally burst out in mindless anger, striking out with curt reproach. He'd seen the initial stroke of pain in Jae's dark eyes, tender as bruises before hardening behind a cold mask of acceptance. Soon, those flashes of hurt never surfaced, masked by a brittle, stoic pretty face...Jae's sensual mouth set against any comment that might be misconstrued as an objection.

Soon Yunho was finding fault in nearly everything Jae did, a cracked note or a single grain of uncooked rice he might find in his bowl. The others spent a lot of their time either avoiding the rippling tension

between the two or teased Yunho into a better mood. Only Yoochun reached out to scrape away the granite mask of neutrality Jae wore, often dipping his head over and whispering below the others' hearing, a burst of laughter usually transforming the iciness of the lead singer's chilled expression into an angelic landscape.

"You and Jaejoong are...close." Yunho tentatively ventured, unsure if his speaking with the other young man would be taken as a sign of weakness.

Yunho took his role as their leader seriously, too seriously the others sometimes thought but he'd failed so many times in the past, not doing enough to lift his family out of their troubles or even being there when his sister felt overwhelmed. He'd always did too little too late in his mind, a driving ambition coupled with the desire to never let anyone down, especially the four young men who depended on him to guide them through their lives and careers. At that moment, Yunho felt the pressure of being more than just himself, the anger in Jaejoong's face finally widening the crack of self-doubt he'd felt starting in his control.

"He's my friend. A very good friend." Yoochun agreed with a nod, sipping carefully at the canned water, letting the semi-salty bubbles float over his tongue. "I depend on all of you so much for support. You are all the family I have here most of the time. Jaejoong... he gives comfort and stability."

"I don't know how he can give you stability. Jaejoong is... so wild. It always seems like he's about to spin out of control...just on the edge of madness." Yunho sought for the right word, something to express the chaos that the other brought into his life. The sensations Jae left behind on Yunho's body and mind were indescribable, a rolling landscape of ups and downs mingled with terrorizing joy and dark trenches of pain. "He drives me crazy with the things he does. I keep telling him to calm down, straighten out but his mouth rambles and he... I don't know. I don't know what I am saying."

"You see the Jaejoong that the world sees." Yoochun tread cautiously, trying to feel out Yunho's emotions. "We've spent the first year together very polite and bowing every time one of us makes a mistake. Now, we're more comfortable with sharing our anger and laughter but not with the bits of us that are tender."

"I don't see him as tender." Yunho admitted softly, the dripping tea towel leaving a trail of tears across the glass table top. "He's too...rough and says nonsense. And then, he stops and is shy...like he is unsure."

Then...he's back to being arrogant and pushy. Which one is the real Jaejoong? Which one do I speak to?"

"He's all of those things, Yunho." Micky turned, facing the leader, his handsome features soft with empathy. "Jaejoong is complex only if you think he is trying to use you or has something to gain. But he's not. He's brutally honest and then shy because he thinks he's not good enough or pretty enough or doesn't sing the best."

"All of that is Jaejoong..." Yoochun continued. "He's also the person who you can count on to cry with because his emotions run deep, hidden behind a layer of tough that he built to protect himself. But it is there, Yunho. I know it is. He was the first one to see me fighting the tears when I missed my family and I was ashamed, believing that the Jaejoong I thought I knew would make fun of me for being a homesick child."

"He's not like that." Yunho's voice was nearly lost, his head tilted down. "He would never...Joongie-ah would never mock someone. He's not...mean."

"No, he's not." Micky agreed. "But I didn't know that. I thought he was cold and narcissistic but in that moment when I felt my heart breaking because it was empty of the faces I loved, Jaejoong held my shoulders and told me that he would be my brother for as long as I needed him to be. That was when I began to know the real Jaejoong, Yunho."

"I can't reach that Jaejoong, Chunnie." Yunho admitted, the scared thread of a sob scraping his throat raw. The ice melted beneath his touch, leaving nothing behind but a soaked rag, much like the tears Yunho held back with an strength nearly broken by the night's events. Everything that he felt earlier...the anger and rage had been washed away with the sight of Jaejoong on his knees, sick and alone in the darkness. That image now burned in the back of his mind, rising every time Yunho blinked.

"I think you can." Yoochun reached over and patted Yunho on the shoulder, squeezing down on the other in comfort. "You're tired right now. Why don't you go to sleep? Jaejoong can stay in Junsu's bed. I don't mind sharing with him tonight."

"Would you mind if..." Yunho blinked back the glitter of salt in his eyes. "If I spent the night in your room with Jaejoong? I don't... I feel responsible for how he is right now. I don't want to abandon him."

Yoochun leaned back against the soft cushions, watching Yunho's face as the young man obviously warred with the conflicting desires in his heart. Nodding, the dark-haired singer stood, picking up the damp tea towel from the table. "I don't mind, Yunnies. I think he'd be... pleased to know you were watching over him."

"I don't know...if that is true." Yunho admitted, voice tight with emotion. His face hurt not half as much as his heart, a leaden weight in his chest. "But I know I won't be able to rest until I know he's...safe."

"He's safe, hyung." Yoochun smiled as he walked into the kitchen to toss the towel into the sink. "You brought Jaejoong home where he belongs. I'm sure he'll feel happy knowing you were beside him as he slept."

Five

Buttery rays crept through the room's thick beige curtains, running a thread of golden light over Jaejoong's soft mouth. He turned away from the sparkling prod, burrowing his face into the soft pillow he hugged to his chest, trying to bring back the fleeting sleep he'd wanted so desperately to chase. The sun confused him, his dark eyes snapping open. The only time the bedroom he shared got sunlight was in the afternoon, meaning he had slept through the entire day.

Jae nearly toppled off of the bed, his hand reaching out to steady against a wall that wasn't there. Grabbing at the edge of the mattress, he blinked, shoving his unruly hair from his eyes. Somehow he'd ended up in Junsu's bed last night, a creeping headache pounding in his temples. Staring down at his hands, the singer hissed at the raw meat of his palms, sheaves of skin pared off and scraped clean. Jae remembered falling after Yunho dragged him outside of Club NB and the shouting...he clearly remembered the shouting.

And then, the memory of his sickness rose up in his throat. Jaejoong rubbed at the flesh under his jaw, trying to ease the gravel-tender ache when he swallowed. Leaning back, Jae flung one arm over his face, wondering how much of his heart he'd poured out to Yunho when he was on his knees emptying out his stomach onto the frozen pavement. A vague feeling of dread remained lurking around the flashes of ache along his temples, a sure sign that his mouth had run away from him again.

He was cold, the room chilled by Yoochun's habit of leaving the windows wide open to let in the night air...even in the dead of winter. Jae was sure he would one day wake up as an ice cube if he ever had to share a room with Micky, or perhaps have so many blankets on his bed that he wouldn't be able to turn over in the middle of the night from their weight.

"Good, you're awake." Yunho's soft voice echoed in the small room, a dark rumbling salve over the chill in Jae's bones. The door was open to the hallway, the other man carrying a tray of covered bowls and a thermos. "You should eat. I brought some food."

Standing in the frame, Yunho's body stretched up in a lean, muscular swath, further drying Jae's mouth. He'd obviously showered, hair steeped black with water and rung dry from a towel. Coming slowly into the room, Yunho approached the singer, his eyes avoiding the pale span of bare chest halfway covered by a thin sheet.

Yoochun's borrowed jeans hung down low on Jae's body, the rise of his hip bone clearly visible below the denim waistband. A smattering of golden down circled the young singer's belly button, curving downward and burying under an undone top rivet. Ridges of black-blue marks marbled Jaejoong's upper arms, the lengths of Yunho's fingers etched under the paleness.

Yunho stopped short, his hands cupped over the tray's handles and stared down at the feral young man sprawled out over the sheets, his lanky frame nearly boneless with a lupine grace. Toshi's poignant voice drifted from the living room, fading away into the driving beat of Silent Jealousy's opening. Barely audible above his heavy breathing, Yunho felt the room spin around him, his breath leached out of his lungs at the sight of a sleep-sensual Jaejoong. Yanking his gaze away from the undone jean button, Yunho nearly stumbled and caught his toe on the bed frame, hissing under his breath at the slight jerking pain.

"I...ah, brought you something to eat. There was some budae jjigae in the freezer. I know you like that so I heated it up." Yunho finally remembered to breathe, moving forward to set the tray down on the end table between the two beds. "There's also some tteok from yesterday. That might help your stomach calm down."

Jaejoong's steady, hard eyes followed Yunho's movements, the leader unsettled by the other's glare. Clearing his throat, Yunho took a sip from a steaming tea cup, testing its warmth. The pungent vapors held the promise of a summer, fresh and green. Sitting on the edge of the bed, his weight shifting Jaejoong closer, Yunho offered the cup to the singer, his hand cradling the ceramic vessel's ridge. "Here, it should be cool enough to drink now."

Lean fingers slowly wrapped around the base of the cup, fluid and graceful. For a long moment, they touched, the tea's searing warmth a chilled frost compared to the taut rigidity of need between the two young men. Assured Jaejoong had control of the tea cup, Yunho removed his hand, rubbing at his palm as the singer sat up, resting his torso against the headboard. Turning the tea cup, Jae placed his mouth on the wet mark left by Yunho's lips, tilting the vessel slightly to sip at the hot liquid.

Jaejoong's eyes closed at the pleasure of Yunho's soft kiss on the glazed porcelain, the slightly moist edge tasting of the other man's mouth. The singer inhaled the scent of the tea, blending in the spicy, vanilla fragrance of Yunho's soap. His dreams were filled with that odor, a sweet need curling into his mind and laying its slick affection over his body. In his nightmares, he couldn't find even the barest whisper of the man sitting next to him, lost in a dark maze of corridors lined with broken mirrors, Jae's own fractured reflection staring back at him in a laughing horror.

The singer schooled his face into a calm he didn't feel, telling his body that Yunho was only being kind, and that the closeness of their bodies was an accident. Another small incident that would slowly drive him insane, replaying in his mind like the other times the leader brushed up against him or touched a part of his body that Jaejoong had thought wouldn't even respond to another's touch, the skittering soft ripple of his nerves proving otherwise.

Studying Yunho carefully through hooded eyes, Jae remarked on the other young man's cut lip and bruise-marred jaw. "What happened? To your face, I mean?"

"You happened to my face." Yunho chuckled lightly, touching at the slight mark.

"I did that?" Jaejoong bowed his head, holding the tea cup in his lap, ashamed at the thought of striking out at the young man who lead them. "I am... sorry. Please... forgive me."

"You don't drink well." Yunho admitted slowly. "I had to call Yoochun to come help me get you back into the apartment. You don't remember?"

"No." Jae shook his head, a sheaf of inky hair across his face. Startled by a thought, he jerked his attention upward, staring out at the open door. "Micky... I didn't hurt him, did I?"

The concern for Yoochun ignited the creeping ache in Yunho's throat, setting his temper on fire. Cocking his head back, the wounds from the night before plainly visible on his face, he regarded the hungover singer with an assessing eye. Yunho couldn't place the emotion pushing up behind the anger, an unfamiliar scraping of hurt paved over with a twist of bitterness. Leaning closer, his body edging into Jae's, he bit back at the words he wanted to fling into the other's face, trying to dislodge the unwelcome feelings from his heart.

The closeness Jaejoong shared with Yoochun had never bothered him before. Now suddenly, there was nothing that Yunho wanted more than to place his fists on Chun's face, striking over and over until the bones broke beneath his blows and Yunho could shout at Jae that there was finally pain there... pain that matched his own. Nothing would suit him more than seeing Yoochun's blood splattered over the white tile in the kitchen, soaking into the sandy grout, so deep that no amount of scrubbing would wash it clean.

His mind rebelled at the thought weaving up from some dark depth of Yunho's soul. That is our brother, his heart reminded the leader, Yoochun has never done anything to deserve these kinds of thoughts.

Yes, he has... replied Yunho's soul... Jaejoong's face filled with worry over Yoochun is more than enough reason to strike him down. That look should not be there. That fear and concern should not be for Yoochun.

"Yunho, answer me." Jaejoong shook at the other man's arm. "Did I hit Chunnie too?"

"He's fine. He and Changmin went to do an interview and then they are going to the movies. Junsu is still with his brother." Yunho shook his head, trying to clear his mind of the traitorous thoughts that plagued him. "I was the only one you were angry at. I was trying to help you and you hit me."

"I am sorry for that." Jaejoong replied, nodding his head in abject apology. Yunho's ire was back, the closed down look firm on his handsome face. Jae tried to pull up his own emotional defenses, too weary from the night's excesses and from the see-sawing roller coaster his heart seemed determined to take him on every time he came near the other singer.

"If you were truly sorry, you wouldn't have gone off like that last night." Yunho heard the words spill from his mouth, unheeded by the warnings his mind were throwing out. For some reason, it appeared as if he had no control over his own speech, finding hurtful little barbs on the edge of his tongue. The pressure in his chest broke, filling his words with a vile bitter flavour, intent on bringing as much anguish to Jae as he felt himself. "You never listen to me. I do everything I can to help you and you throw it back in my face. It's like you ignore all I tell you and choose to do the exact opposite. Last night... I told you not to leave."

"You..." Jae bit down on his tongue, tossing the rest of the tea into his mouth. The hot liquid seared, burning the tender layer of his tongue.

He'd hoped that it would wash away the harsh words that he felt coming on but the tea did nothing more than wash the taste of Yunho from his throat.

"I am tired of your yelling." Jaejoong clenched at the cup, feeling the delicate ceramic crack beneath the crush of his palm. "All you do is yell and stomp around. If I left last night, it was to get away from you and your yelling."

"I yell at you because you don't listen." Yunho insisted. "It's like you don't hear a single word I say."

"I don't hear a word you say?" The slender young man struggled to free his legs from the sheets, the cotton wrapped too tightly around his body to be easily shed. "How can I not hear your words? You stab with your words like a hot knife and you don't care when you hit my heart. All you do is twist until I cry out and bleed all over your hands. Every time I close my eyes, all I hear is you... telling me that I'm not good enough to be dancing or singing..."

Tossing his hands up in the air, Jaejoong worked at the covers, trying to unwrap himself. Yunho grabbed at the young man's shoulders, gouging in deep, slamming Jae back into the headboard. Pulling himself in closer, Yunho warily eyed the other's snapping teeth and hot eyes, long lashes barely blinking as Jae's anger poured off of him in waves.

"Stop running, Jaejoong." Yunho's hands drifted down, covering the marks he'd left on the other the night before. The tenderness of the movement was marred by the flaring pain as Yunho's grip reignited the discomfort in Jae's arms. The singer struggled anew, trying to break away from Yunho, kicking futilely at the covers in an attempt to get loose.

The CD switched over to Longing, the main line looping through the apartment, bouncing off the walls until they came to rest in the back bedroom. Jaejoong ducked his head, debating if he could stand smashing his temple against Yunho's but the throbbing headache he already had probably would worsen, if not send him staggering into the hallway where the other could easily catch up with him.

"Just stop." Yunho ordered, the command in his voice strong. Another growling snarl from Jae's ripe mouth grabbed at the words and flung their intent back in Yunho's face. Stopping to take a deep breath, Yunho spoke again...softer this time in the hopes that Jaejoong would finally hear him. "Please, Joongie. Stop fighting me."

"I'm not the one fighting you." Jaejoong bit down on his lip, wondering if he could bit through the softness and lean in, mingling his blood with Yunho's. "You're fighting with me. You always start it. You poke and poke until I can't even breathe without you telling me that I am doing it wrong."

"I can't help but notice you breathing." Yunho's cheek nearly brushed Jae's temple, the softness of his skin whisperingly close. The scent of the leader's body once more flooded Jaejoong's senses, tearing the fight out of his anger. Turning his head, Jaejoong stared deep into Yunho's handsome face, seeing the shattered image of his own features looking back at him.

"Yunnies!" Changmin's head popped around the door frame, his bright smile lighting up his young face. "We're back. We came home to see how Jaejoong was doing. Yoochun stopped and bought some iced fruit drinks. He said it would be better for Joongie's stomach than water."

"Ah, thank you, Min." Yunho reluctantly pulled away from the closeness of Jae's body, not wanting to let go of the other's nearness but the curious look in Changmin's inquisitive face made him nervous. "I'll come and bring him one."

"I need to shower." Jaejoong clenched his fists into the sheets, willing his body to relax before Min bounced into the room and pulled the covers free from his rigid form. "I'll join all of you in the living room."

He ignored Yunho's beseeching glance, stumbling from the end of the bed and working towards the bathroom. His body seemed reluctant to obey him, legs moving woodenly until he found the handle of the door, turning the knob and forcing it open. Jae heard Yunho calling out to him, something about assistance but the singer wanted no part of anyone else at the moment, especially the one person who seemed to rake open his emotions and leave them bared for the world to see.

Hitching a breath, Jae peeled off Yoochun's jeans, sniffing as he fought back the angry tears in his eyes. It was unfair that he would be given the chance to have everything that he thought he'd wanted only to discover the cruelty of fate. The dream of being a singer was nothing compared to the longing in his heart at the sight of the band's leader, a tumultuous storm of emotional upheaval with every waking moment of the day. To have Yunho living and laughing near him was torture, a single drop of acidic pleasure on his heart with every breath he took.

Turning the water on to a steady stream, Jaejoong ducked under the steaming water spray, hands spread out to support his battered body and willed his soul to heal itself of its love for Yunho, leaving him with some peace.

Six

The fog on the shower's glass door smeared beneath the touch of Jaejoong's hand, fingers trailing into the mists, leaving runnels of water pooling down onto the tile's below. A trail of tears lost amid the spray hitting the singer's face tasted hot on his open mouth, salted anguish on the tip of his tongue. Long streams of liquid moved over Jae's body, pooling in the recess of his collarbone before spilling over, running down his chest and over the tips of his areole.

Jaejoong's hands roamed over his stomach, tracing the ridges of his abdomen muscles and dipping over the edge of his hip bones, feeling the press of his own fingers against the soft milky skin stretched taut over his trim waist. His arms ached, the roiling pain throbbing where Yunho's fingers left their mark, purpled kisses of violence Jae wanted to be licked clean. His ebony eyes shut against the steam, his thoughts drawing back to the feel of Yunho's hands on his arms, pulling him in closer until their breath grew hotter than the water pounding on his back.

His thoughts wandered to the cut on the leader's mouth, a small slice into the perfection of a cupid bow lip. Jae recalled his want to lean forward, laving at the spot until it opened up again, his teeth biting down on the tender area until Yunho cried out with the pleasure of Jae's mouth on him. The singer's hands grew rougher on his belly, digging fingernails into the curve of his pierced navel, leaving long welting marks until finding the sensitive nub of his ringed nipple. A flash of gold ringing shone under his fingers, twitching as he worked with a seductive roughness at the tender point.

The back of his head was a bit tender, another bruise lost behind a tangle of water-soaked black hair. Hard beneath the singer's temple, the tile grew warm from Jae's body heat, the doors steaming up thick from the panting breath escaping his open, gasping mouth. Fingertips found and worried at his nipples, Jae imagining that the hands touching him were larger...harder and felt rough over the soft blush of his skin. Yunho's hands fascinated him, square tipped and competent. He'd watch the other peel an orange, often digging in under the skin and lifting the rind clean of the meat. Jae gasped, his left hand finding the ridge of his sex swelling beneath the soft curls nesting above his groin.

Sensations flooded his body, leaving him breathless and panting. His tongue licked out, touching the ridge of his own lip and Jae fell into the hope of a kiss, worrying at the fullness with his teeth. The small seductions he'd played at, teasing smiles from women and the furtive long glances at strong faced men didn't leave Jaejoong prepared for the onslaught of obsession on his senses, the want of Yunho sometimes overwhelming him until all he wanted to do was drive it from his body.

His hand stroked at the heft of his shaft again, rolling the loose skin beneath his palm. The water made it easier, its velvet head laved from the moisture running down Jae's chest. He blindly reached for a bottle of shampoo, hoping to ease the ache of his sex beneath the roughness of his hand. The vanilla spice of Yunho's soap filled the shower, a scent that hardened Jae instantly.

Dribbling a thread of white shampoo over his spread fingers, Jae closed his eyes and rested his head back, working at his sex with long strokes. The bottle fell, hitting the tile with a clatter as he released it, his fingers touching on the bruises left by Yunho's anger. In his mind, the marks became the remnants of a night spent in passion, his lover gripping too hard as his length split Jae apart, reaching down into the depths of Jae's body until all that was left was a quivering mass of passion and flesh, crying out for release beneath Yunho's hands and mouth.

There was an ache inside of Jae, something that wanted Yunho's touch so deep inside of him that there was nothing left of Jaejoong...nothing left of Yunho... only the mingled forms of two young men writhing against one another until their bodies blended into a synchronized dance. Jae knew there was more to sex than just the release of his seed against his open hand but the unknown of it left him gasping with wonder. When being close to Yunho nearly brought him down to his knees, panting with the dizzying explosion of desire, Jaejoong couldn't imagine how his world would even survive a kiss... the touch of Yunho's mouth on his own, the tip of a tongue slipping past his lips and sliding over the roof of his mouth.

Harder he stroked, remembering the look on Yunho's face when he discovered Jae working on a dance move he'd failed at the day before, the flash of pride and...something else... plain on the leader's face from the reflection in the mirror. It had quickly vanished when Jae stumbled, lost in the sheer pleasure of Yunho's presence in the wide room.

Striding forward, Yunho spread his hands on the singer's hips and rolled them into the turn, standing behind him, pressing hard to show him the movement. It had taken every bit of strength in Jae's body not to lay his

head back on the leader's strong shoulders, digging his hands into Yunho's thighs until no space remained between them. Yunho had been unaffected by the touch... a long string of pearled moments that left Jae breathless every time he worked that routine over and over in his mind.

With a tortured cry, Jae felt the rising pulse of his body aching along his shaft, threading upward. His stomach clenched, his muscles tight and convulsing beneath the pleasure. His hand became Yunho's in his mind, Jae wanting the touch of the other more than anything on his skin. The shampoo's slickness ran hot beneath Jaejoong's palm, a simulacrum of Yunho's hard body working into Jae's pleasures. The world exploded too quickly for Jae, filling the seeping blackness of the night behind his closed eyes with a cascade of sparkling constellations. His legs nearly buckled beneath him, his balance lost under the wavering release of his seed, the pale liquid dashing over his clenched fist.

Gasping, Jaejoong pressed one hand on the shower wall, dragging the steamy water filled with Yunho's scent deep into his lungs, holding each intake for a split second. His chest ached from the effort of stilling his breath, the vanilla odor burning splashes of Yunho deep into Jae's core where he cradled each minute shred of the other in his heart. A long moment passed before the shaking stopped, leaving nothing behind but a weakness in Jae's bones and a languid pleasure in his lean muscles.

Yoochun was waiting for Jae when he walked into his room, a towel wrapped tight over his loins, knotted over one jutting hip bone. The young singer's rolling gait made Yoochun smile, a feline grace and sensuality riding Jae's every step. Seeing Micky, Jaejoong stopped sopping the dampness from his hair, his hands stilled on the smaller towel around his head.

"You took long enough in there." Yoochun said with a smile. He'd taken more than his share of long showers, the bathroom was often the only place any of them had a shred of privacy.

"I stunk." Jae dug around a pile of clothes looking for clean underwear, tossing things onto his bed until he found what he was looking for.

Sliding the towel free from his body, Jae stepped into the briefs, tugging at the snug fabric until it cupped the curve of his ass and the elastic lay properly at his waist. A mostly clean pair of jeans was found, then an old t-shirt he'd discovered at an American-style store, its ribbed cotton a sensual feel against his skin. The spread wings of the silk-screened phoenix worked over his chest, running under his pectorals and nearly

into the seams under his arms. The grey shirt fitted comfortably on Jae's body, the soft fabric swishing around his waist.

"Sit down." Yoochun grabbed at a belt loop, tugging the singer down. He'd seen Jae fidgeting, knowing the young man had more than a few things on his mind. "Talk to me."

"About?" Coy, Jaejoong leaned across the bed, as if to search for a belt or perhaps even a brush, anything to avoid Yoochun's prying gaze.

Seoul churned outside of the window, a city alive in the afternoon. A car horn honked in the distance, muffled by the closed glass. The sky shone a brilliant white grey, dotted with popcorn clouds promising a colder sheet of snow on the horizon. A street lamp sat sullen beneath a cap of white froth, the snow from last night still clinging to its bowed light fixture. Far off in the distance, the world moved along its circled path, laughter creased smiles readying for a holiday that spun sugar dreams which would melt as quickly as the snow on the wind. Jaejoong followed the flight of a small bird as it hopped from a bare-branched tree to the edge of a power line, its fluffed up body warmed against the chill in the wind.

"Jaejoong-ah..." Micky's gentle reproach was soft, a reminder that they'd shared nearly every secret each other had, sometimes whispered behind raised hands, eliciting a giggle from the often shy Jaejoong. "I'm the one who Yunho called to help get you back into the house. I was there when you hit him. I wasn't there when he found you."

"I don't think I was there either." The flush of blood across his cheeks scorched Jae's conscience. Lies had never come easy to the singer, a blunt honesty often on the tip of his tongue, along with a fierce indiscretion and rough tenderness. Clearing his throat, Jae ducked his head down, his fingers playing with the edge of the towel he'd tossed aside earlier. "I think I might have told Yunho how I felt about him. I don't know. I don't remember...and he isn't... acting any different towards me. Maybe it just doesn't matter...to him, I mean."

"I don't know. He didn't say anything to me. He was more concerned about you biting his ear off than anything else. I think if you told him that you ..." Micky tried to find the words for how Jae might feel towards the leader of their group but the thought escaped him. The tough, gentle singer never fully expressed what was going on in his head much less his heart and Yoochun had always been too polite to pry, thinking the slightly older boy would eventually tell him everything. "Do you know how you feel about him?"

“No.” A shake of Jae’s head sent a slight shower of drops over Yoochun’s arm. The springs of the mattress gave beneath them as Jae stretched back, allowing himself to fall back into the soft down comforter stretched out over his bed. “I... can’t think about it. It hurts too much.”

Yoochun looked about the room, the mess of three young men edging up into each others’ space in a polite war. Jaejoong’s area was the worst, a disaster that spoke of the young singer’s frenetic personality and energy. A riotous amount of clothing piled up against the wall, the cleanliness of some of the items clearly in question. Stacks of CDs fought for space alongside of small piles of photos, faces captured smiling into a camera held by the pretty singer. His walls were empty of posters, the blankness at odds with the business of Jae’s mind.

Changmin’s area was nearly spotless save for the mounds of books stacked one on top each other in towers of information. His clothes were neatly stacked out of sight, a pair of bunny slippers resting beside his bed, their floppy ears spread over pink noses. Yunho’s space clearly belonged to the insatiable perfectionist that drove his ambition. The music clustered at the end of his desk came mostly from other performers, Yunho’s incessant listening to others’ voices in an attempt to learn yet another vocalization technique to better his own voice. A small jar of Tiger Balm rested on the nightstand near his clock, the chamomile-clove tincture to ease the tiny aches of a muscle stretched too far during a dance routine.

Jae’s fingers roamed over the lines of the comforter, the dampness of his hair soaking into the silken coverlet. Yoochun sighed, turning around to face his friend, leaning most of his weight on one hand and staring down at the enigmatic singer. Bemused, Micky shrugged at the impoliteness of his thoughts and forged on, braving the mercurial Jae’s temper.

“Can I ask you a question?” Yoochun said, watching Jae’s face as the singer debated answering. When Jaejoong gave him a slight nod, he continued. “Have you...ever had...relations with someone before? More than a kiss. You know... fully...”

“Relations?” Jae snorted, nearly laughing at Yoochun’s formality.

“Sex. Fine...” Micky laughed softly. “Have you ever had sex with anyone before?”

“With a girl. Yes.” Jae nodded. “It was... nice... but...”

"There was something missing?" Micky mulled over Jae's nodding assent. "But not with another... guy."

"No." Jae shook his head once, a curt negation. The pleasure he'd shared had been a relief for his body but the emptiness of his soul left ashes on his tongue. The girl was a soft warmth he'd sought when he'd reached what he thought had been love, only to discover she'd lured him close solely to use him, shoring up her self-esteem by a pretty object on her arm. In the end, he'd discovered she regarded him no more important to her heart than a broken watch, something to cast aside when its usefulness had worn thin. "I've... wanted...but...this is embarrassing, Yoochun."

"Humour me. I want to know how you feel about Yunho."

"I've liked other...guys." Jae admitted softly, trying not to make eye contact with Micky. "And I know that it's...considered wrong. It was something that... made me different from the others I knew. But, my heart feels... it feels on its own. I don't tell it to want Yunho. I don't want to be hurt when he looks at me and then his eyes just slide over me like I'm not even there. And when he touches me, even if by accident, I can't breathe. Everything in me just stops and then for a second... or even more... my world just becomes him. Even the wind just stops and becomes him."

"I guess I was trying to see is if you want Yunho to love and have sex with you or if you are just in love with the idea of being in love." Micky lay down on his side, spooned up against his friend's lean body. "Don't give me that look. I know you, Joongie-ah. I know that you want to be loved. More than anything else in the world, you want someone to look at you and feel... everything in your body and heart."

"I don't...know how I feel about him." Jae rubbed at his face, hands spread over his hot cheekbones. "It feels different with Yunho. He makes me...insane. When he comes near me, I just want him to touch me in places that I...I've never had anyone reach inside of me before. Even when he's yelling at me...and he shouts a lot... I just want him to be near...so I can feel him against me. I hate this. I hate how he makes me feel and every single time I say that I'm done with it, I come back around and stand there to take more."

"And I'm angry. Angry at myself because I hear my own voice and the weakness I feel in my guts." Jae snarled, fists digging up handfuls of the comforter between his fingers. "He makes me feel like I've poured sin onto my soul and all I want to do is lick it clean. That's how he makes me

feel. I don't know how it makes me feel about him. Other than confused, angry and... gods...want."

"It sounds like it's making you sick." Micky brushed at the faint marks on Jaejoong's exposed arms with the tips of his fingers. "When he brought you home last night, I got scared that he'd hurt you so much, you'd leave us. Or make Yunho so mad that he would want you to leave."

"It might still happen, Yoochun." More tears filled the basin of Jae's eyes. He refused to feel them, refused to allow them to spill onto his face. "I'm not as good of a dancer as the rest of you and... you can always find someone else to sing the lead parts. All I do is infuriate him and then his anger makes me want to do stupid things. I spend my entire life either running to him or running away from him."

"Then that definitely is being in love." Yoochun replied with a sigh. "*A pity beyond all telling is hid in the heart of love**."

"Is that poetry?" Jae peered over his arm, suspicion in his eyes. "You sound like Junsu."

"I don't remember who said it but I remember it." Yoochun poked at Jaejoong's ribs, a swath of skin exposed from his shirt riding up under his arm. "The point is, that even if you're in love... there's often other kinds of emotions there. Probably even more emotions because you've never been in love before... or wanted someone like this before."

"Have you?" Jae cocked his head, looking up at his friend. "Wanted someone like I want Yunho?"

Jaejoong was usually the one holding the other's hand, rubbing at his shoulders when the absence of Yoochun's family became too much to bear. They'd each dealt with their loneliness in different ways, buried in music and other past times in the hopes that the holes left in their lives would fade at the edges, long enough to dull the cuts of their heartache. Yoochun was the most sensitive of them, his feelings riding very close to the surface of his thoughts. The singer had wiped more than his share of tears from his friend's face, coaxing a smile from Yoochun's sadness with a silly face or a soft, caring word.

"No, not like I've watched with you and Yunho." Micky admitted. "I've liked someone but I've never... lost myself in them. I fear that you're doing that with Yunho, losing yourself in him and forgetting that you have something to offer...something of yourself. You bend every thing

you do into pleasing him, keeping yourself pushed down because you want to keep him happy but I think that only makes him more... angry.”

“You’re the most honest person I know, Jaejoong and you’re not being honest with him. The face you show him isn’t yours. It’s someone you made from papier-mâché and you’re hoping that he’ll like that person.” Micky stole a glance at Jae’s face. The singer’s eyes were lost in thought, faded into the depths of his heart.

“You can’t expect him to love a construct...someone that isn’t real. Last night when you hit him, that was the most real I’ve seen you be with him.” Yoochun rubbed at Jae’s belly, trying to ease some of the tension from the young singer’s body. “You were angry...even when you were half-unconscious... you were angry because you gave him your heart and he didn’t even look at it. Not even long enough to knock it free from your hands and break on the ground.”

“You’re hurting me. Why are you saying these things?” Jae turned away, nearly pushing off of the bed to get away from Yoochun. Micky’s hands on his shoulder stopped him. “Please, it’s bad enough that his words...”

“Listen to me, Joongie-ah. I’m not saying this to hurt you.” Yoochun pleaded, bending down until his chin rested on the curve of Jae’s arm. “I’m saying this because I think you are in love with someone who can break your heart. And that scares me. If you are going to love someone and hope that he will love you back, you have to show him who you really are. Not pretend to be someone that will make him happy.”

Jae’s voice was very small in his throat, caught on the fear overwhelming him. “What if he doesn’t love me? What if he can’t?”

“Then I’ll be there until you can’t cry anymore.” Micky promised, pulling Jae back and hugging the singer tight against his chest. They lay there, back to stomach while Jae swallowed at the truth in Yoochun’s words. “I promise, Jaejoong. I won’t let you cry alone.”

Seven

Micky picked out a series of chords on the electronic keyboard he fitted onto the corner of the desk, listening to the pure notes float through the small room he shared with Junsu. When they first decided on who would be sleeping where, he'd never imagined that sharing a room with the nearly always smiling young man would be the most peaceful place in the house. Now, with the tension thick between Jaejoong and Yunho, he found some comfort in the simplicity of his relationship with his roommate.

The window offered little insight into his problems, a drifting cloud dancing along the distance. Changmin was singing someplace in the house, a high pitched silly song used in a soda commercial. The lyrics brought a grin to Yoochun's thoughts, a tale of happy rabbits and their smiling lives. He missed the innocence of a young soul, Changmin often reminding him of his younger brother, a face he wished he saw more of. The separation from his family tore at his resolve to push himself hard but the others made living apart easier, their familial companionship giving him a cradle to lean into when his heart ached too much.

Footsteps pounded down the hall, a running burst of enthusiasm matched by a squealing ring of laughter, a surprised Changmin shouting a warning towards Yoochun's room. The youngest boy continued his singing, interrupted only for a moment before falling back into cadence, obviously lost in a video game in the main living room. The footfall grew louder, an elephantine swaying beat on the wooden floor.

"I am home, Chunnie-ah!" Broad-faced and pleasant, Junsu's smile lit up the walls with its brilliance, a white swath of joy. Micky smiled despite the troubles that seemed to hang over the day. A smiling Junsu was hard to resist. Bounding over to his bed, Su did a half-leap into the air, stretching his arms out as he fell onto the soft mattress. Rolling over onto his side, he grinned again, even wider much to Yoochun's surprise. "Did you miss me?"

"Terribly." Yoochun nodded, not at all surprised to find that he spoke the truth. He found he spent most of his time looking for Junsu amid the clutter of their day, a curious hole in his life when the other singer was

off doing things with his family or on a separate interview. “Did you have fun with your brother?”

“It was good to see him. His world is so very serious. Not nearly as much fun as ours.” Junsu worked his jacket off, trying to sit up at the same time. The long-shag of his hair stuck up around his face, disheveled from the winter winds picking up outside. He’d brought the cold in with him, a burnish of red over the tip of his nose. Finally getting the jacket free from his arms, Junsu pulled his pillows up against his back, sniffing at the scent on them. “You washed my sheets?”

“I had to.” Yoochun admitted. “Jaejoong ended up sleeping there...after spending a night at a club.”

“Ah. He must have smelled.” Junsu wrinkled his nose, thinking of the sour taste of cigarette smoke on the young singer’s body. The smell of tobacco on Yoochun didn’t bother him at all but its taint on Jaejoong seemed oddly pungent, an out of place scent that only belong to Micky. “Thank you for washing the linens. I like Jaejoong but I don’t think I’d want to sleep with the scent of him on my sheets.”

“It’s been a... trial since you’ve been gone.” Micky said, turning in his chair. He debated what to tell the other singer, wondering how much of it was in confidence and whether or not they could actually do something about the careening tragedy that seemed to be spinning about around them. “I am glad you’re back.”

“Changmin told me that there was...trouble.” Junsu glanced at the door, watching for the stretch of long shadow against the hallway wall that told him there was someone walking towards the bedrooms. “He doesn’t know much of what’s going on. I’m not sure if it’s because he doesn’t want to know or really has no idea.”

“I think it’s better that way, maybe.” Yoochun leaned forward, sliding onto the edge of his own bed.

The space between the two beds was slender, enough for a single person to walk past. They’d moved the furniture around to have more space in the front of the room, not realizing that by positioning their sleeping area in close, that they would cement a friendship of whispering laughter and easy smiles. Junsu and Yoochun spoke often in the night before they fell asleep, sharing tales of their dreams or wishes they had for their lives. Their words remained easy, centering mostly on the days events or things that they would have to do in the near future. Sometimes one would fall silent as the other would speak of things more

intimate, of fears or heartbreak that lay in the past, each offering small comforts in a touch or a soft word.

“What has our Jaejoong done now?” Junsu slid off of his bed, making his way onto Micky’s, his face still turned towards the hallway. He would keep watch on the shadows, trying to afford the other some privacy while they talked. “I didn’t see him or Yunho.”

“Jaejoong wanted to go to the studio and practice.” Micky thought on the small argument he had with Yunho, trying to keep the other from following but his words fell on deaf ears. Their leader hadn’t wanted to let the singer out of his sight, despite being at each other’s throats all day. “Yunho followed.”

“Yunho always follows. He’s like the moth to a burning flame. I am not sure which one is hurting more.” Junsu made a face, bitter on the sweet of his soul. “Jaejoong for being in love and not saying anything or Yunho wanting to love and not knowing how to.”

“So you...” Micky hissed out his breath, letting the stress in his stomach out. “You’ve been watching them as well? I thought maybe I was the only one who noticed.”

“I’m not blind, Chunnie-ah.” Junsu nudged the other with his shoulder, the slight chill of winter seeping in from the window glass. “Did you think you were the only one to notice how they circle around each other. It’s making me dizzy watching them. I wish one of them would finally do something to bring the other around. Even if loving one another is... not something they can share in the open...wouldn’t it be better than tearing each other apart?”

“Jaejoong is in pain.” Yoochun breathed a sigh of relief, finally finding someone to talk to on the whole subject. “Yunho spends his time angry and I don’t think he knows what he’s angry at yet. Just that Jaejoong is the reason for it.”

“Jae is the reason for it but not for anything that he’s done.” Su agreed, a nod of his head bobbing the hair into his face. Impatiently shoving it back from his forehead, his eyes twinkled with mischief. “I think we should lock them in a room and not let them out until they’ve sorted out this nonsense. It’s driving us all insane with worry. Well, maybe not Min. I’ve changed my mind. He doesn’t understand what’s going on between the two of them.”

"I don't think Yunho is ready to admit that he has feelings for Jaejoong." Micky replied. "It's a long way from being intimate and then another thing to cross that threshold of ... loving another man, especially someone that drives him as mad as Jaejoong."

"Jae drives him crazy because he looks for logic in the chaos that is our Jaejoong." Junsu pointed out. "The sooner you realize that Jae has no rhyme or reason to him, then life is easier for all concerned. Take what he shows you at face value and remember that what he feels one moment might not be how he is the next. Then everything is all right."

"That's not true. He makes some sense...sometimes. He just is... simply complicated. Yunho overthinks things and thinks Jae doesn't care about what he wants." Yoochun pushed at Junsu, sending the other sprawling back into the covers. Su laughed loudly, his easy going nature clear on his face. "Jaejoong does care...sometimes he cares too much about what Yunho thinks!"

"I know he does." Junsu teased at Yoochun's waist with his toes, pulling at the other's shirt. "Jaejoong's heart is too big for his soul. It's always wide open and the only thing he has to protect it is his stubbornness and prickly nature. But he does care. I've seen it. I've seen it when you are sad. He is there, always saying the right things to make your heart lift. I wish I was able to do that for you, sometimes."

Micky stared down at the smaller young man, a crooked smile on Junsu's face. Nodding, Yoochun slapped at Junsu's thigh, a light touch to show he felt the sentiment behind Junsu's words. Pulling a bolster free from under Junsu's leg, the young man cradled it up against his stomach, leaning on the wall beneath the window.

"I'm just not sure what to do." Yoochun finally spoke, his fingers playing with the ridge of bone along Junsu's ankle. "I can see that Yunho cares for Jae...he cares deeply. I just don't know if Yunho is ready or able to love him. And Joongie needs that. If I could wish one thing for him, it would be that. Someone to be there for him, always...no matter what."

"We can't do anything about it." Junsu reached out, rubbing at Yoochun's shoulder. "Nothing good will come of playing Cyrano de Bergerac for them. I'm sure it would end up being a disaster if we tried."

"Can you see me hiding in the bushes trying to whisper things into Jae's ear for him to say to Yunho standing on a balcony?" Micky laughed hard, thinking of the look of confusion on Jaejoong's face when he misheard something romantic in a movie. "It would be horrible."

"I could help!" Junsu stretched his arms over his head, pulling Micky's feather pillow under him. "I could look up love poems and have Jae write them in longhand, sneaking them into Yunho's pockets to find."

"With our luck, someone would borrow Yunnies' jacket and we'll spend days chasing them through the streets of Seoul, trying to get the note back before it was read." Yoochun smirked. "That's how it would be for us."

"They have to work it out themselves, Chunnies-ah." Junsu's face grew serious, transforming his cute features into a stunning handsomeness. Sighing, he rested his chin on his chest, staring down at his friend. "Hopefully, they'll both come to their senses before long."

"I think Jae has come to his senses...well, as much sense as Jaejoong has." The young man said, his hand still resting on Junsu's shin. "Yunho is the more stubborn one. I don't think he wants to look at Jae. Yunho is afraid of losing control and Jaejoong will do that to him. But Joongie will also make him laugh with joy that he's never felt before. I don't know why Yunho can't see that sometimes, love can give him that....Jaejoong can give him that."

"We're often scared of what can make us feel the most, Chunnies-ah." Junsu whispered, the heat from Yoochun's fingers burning into his thoughts. "That's how we are. Always wanting and scared to have."

Yunho watched from the door, hiding behind the thick sheave of wood separating the main studio from the side room. Jaejoong had the place to himself, save the lurking presence of the band's leader amid the shadows. Stripped down to a tank top and loose dance pants, Jaejoong stretched out his left leg, feeling the pushing burn of his muscles give, the soleus aching from the overextension he'd fallen into. Every step he took crept a tearing agony along the front of his leg, the thigh twitching in response.

The studio looked the same as it always did, spans of wooden floors polished from countless feet trying to echo the dreams of a choreographer. A powdery freshener tried to mask the scent of sweat and tears, the undertones of coppery blood and spilled water when a body finally broke under the stress of bending the body beyond what it was meant to do. Still Yunho loved the feel of the mirrors around him, finding the perfection of movement in what they did, matching the synchronicity of their music to the supple lines of their bodies. Yet now, holding only Jaejoong, it took on a mystery Yunho couldn't fathom...a

puzzle to which he felt like if he just found the right thing to say or do, would unfold into a glorious, joyous mess that would sear his soul clean from the face of the earth.

Music played from the inset speakers above the mirrors, the dimmers lit only to spotlight the front of the room where the slender singer walked off the aches in his thighs. His body moved from the shadow to the light, curves of stygian molding along the lean lines of his form, casting small dramas in the theatre of his face. Yunho's mouth dried, a sticky mess of ashen want he couldn't ease with a swallow, every ounce of moisture seemingly rushing to an uncomfortable spot in the back of his throat. Jaejoong reached up over his head, working the knots loose from his shoulders and stepped back into the beat of the music, trying to place his mind fully on the routine he didn't seem to be able to master.

Sliding up from a crouch, Jaejoong stepped forward, moving his head to the side with a snap. The shoulders followed, a curling motion that would bring his body directly in line with Changmin before another stepping dance slid him around Yunho. With his eyes closed, Jaejoong concentrated on moving through the routine, nearly stumbling at even the thought of ghosting past Yunho's strong body.

His hands smelled of the vanilla from the shampoo, a perfume embedded in the very pores of his skin. Jaejoong stopped suddenly, capturing the feel of the shower again in his heart. Standing the place where he would brush under Yunho's arms, it would take just the smallest of movements to stand up and be captured there, a circle of strength and warmth encasing his shoulders.

"You always stop there." Yunho said, coming out of the shadows, his face wary with regret and trepidation. "Even when we're dancing in group, you stop there and wait, for the smallest of seconds. That's what throws us off. You fall out of time."

"Did you follow me just to correct me? Don't you have anything better to do?" Jaejoong cast his eyes down, his jaw set against throwing words into Yunho's face. Grabbing at the towel he'd thrown against the floor, Jae's body bent forward, his thigh nearly giving out under his full weight. Crying out, the singer held out his hands, hoping to catch his fall before he struck the hard wooden floor.

The world jerked once, his waist held by two hands before his body slide down softly, a gentle arc resting him near the mirrors. The mounted wall bar gave Jae a place to hook his hands into, easing down with a care to

his injured thigh. Yunho bent down, his knees on either side of Jaejoong's hips, holding the singer up until Jae was sitting back.

Yunho's hands roamed down, exploring the span of Jae's hips, feeling the long muscles beneath the pants fabric. Watching the singer's face, Jae's eyes closed in sublime pleasure, Yunho leaned in to the curve of the other young man's throat, wanting to taste the dapple of drops running down from Jae's jaw line to his chin. A touch of Jaejoong's thigh brought a hissing retort, his injured leg spasming beneath Yunho's probing touch.

"That hurts." Jae ineffectually pushed down at Yunho's strong hands, the other singer ignoring the futile attempt...as well as the furious look in the young man's brown eyes. "Stop. I'll just walk it off."

"You fell last night too." Yunho unthinkingly pulled at the stretch fabric, swiftly working the pants down Jaejoong's body to feel at the muscle twisting under his fingers. "You tore it, I am sure of it."

"We dance through our pain." Jaejoong's words echoed Yunho's stinging retort from the other day.

"Don't toss what I've said back at me." The gentle reproach nearly broke Jaejoong's heart, Yunho's face hidden behind a swath of hair as the other ran delicate fingers over the stretch of Jae's thigh, trying to feel where the heat of the tear stopped and healthy muscle began anew. "I'm sorry for saying that."

"I'm sorry for saying a lot of things, Jaejoong." Yunho glanced up. Jae's teeth nibbled at the fullness of his own lower lip, the sensual plumpness dimpled by a sharp white bite. His own mouth rebelled at the sight, wanting to follow the divets with his own tongue, feeling them rise back up and wanting nothing more than to dimple that fullness again, marking him until Jae cried out into the echo of his mouth.

Shocked at the thought, Yunho pulled himself up, hands shaking with the sheer power of the image of Jaejoong's body surrendering under his ravenous mouth. His breath iced into his chest, trying to spread some calm through the jittering nerves that nested in his stomach. Fists at his sides, Yunho inhaled again, catching his breath before speaking again.

"We need to get you home. You shouldn't be practicing like this." Yunho debated not offering his hand to the other singer but knew Jae wouldn't be able to stand without assistance, not with his muscles knotting from overuse. Touching the singer would be a torture, wanting something

from Jae that he couldn't even voice aloud... Yunho braved himself for the anguish of their skin touching.

"I don't want to go home." Jaejoong's voice was small in the echo of the room. "Can't I just sit here for a bit and let this go away?"

"Better if you were in a hot tub of water. It will loosen your muscles and we can rub Tiger Balm on it afterwards." Yunho said, shifting to crouch down besides the delicate-featured singer. The delicious sin of Jae's face moved something inside of Yunho, something he feared would consume him if he allowed it. And yet, there was a small part of him that whispered for its consumption, that fully engorged obsession with the dark sweetness Jae's presence promised. "I'll help you. I won't let you fall."

"You've pushed me down before."

Yunho knew Jae wasn't speaking of anything physical. The words...the anger he'd been bearing from Yunho's anger was more than enough to tear apart anyone and yet the singer withstood it all, turning away from the ire as if it were nothing more than a sheet of rain to be absorbed before the sun shone again.

"Not this time, Joongie-ah." The soft whisper of his name melted Jae's resolve and he leaned back into Yunho's hands, feeling the other's strength lift him clear of the floor. "I won't drop you this time. I don't want to drop you ever again."

Eight

Crimson rose petal clouds hung on the edge of Seoul's skyline, the winter sunset bleeding the steel grey away in preparation for the crispness of a cold night. The streets were empty, missing the hordes of people, bundled up warm against the biting wind whipping in between tall downtown buildings. Snow flakes clotted the breeze, shoring up against the sidewalk and turning to slush on the steaming vents pressured from a subway's grates. A bell tolled low in the distance, a opulent ringing of tradition on cast pot metal.

Just outside the office window, a clearing of land curved around the river that cut through Seoul, the landscape dotted with small tributaries and gardens, perfect for families to gaze at the water and share an ice in the summer. The winter kiosks had just started opening, evenings filled hot mists rising from portable steamers and tea pots with merchants gathering at opportune spots to peddle their wares to chilled customers. A cluster of parking spaces lay empty along a pocket of yellowed grass, fallen leaves carpeting the ground in a blanket of burgundy and golden decay. In the freezing blanket of snow covering Seoul, Jae could barely make out the icy greyness of the water, crackling sheets of ice smashing against the ornamental rocks placed along the river's edge.

Yunho had left him in the small room just off the dance studio, reasoning that the closer confines would warm better compared to a large empty space. They weren't going to be going anywhere for a few hours, the main roads closed down as work crews struggled to clear the streets of melting piles of snow. A van sat up on the far side of the road, its tires resting against the sidewalk, fender crumpled from hitting the guard rail protecting the park grounds. The long streaks of rubber left by its careen on the iced over asphalt had been obscured by more snowflakes, its wake merely a memory.

While the office was definitely warmer than the studio, it lacked the clean aesthetics of the wooden floored expanse. Most of the furnishings were items leftover from various living rooms, cast-offs of others' lives shored up against the walls that heard the panting breath of dreamers. A stack of mattresses served mostly as a couch, the thick-piled softness covered with a mish-mash of pillows, most of them with at least one passing nod to a spectrum of colours that should never have been paired

together. Blankets and quilts, some faded grey from tears and time, covered most of the mattress edges, a lone end table crookedly holding up one corner in a vain attempt to provide the room with a forgotten elegance. The walls bore signs of quarrels and inspiration, long strings of Korean and Chinese cribbed into cramped lyrics, the pencil graphite faded on top of poems written in the heat of a passion since cooled.

With the heat dialed to high, Jae tasted the rank humidity of the stream on the recycled air, a pregnant green amid the crisp blueness of winter. He'd always disliked the cold, feeling the bite of it in the depths of his bones. Winter was good for roasting chestnuts and cracking open the soft hot shells, peeling back the paper-thin covering and popping the sweet meat into his mouth, but the studio's office was getting too warm, his fingers reddened from the hot air. A flick of a switch kicked the vents back down to a normal flow, the air sweetening as Jae cracked open the window, trying to get the staleness out of his breath.

Jae bit back a grimace, rubbing at the soreness in his thigh. The torn muscle ached, more from the cold than anything else but the throbbing warmed his palm, a worrisome sign that he would need more than a day's rest to heal the damage he'd done. Settling down against the mattress, he tried to work the leg of his pants up over his knee, worry at the fabric until it bunched up over his thigh. The sweat fleece, worn nearly thin through, gave easily under his strong hands, stretched out until he could see the purpling expanse of his thigh. Hissing at the sight of the injury, Jaejoong unscrewed the tiny jar of Tiger Balm liberated from Yunho's backpack, the red-orange salve pungent and thick with cloves.

"Let me help you with that." Yunho had rejoined him, carting two red paper cups, steaming and fragrant. Handing Jaejoong one, the young man placed his on the floor, not trusting the precariously balanced end table, its cock-eyed legs unevenly canted on the cement floor. "Drink some of the cocoa. It's not great but it's all I could find. It'll keep you warm."

Sighing, Jaejoong sniffed at the opening of the lid. The dark richness of hot chocolate greeted his sugar-starved body, mouth watering at the thought of it on his tongue. Grunting a reluctant thank you, he sipped slowly, the burning liquid searing his taste buds.

"Ah! Hot!" Panting, Jae inhaled sharply, already regretting the too-hasty decision to sip at the steaming liquid. A familiar rippling of bumps deadened the surface of his tongue, the sweet chocolate running down his throat. "Too hot."

“Careful. It’s very hot.” Yunho smiled over the edge of his cup, watching Jaejoong’s lips purse as he panted to suck cold air over the tortured spot. “You are always too impatient. You never let things cool down first. How do you taste anything with your burnt tongue all the time?”

“Stop teasing me.” Jae growled, a throaty purr rumbling in his chest. “How was I supposed to know it was that hot? You could have warned me before I drank any.”

“Give me your leg.” Yunho sipped at his own cup before setting his cocoa back down, patting at his thigh. Jaejoong peered at him through a curtain of dark bangs, eyes suspicious with trepidation. “Trust me. I’m not going to hurt you. We’re going to be here a while. Stretch your leg out on mine and I’ll rub at that muscle. Maybe it will help the pain unknot.”

Kicking off his sneakers and wondering if he had a hole in his sock, Jaejoong placed his foot over the space between them, resting his heel against the inner curve of Yunho’s leg. The young man’s fingers easily found the tender area, still warm from overexertion. Slowly working into a circle, Yunho pressed down, watching Jae’s face for discomfort while he massaged at the area, hoping to ease the other’s distress. Dipping his fingers into the balm, Yunho carefully scraped at the surface, taking only enough to coat the pads with a thin layer.

Moving his hand over Jaejoong’s leg, he touched at the sensitive, tender skin. Yunho barely skimmed the surface of Jae’s inner thigh, finding the beginning of the muscle and working the salve into the ridge bunched up along his lean bones. Jaejoong nearly jumped at the touch, a mewling keen of pain followed by a feral narrowing of his dark eyes.

“I’m sorry.” Yunho felt his words fill with meaning, emotions that he couldn’t name amid the chaos of having his hands on the warmth of the young man near him. Clearing his throat, he tried to shove his disrupted heart back into its place, ignoring the heavy pounding cracking his chest wide open. “I’m not trying to hurt you.”

“I know.” Jae stared down into at the foamy peaks of his hot chocolate, visible through the peeled back drink opening of the lid. The words he wanted to hear from Yunho’s lips would never come, tender and open murmurings running hot along his ear. It was too much to be near the other, the splinters in Jae’s soul deepening into chasms he longed to fill with something...anything so as not to feel the pain of Yunho’s hands on his body.

“What are we going to do?” Yunho’s question hung pregnant between them, a ridge of bony silence edged sharp with past words flung in anger and hurt. Glancing up at Jaejoong, the leader’s face bore no trace of emotion, his thoughts hidden behind the cold mask he easily pulled over his features to protect himself. Jae often stared into that face, sometimes wishing he could tear the porcelain perfection from Yunho’s skin... searching for the man laying beneath it.

“I don’t know.” Jaejoong finally answered, his heart skipping in fear then stilling with dread. “Do you want me to leave the group?”

“No.” Yunho’s emphatic reply startled Jae, nearly enough to make him spill the cocoa he had left in his cup. “Joongie, you are a part of us. It would be... it wouldn’t be the same without you.”

“Then what are we going to do?” Jae wanted to wrap his fingers into Yunho’s shirt and pull him close, tugging the other man closer until they shared nothing but the thinnest of veiled air between them. He resisted, angry at the dichotomy of his emotions. No one could make him soar the reaches of his temper like Yunho...and at the same time, fill him with the darkest of wants.

“I don’t know why you never listen to me...” Yunho started.

“All I can do is listen. Every time you open your mouth you tell me this or tell me that.” Jae snorted in exasperation, his pretty face a mockery of Yunho’s stern commanding features. “Jaejoong, you’re breathing wrong. You’re stepping wrong. You sleep too hard. You slurp when you eat noodles.”

“I’m the leader of the group.” Yunho rounded back, his fingers stilling on Jaejoong’s thigh. “I’m responsible for everyone.”

“Responsible for the group, yes. Responsible for me, no.” Jae shook his head, slamming the paper cup down onto the floor. Leaning in, he bent nearly nose to nose with the startled Yunho. “You barely give me room to move and then criticize me when I do. You are driving me away from the group with your shouting. I want to run until I can’t hear your voice any more because all it does it hurt me.”

“That’s not...” Yunho’s anger flared, a familiar whiteness threatening to overpower him. “We can’t argue this out, Jaejoong. Neither one of us can go anywhere at the moment, not for a few hours at least. If we’re going to get out of this anger without killing each other, then we have to start someplace. Start talking at some point. No more yelling.”

Crossing his arms over his chest, Jaejoong leaned back against the wall, eyes fixed firm on the other man's strong face. Yunho continued to spread another layer of balm over the muscle, working under the mass, hoping to loosen the bundle of nerves clenching Jae's thigh.

The silence between them grew, uncomfortable at first then smoothing into a soft cadence, punctuated by the sounds of snow striking the window outside. Reaching over, Yunho closed the glass shut, muting the world and encasing them in a cocoon of warm solitude. Jae's flesh was warm beneath his hands, fluid and giving until he met the steeled velvet lying beneath.

"What do you want to talk about?" Jae reluctantly broached the quiet. Yunho smiled to himself, hiding the grin behind the pretense of looking carefully at Jae's thigh.

"Anything you want." Yunho's thumbs worked at the long shadow running up the inside of Jae's leg, curving around his hip and up into the hollow just below the bunched up fabric of his sweats. "Yoochun says that I don't know you...not the real you. So maybe I should find out what he's talking about."

"Chunnie-ah has a big mouth." Jaejoong muttered accusingly. His breath was coming in short pants, an uncomfortable thickening stretching his control. Placing his hands over Yunho's, he stopped the other singer from probing any further along his leg. "I'm good. Thanks. Your chocolate must be cold by now."

"At least I won't burn my tongue." Yunho teased lightly. "Tell me one thing that I don't know about you."

There was a secret hovering just at the edge of Jae's heart, a spilling of desires rushing into a foolhardy tide that would consume his life if he whispered his need to Yunho. Swallowing down the hopes of his soul, Jae tilted his thoughts back, hoping to find something harmless to speak on while they withstood each other's company. There were so many things Jaejoong could share with the leader, from the wish that he would continue running his hands over Jae's body, searching out each inch of skin and licking it clean of the shivering just beneath the flesh to the fact that he often stole things Yunho discarded and kept them, secretive stashes of obsession he pondered the sanity of.

"Tell me why you won't toss out that hoodie. It has a broken zipper and the hem is ratty." Yunho nodded at the sweat jacket Changmin washed after it came up from Yunho's car. He couldn't understand Jaejoong's

need to cling to things that had passed their prime, a tattered ragamuffin of memories knitted with unfurled yarn and shattered buttons.

“I like it.” Jaejoong glanced down at the garment, feeling at the ribbing on the sleeve.

He’d lifted it from the trash bag when they’d first gathered, an unthinking action Jaejoong should wonder if he should regret but never had. Something in the forlorn cast aside hoodie, worn nearly thin from Yunho’s body, called to Jaejoong and he folded it under his shirt, often moving it around in his dresser until he was sure the other young man had forgotten its existence. It had since become a beloved thing, worn when he wanted to feel the warmth of Yunho’s presence around him.

“It’s old.”

“It’s comfortable.” Jaejoong defended his jacket, tugging it close around him. “I don’t like throwing some things away. I never know when I’ll need something to keep me warm. Something that keeps me safe.”

“I know how that is.” Yunho nodded, remembering the times he’d spent trying to scrape together a living to shore up his family’s life. Things were easier for them now, his future mostly secured with a little hard work and perseverance. “You spent some time... alone. Very alone. I’m sorry for that.”

It was hard to speak of their troubles before the group was formed, Jaejoong most reluctant than any of them. Yunho guessed things were harder for the pretty faced singer, much harder than he had himself. Loud noises made the other flinch at times and any casual touching often led Jae to slowly drift away, distancing himself from the person. The cold face Jaejoong wore hid more than just a scattered, chaotic personality, it also protected something broken inside.

“Do you mind sharing a bathroom?” Yunho asked, trying to lighten the situation.

“I have many sisters.” Jaejoong made a face. “That I can even see the bathroom is a miracle.”

“True.” Yunho nodded, his hands returning to Jaejoong’s leg. The singer moved slightly, as if to pull away but remained still, letting the other run his palm over the rise of his muscle. A small soft velvet curve of skin drew Yunho’s attention, his tongue aching to just take a small lick or nip

his teeth against the depression, perhaps even drawing a circle of moisture with a damp finger...just to see the reaction on Jae's face.

"There's something between us, Jaejoong. I don't know what it is but it's there." Yunho said suddenly, examining the thoughts that now crowded his mind. "We push and pull at each other. Sometimes there is nothing that I want more than to strangle you until you choke and turn blue and then...sometimes..."

"Sometimes it's hard not to put myself in your hands so you can choke me." Jaejoong whispered, his fingers ghosting over Yunho's wrist. "I don't want to fight with you, Yunnie."

"We have to get along, Joongie-ah." Yunho sighed heavily, unsure of how much longer he had the strength to fight off the insanity invading his mind. "For the good of the group, we have to find some way to work things out between us."

"Not just for the group," Jaejoong's voice brushed tendrils across Yunho's soul. "There's nothing more that I want than to be... with all of you. Nothing else that can make me complete. I'll do anything...be anything to have that. I need to have that...need to have... you in my life. Even if it breaks me."

Nine

Changmin stirred a handful of mung beans into the boiling mass of rice, blending in the final ingredients to the *juk* he'd made for dinner. The aromas drew out Junsu, his hair damp from a long shower, time spent mostly getting the cold out of his body from the walk through the snow. Micky's face creased into a wide smile, snagging a cooked mushroom out of the pot, feeling the slippery fungus slide between his teeth. Chewing the meaty chunk into smaller shreds, Yoochun dug through the dish drainer, gathering enough bowls to set the table.

"I claim Yunho's mushrooms." Junsu worked the hem of his t-shirt down, padding barefoot into the kitchen. Micky scoffed, pushing him slightly with an open palm. "What? He doesn't like them. And if I don't claim them, you or Changmin will steal them off the side of his plate without sharing."

"If you hadn't taken so long in the shower, *duck*, you would know that they're not going to be home for a while." The taller singer ruffled Junsu's hair as he passed, feinting a dodge when the other smacked lightly at his shoulder. "Yunho and Jaejoong are stuck at the studio. The snow is too thick for the work crews to clear out."

"That should be interesting." Su snuck a glance at Changmin, his head bobbing in time to the music playing through the ear buds of his iPod. Lost in his own world, the younger man sniffed at the *juk*, pondering if it needed more salt. "I wonder which one of them will survive the longest."

Junsu stuck his head in the fridge, hunting for the jar of sweet pickled takuan he'd gotten from his aunt. Changmin wrinkled his nose at the sight of the yellow pickle, sticking his tongue out when the hiss of the lid being opened sent out a wave of strong horseradish and sugar smell to overpower the fragrant rice dish he was preparing.

"You better not smell like that tonight when we're asleep." Micky warned Junsu. "Only eat a little bit of it. Or I'm going to leave the window wide open and hope it freezes any gases your belly might make."

"Funny." Su rolled his eyes, edging past Changmin and grabbing a small bowl and a fork, spooning out a large portion of takuan. Fishing out a

round pepper-spiced piece, Junsu popped it into his mouth, enjoying the satisfying crunch and the bittersweet rice vinegar taste on his tongue. "So who do you think will come out of that room...well with the least amount of bruises and blood?"

"I'm betting Jaejoong." Yoochun commented under his breath, mindful of the baby-faced cook sidestepping in the kitchen. Junsu fished out a small chunk of pickle with his fingers, holding it aloft for Yoochun to bite into. The dark-haired young man bit down, moving his head to catch the liquid dripping under Junsu's palm. The tip of Yoochun's tongue lapped at delicate webbing running from Junsu's thumb to his palm, sucking the sweet vinegar lean from the other singer's skin.

"There now you'll smell as bad as I will." Junsu teased.

Chewing around the treat, Yoochun continued as if the other singer hadn't spoken. "Yunho's patience is already worn thin. Joongie has more control of his tongue..."

"Jaejoong's tongue has barely met his control. I don't think they've even formally met." Junsu argued. "What Joongie thinks, he says."

"Not when his heart is in it. I know him. He won't risk it." Micky disagreed with a shake of his head. "Jae won't open up. He will spend most of the time sullen and disagreeable."

"I will bet on that." Junsu held his hand out to the other singer, his mouth quirked into a grin. "You do my laundry for a week."

"I already washed your sheets." Yoochun replied. "If anything, you should do my laundry for one day."

"Ah, no. You had to wash my sheets because you let a club-stinky Jaejoong sleep on them. He is the one who should do your laundry for one day. Or at least wash your socks. They smell as bad as those sheets probably did." Junsu pointed out, trying to maneuver around Changmin to return the pickled daikon to the fridge. Changmin shot them a look over his shoulder, curiosity plain on his face. Shrugging, the youngest singer returned to his cooking, worrying at the list of ingredients written in Jaejoong's scrawling handwriting. "Laundry for one week."

"And how will we determine who wins?" Micky set down the last of the bowls, arranging the napkins before laying down the utensils Changmin set out earlier. The silver clattered on the marble top, a chiming light

tone reminiscent of the bells overheard in the temples surrounding the city. "Count the black eyes? They can only have two each."

"I hadn't thought of that." Junsu pursed his mouth, quixotic ruminations running through his mind. "Who ever is the most mad when they come home. I think we'll have a sullen Jaejoong, irritated for being trapped in with Yunho for so long."

"I think that would mean I win because Jaejoong would have not said what was on his mind." Yoochun reasoned out. "My money is on Jae lasting it out and Yunho coming home angry because he's irritated at Jae not responding anymore."

"How will that be any different?" Canting his head, Junsu stared at Yoochun's shrug. "We can talk about this later. It's time to eat and Min's going to start paying attention to what we're saying."

"It's too late for that. I can hear both of you." Sighing, Changmin pulled the earphones out, letting the wires dangle around his neck.

Tapping a wooden spoon against the rim of the pot, he loosened the juk stuck to the curve. Dumping the rice porridge into a bowl, he stuck a serving ladle into the mixture and placed it in the middle of the table, the vegetables softening in the steaming rice. Cracking open a bottle of cucumber kim chee, Changmin sat down, sliding his napkin onto his lap.

"If you want to know what I think..." The youngest of them served himself a hefty portion of the rice, careful to scoop up shreds of beef and bok choy as well as avoiding the onions he knew the others liked.

After shaking a few streams of *Sriracha* sauce over the juk, he dug his spoon in and stared up at the two young men standing at the edge of the kitchen area. "Jaejoong should just tell Yunho that he's in love with him and Yunho can either decide if he wants Jaejoong as a friend or something else. It would make all of this easier and we can go back to just being friends, instead of pretending that nothing is going on in front of us. That's what I think. Now sit down and eat. I'm hungry."

"I don't know what you mean." Yunho's voice dropped to a quiet burr, softened by the conflict in his mind. His hand roamed over the landscape of Jae's thigh, thumb rubbing a circle into the dip of his knee. Outside, the slow drip of snow melting against the heat of the window fogged away the world, keeping them safe inside of the cage of words they'd built around each other. "What are you talking about? Without me..."

Jaejoong's chest hitched, his heart numb and no longer able to absorb any more of the wounds he inflicted on himself. His body ached for sleep, anything to remove himself from that lingering tincture of acidic heartbreak that dripped from Yunho's apathy. Rubbing at his face with his open palms, Jaejoong pushed back on his thoughts, shoring up the walls of the cold mask he wore.

"It doesn't matter." Jae said finally, the faint brush of his tears hovering at the edge of his broken words. Smoothing out his tone, the singer nodded, a curt break of formality in the disarray of his emotional upheaval. "What I was trying to say is that I will do anything for the group. For Junsu, Yoochun, Changmin and...you. I don't want you to feel like I let you down."

"You just need to concentrate when you are doing things." Yunho stumbled back onto the safety of the world he knew, one where he had control over what his tongue spat out and his heart paid no attention to the trim, lithe young man sitting across of him. Conscious of the raging anger he'd flayed Jae with last night, Yunho tried to pick out his words carefully, trying not to breach the small amount of compromise they'd seem to reach. However slight the treaty was between them, the group would not survive their fighting. Yunho knew the others held Jaejoong in a special place in their hearts. He'd seen that with Yoochun.

Another flare of white anger burned along the line of Yunho's reason. Closing his eyes briefly, he tilted his body back, leaning nearly into the side of the desk. Clearing his throat, Yunho tried to gather his thoughts back up, to reason with the young singer but when he stared into Jaejoong's face, all he could see was the thin icy sheen of the man he'd first met.

"What's wrong now?" Yunho asked, his chin lifting up. The chilled look on Jaejoong's face was one he wore himself, often a shield from the fire Jae set in his blood.

"Nothing." A shake of Jae's head denied anything was wrong but the timbre of his voice and the threatening roil of something dark at the edge of that single word sent alarms across Yunho's awareness. "No, there is something. Because you're not understanding me. And if I don't tell you how I feel...how I feel when you're near me, then I'm going to spend my life in a lie wrapped tightly around my throat and I'll choke to death as it gets bigger and bigger. I can't live with lies, Yunho. I just can't."

A fine line crackled along the porcelain perfection of the singer's features, Jae's expression changing, infused with a passion Yunho had not seen before. The small shift of the other's face was incredible, blending the angel prettiness with a seductive, coy creature, sure of his effect on Yunho's calm.

"I spend my entire time walking carefully around you. Every thing I say and do is because I am either afraid I will get you angry or drive you away from me. And I can't do that anymore. I can't, Yunnies." Jaejoong shifted, ignoring the searing pain traveling up the length of his thigh. "So even if this makes me lose you...lose you before I can even have you... I have to do this."

Jae's abused nerves twitched, screaming in protest at the movement. Jae would pay for his body's insubordination, his hands finding the folds of shirt fabric on Yunho's chest. Wrapping his long fingers around the soft material, Jaejoong pulled himself closer, his hips twisting. A moan floated in the air and Jae was unsure whether it came from him or the young man he fought so hard not to love.

"You make my life drown with my tears. I lay awake in bed thinking that I can stand one more night of listening to you sleep and hope that the next morning, I'll wake up and not care anymore...not want you anymore." Jae pressed in, his full mouth a whisper away from Yunho's parted lips, their mingled breath kissing in a chocolate cream cloud. The singer wanted... he could practically taste the chiseled ache blooming in his chest, a steel-razored rose he sharpened with each second of his life he shared with Yunho. "This isn't what I should want. And I know it isn't what you want."

"I..." Taken aback, Yunho stammered, his hands moving up to clasp over Jae's fingers, unsure if he should pry the other loose or pull him closer, tucking the singer's lean form into the curve of his body. Jaejoong's warmth felt as if it should fit right into his, a tangle of bone bonded onto the inferno stoked with each word falling from the singer's pretty mouth.

"I've seen you... look at women." Jae swallowed, trying to spare himself the memory of Yunho's rapt attention on the female singers they'd often shared a back stage with, lilting voices a cloying sugar, a counterpoint to the dark molasses of Yunho's answering chuckles. "And...I know that I'm not..."

"I just need to do this once...and then...I'll be done with it." Jae whispered. "I *have* to be done with it because I can't survive this anymore, Yunnies-ah. I just can't bear this without at least knowing that

I've told you... or showed you...even if you turn away from me in disgust. Because when I lose everything...and I know I will... it will be worth it. I'll at least have tasted you on me once. And that has to be enough for me."

The kiss started gentle, a pressing of firm lips on the softness of Jae's mouth. It deepened slowly, Yunho's shock parting the way for Jae's affections. With a biting urge, Jae's teeth sought Yunho's lower lip, suckling it into his mouth, the moistness of his tongue catching on the healed over split his fist made the night before. The gasping cry finally lifted from its prison in Jae's throat, rolling over the darting tongue he plunged into Yunho's mouth and falling into the chasm of the leader's heart, echoing around in a rattle of desire. They fought for control before Yunho pushed Jae down, his fists clenched tight in the singer's ebony hair, holding him down as he ravaged apart what little control Jae had left, opening the singer's mouth with a fierceness that dared denial.

It ended as quickly as it began, a sudden cold frigid in the space left between their panting bodies. Yunho pushed off of Jae's prone body, distancing himself from the length of sin he had just wrapped himself into. Hands shaking, the leader stood, trying to gain some balance...anything to center himself after what he'd just done. Staring down at the young man's beauty, Yunho turned his back slightly, trying to erase the erotic thoughts in his mind, shoving down the unwelcome desire running rampant along the curve of his groin.

"That was wrong, Kim Jaejoong. Wrong." Yunho said flatly, his hands cutting a straight line of rejection in the air. "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."

"You've said that." Jaejoong's hair once again curtained his face, shielding him from the harshness of Yunho's expression. "I understand that."

"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." Yunho turned on his heel. "I don't care how bad the weather is. We're heading home. I'll meet you in the car."

Watching Yunho leave the small office, Jaejoong discovered he'd been wrong. There certainly were more tears left in his soul. The sight of Yunho leaving with the taste of Jae in his mouth proved that. There was nothing of Jaejoong that could make Yunho love him, now he was sure of

it. Nothing at all, the hot salt drops staining his hands said as they fell, echoing in the nothingness of Jae's shattered heart. The risk he'd taken meant nothing to the tall young man who with a single turn of his body fractured dreams Jaejoong didn't even know he'd left in the openness of his soul.

Uncaring of the pain in each slow, aching step, Jaejoong stood then turned off the lights behind him, silent in his misery.

Ten

It seemed like the most natural thing in the world, to push Jaejoong away and shove his feelings into a box, wrapped tight with barbed wire made bloody from the other singer's bleeding heart. Yunho felt it was the right thing to do...the only thing he could do but the wrongness of everything gnawed at him.

He stood at the threshold of the office building door and let the winter slam at his face, the snow biting through the nothingness in his soul. An icy night swept over the city, frozen to a standstill by the sheer glut of water pouring from the sky. Yunho's eyes followed a light arcing on the horizon, possibly a plane heading to someplace far from the mess he seemed to make of his life.

Water diamonds floated on the breeze, steaming trails working through the warmer air and falling in a gentle glide over Yunho's face. The street was empty of cars and people, a silent pocket of peace in a bustling city. Yunho's mouth stung, his fingers trembling as he lifted his hand, pulling it back away to stare at the dollop of blood filling the maze of his fingerprint.

Soft footsteps echoed behind him, a tread fall he knew in his sleep, hitched with the limp gained from Jae pushing himself for Yunho's impossible standards. The wind shifted around them, carrying Jaejoong's scent into Yunho's lungs with his next breath, green tea with a hint of the instant hot chocolate they shared. A brush of a shoulder against his and then Jaejoong was gone, lost in the shadow sliding down from the awning above.

"Do you need help? Walking?" Yunho stumbled over his words, unsure if he could even face the slightly older singer. Jae's face was hidden behind a sheet of inky dark lit only by slices of the street lamp's dull mercury orange bulb, obscured from Yunho's view. Jaejoong continued to struggle, placing his hand carefully on the iron railing to support himself, shrugging off Yunho's hand when it slid under his arm.

"Why don't you get the car and bring it here?" The winter could not compare to Jae's words, snowflake brittle and fragile on the biting cold. "That would be something nice you could do for me."

"I... didn't want to hurt you, Jaejoong." Yunho's hand moved away from Jae's side, sliding up to rest on the span of his back between his shoulder blades. He could feel the wings of bone beneath his palm, the strength of Jae's body tensed in a knot of tension. "Please, can't we just let this go and go back to how we were?"

"And how were we, Yunho?" Jae stopped short, his knuckles white as he gripped the supporting pole. "I break myself apart trying to please you and you get to judge whether or not I get a single precious word? Or maybe just wait for perhaps a hint of a smile when I hit the right note? Because that is what it will mean to go back to how we were before. I give everything inside of myself in return for nothing of you."

"That is not how it was." Yunho objected, grabbing at Jae's elbow.

"That is exactly how it was." Jae bit back, trying to jerk himself free of the other's much stronger grip. "I told you before, I'm not going to do this...that anymore. This...how I feel... everything that I've held inside of me for too long is now yours to deal with."

"I can't." Yunho dug in deeper, pulling Jae back under the cement overhang of the balcony above. A horn honked as a car passed, a shouting voice mocking the young men standing so close together in a passionate huddle. "Do you hear that? Is that what you want for the rest of your life?"

"I would stand that if it meant having you." Jae shot back, his resolve fueled by the tattered pride he barely held together with sheer will. "I don't think you understand that. I don't think you see that. Nor do I think you care."

"My family..." Yunho started, Jaejoong tugging again at the firm grip, trying to break free from the leader's crushing fingers. "I don't... feel that way about you."

"I don't believe you." The irony of it all finally sunk into the singer's mind, his breath a misty dragon against the night sky. "That's what's funny about all of this. You say you feel nothing for me..."

"That isn't true. I care for you as I would a friend!" Yunho pulled Jaejoong back into the arc of his body, shielding the singer from the prying eyes of passing motorists.

"Then why is the first thing you say to me is about your family...how they would react to your loving me? Or how the world would see us

together. Or maybe it's your own shame that you can't bear to look at. Maybe loving me or even thinking about loving me is just so shameful that you can't even begin to think you could find a scrap of happiness in it." Jae pried Yunho's nerveless fingers loose, leaning in close to the leader's astonished face. "You didn't say; I'm sorry, Jaejoong but I don't care about you like that or that you don't look at me with desire in your heart. The first thing you say is that I have led you down a path that you don't want to be on."

"But I can't lead you someplace that you don't want to be, Yunho." The singer pointed out, his head tilted to one side as he regarded the leader with a steady gaze. "I've done all I'm going to do and I've given all of myself that I'm going to give. I've let you lead me around for too long, not the other way around. Yoochun was right..."

"Yoochun. I swear I hear his name off of your tongue more than anything else you say." Yunho rounded on Jaejoong, pushing in front of the singer's way. "We're talking about what is between us. Not you and Yoochun."

"Why do you care? What do you care if I say Yoochun's name until my tongue bleeds from my teeth cutting against it?" Jaejoong asked, trying to hold himself together for just a little while longer. If he could just make it to the car, he would be okay. Each step closer to the snowed over vehicle was agony, his leg ached nearly drowning out the pangs in his chest. The last of Jae's strength drained out of his body, his shoulders no longer able to carry the weight of his dignity and hold off the anguish tearing him apart.

"Why can't you just let me crawl home and bury myself under the covers until it stops hurting?" Jae broke with a sob, a hiccupping sound skipping a beat into his words. "First you pick at me until I break my body and now you pick through the shreds of what I have left of myself, looking for what? Any last bit of myself that you haven't sucked clean of life?"

"Fine. Get in the car." Yunho wanted to shove at Jae's shoulder, knocking him down and pummeling him into submission. More than anything, he found himself desiring to bite down into the plump mouth drawn into a straight line across Jae's face, slicing at the rounded edges until it bled and he could suckle another moan from Jaejoong's throat. Swallowing hard, tasting only himself in the dampness, Yunho dug the keys out of his pocket. "I'll take you home."

"No," Jaejoong disagreed, walking slowly down the stairs to the parking lot, his shuffling steps painful to watch. "You'll take me back to the

apartment. A home is where someone is loved. You've made it clear that is never going to be the case. Never call where we live a home. That's a bigger lie than anything else you've ever said to me."

No door slams heralded their entrance, a meek slipping through the apartment and into the far reaches of different rooms, Jaejoong with his leg stretched out on the wide red sofa and Yunho safely tucked away in the tight confines of the music room. Snarling at Changmin's cheerful greeting, Yunho shut the door, closing himself off from the world Jaejoong sent tumbling.

"You know, I bet Junsu that you would win the argument." Yoochun walked into the living room, holding out a bowl of steaming soup heavy with noodles. Jaejoong glanced at the food with a lackluster eye, his soul worn thin from the trials of the day. "I will have to do his laundry for a week."

"You eat the noodles. I'm not hungry." The plaintive remark was disregarded by the larger young man, Yoochun placing a pair of chopsticks into Jaejoong's hand.

"Eat, it will help you. It will fuel your anger." Yoochun noticed the strained look on Jae's face as he moved, his injured leg propped up on a pile of bright blue pillows.

"My anger has left me. It has moved out and its cousin, apathy has moved in." Jae picked at the noodles, staring down at the wide white lengths as if they would give him the answers to the universe. "I am certain that I can't eat all of this."

"Don't worry, I am sure the ravenous black hole that is our youngest brother will help you with any leftovers that you might have." Yoochun pulled his feet up, tucking them underneath him. The urge to touch and comfort the weary singer overwhelmed him yet he held back, knowing Jae too well to reach into the private curtain he'd drawn about himself... a worn sheet of distance he'd woven out of his need to feel safe from the world's battles. "Talk to me, Jaejoong. Did you and Yunho fight again?"

"No, not really." Jae reconsidered his words then continued. "Maybe a little bit."

"And?"

“And then I kissed him.” The singer shrugged, his elegant shoulders barely moving under the heavy quilt Yoochin tossed over his torso before going into the kitchen for food.

“So you finally just gave in to everything you felt?” Yoochun whistled under his breath. “That took courage.”

“It took cowardice.” Jaejoong refuted, his eyes filming up against the memory of Yunho’s face when he pulled away. The disgust and lust was clear there, a desire enflamed by touch and perhaps the promise of release from a willing mouth but not a trace of love existed in those glittering eyes. “I couldn’t... it’s just been too hard to be what he wants and then not being what he really desires. I thought that if I kissed him, I would be free from wanting him.”

“Are you?” Yoochun knew the answer. He could see the obsession Jaejoong nursed still embedded deep within the singer’s dreams.

“No.” Another word slithered free from Jaejoong’s velvet hell. He picked up a strand of noodle between clenched wooden prongs, letting it slide free to splash back in the meat broth.

“It hurts so much, Chunnie.” The realization of what he’d lost finally breached through Jaejoong’s control. “All I wanted was to be happy. I thought that Tong Vfang Xien Qi was going to be getting my dreams and instead I find I am in a nightmare that I can’t wake from.”

Leaning over, Jaejoong blindly sought the comfort of his friend’s body, wanting the warmth of another human being to ease the bitterness creeping through him. “I thought that by kissing him once, I could let him go but I can’t. I’m left to wonder if everything I taste from now on is going to be like ashes on the roof of my mouth. I miss him...and he’s not even gone. I miss someone that I’ve never had. And it is breaking me, Chunnie-ah. I feel as if I am falling down into a sorrow that has no end.”

“It will get better, Joongie-ah.” Micky moved carefully, not wanting to dislodge Jaejoong’s injured leg. Cradling the singer against his chest, Yoochun’s arms wrapped tight about Jae’s body, holding him close and silently willing the young man to finally release his pain into hot, healing tears. “I told you I’d be here for you when you cried. I’m here now, Joongie. Feel me. I’m here.”

Yunho stood tucked inside of the niche in the hallway, his palms pressing back on the stucco wall. He’d wanted something to drink,

thinking that Yoochun had taken Jaejoong back into the bedroom he shared with Junsu but the soft murmur of voices stopped him in his tracks. Stepping quietly forward, the leader strained to hear what was being said, wanting to curse when Jaejoong's devastated voice was lost beneath the sound of his own breathing.

Yoochun was there to offer comfort, as the leader assumed he would. An ember stoked hot burned in Yunho's guts. A peek around the corner gave him a good view of their cuddled bodies, Jaejoong easily fitting into the breadth of Yoochun's chest. Sniffing, the singer murmured something low, Micky's head bowed down to catch each pearly tone.

"He doesn't love him." Junsu whispered into the crook of Yunho's ear, making the leader nearly jump out of his skin. "Jaejoong, I mean. Well, I suppose I mean Yoochun as well. Neither one of them love one another... well, I think they do. As brothers, I mean."

"Why should I care?" Yunho brought himself up taut, wondering if he could somehow crawl off back into the music room without Junsu thinking he was running away.

"Because your face tells me that you do care...about something going on in there." Junsu leaned over, straining his neck to see into the living room. "And if it isn't Jaejoong crying, then it must be Yoochun."

"I don't feel anything for Yoochun." Yunho hissed back, his eyes darting towards the living room. The broad grin on Junsu's face held a threat of alerting the two in the living room, a very real possibility for a mischief maker like Su. "Keep your voice down. I don't want them to hear us."

"True, it is hard to eavesdrop if you're overheard. The people you're eavesdropping on then find out you're lurking in the shadows, listening to their conversation. This leads to explanations and all sorts of odd questions." Junsu nodded in full agreement, his handsome face sardonically solemn.

Tucking his hands into the pockets of his pajamas, Su strolled back down the hallway towards his room, walking backwards to watch Yunho's face. "On the other hand, if you don't care...about either of them...then you shouldn't care if they overhear you so it wouldn't matter if they had questions about why you were lurking."

"Junsu, shut up." Yunho advanced on the younger singer. "It's not that I don't care. I just can't... let them see me. I've already ...you don't know what you're talking about."

"I guess not." Junsu turned, casually walking along the rugs strewn on the oak flooring. He marveled at the reflection of the overhead lights in the wood, the mahogany grains running through the lighter weave reminding him of the sun coming through the curtains of his bedroom. "But I can guess, oh mighty leader, that Jaejoong said or did something that upset both of you."

"No." Yunho halted just at the threshold of the back bedroom, his mind wandering back to the living room and the sight of Yoochun holding Jaejoong in his arms. "Jaejoong....did what he felt like he needed to do."

The kiss returned to Yunho in that moment, a fleeting lifetime of savouring the depths of Jaejoong's soul. With a clarity that he didn't know existed, the young man longed for another brush at the silken dip of Jaejoong's mouth, his fingers finally cupping the other's chin...holding him still long enough to pull every last erotic mewl from his gasping lips. The kiss lasted too long for Yunho's mind and not nearly long enough for his body, an unyielding thirst building up against his denial.

"Haven't we been friends, Yunho?" Junsu flopped down on the bed beneath the window, drawing one of Micky's pillows to his stomach. It comforted him, the scent of toothpaste and cherry soda that seemed to follow Yoochun. Now, staring up at his band leader's face, he wondered at the folly of loving in the quiet solitude of his own heart. "I'll listen to you...like Yoochun listens to Jaejoong. But I won't give you any advice. I don't think I can offer anything of wisdom in something like this."

"If I share with you, Su, you have to promise that you will not tell anyone." Yunho sat down on the edge of the bed, the metal frame giving slightly under his weight.

"I promise, hyung." Junsu crossed an index finger over his chest. "Not a word."

Sighing, Yunho rubbed at his forehead, trying to work out the thoughts and sensations that Jaejoong awoke in him. He had no idea how to tell Junsu that the sloe-eyed singer stopped him cold with his beauty or that he sometimes found himself awake in the middle of the night and thanking the heavens that the street lights outside illuminated the room bright enough for him to stare at the sleeping form in the bed next to him. There was no place for those words in Yunho's life, a complication that he couldn't even begin to grasp taking on.

"I said something to Jaejoong. Something that I think I am going to regret, always. Something that broke his heart. I know by saying this

thing...that I broke something inside of me too.” Swallowing at the cancerous passion that seemed to grow in his chest with each waking moment, Yunho whispered. “I don’t know how to take it back, Junsu. God, I would give anything to know how to take it back. I can’t stand to watch him cry. And I hate knowing that I’m the one who has given him those tears.”

Eleven

A soured milk sky distended across to the horizon, the hills around Seoul thick with another dousing of bitter snow. Junsu stared out of the living room window, pulling aside the long strips of vertical blinds with the back of his hand. The dancer's breath ghosted over the cold glass, his mouth warming the pane, fighting with the sparkled frost cobwebbing up from the sill. Below their apartment, barren trees shuddered under the weight of snow, branches groaning in the swaying wind.

An arm hooked over Su's shoulders, a broad chin resting on the curve of muscle on the other side of his face. Yoochun's face grinned back at Junsu in the glass, split by fingers of icy lace spreading slowly by the cold outside. Tilting his head, Yoochun lightly bumped Junsu's temple, giving the smaller singer a quick hug before releasing him, the warm hug crumpling Su's t-shirt.

"I miss our room." Junsu turned, making a comic frown at Yoochun's mock-pain face. "Last night I cracked open the window because I was too warm. That's wrong. It's the dead of winter and I'm too warm. I blame you for this. I'm sure the others blame you too. Changmin woke up with chattering teeth and kicked me."

"I'm sure Changmin can't kick that hard." Yoochun waved an empty mug at his friend, holding up a packet of instant cocoa. "He's tall but thin. Not a lot of power in his legs."

"He has sharp toes!" Junsu pulled up the leg of his sweatpants, hoping to find the bruise he was certain formed in the middle of the night. Yoochun glanced at the stretch of perfect skin, golden despite the pallor of winter. Snorting, Yoochun shook his head at Junsu's silliness, the singer protesting the dismissal with a cry. "They were like knives."

"If it makes you feel any better, I miss you being in our room too." Yoochun poured a second packet into an empty mug, wondering if they had any more mini-marshmallows, the bag possibly surviving Min's all-consuming appetite. "Were they mad at you?"

"Changmin was cold, and told me that if I wanted to be a polar bear, I could go sleep on the sidewalk. Yunho didn't say anything." Junsu

shrugged, worry for their leader on his charming face. He sniffed at the air, catching a whiff of steaming milk and chocolate. Slinging his body onto the couch, Su snuggled down into the low backed cushions, slanting sideways to let Yoochun sit next to him.

“How long do you think this is going to last? It’s been three weeks. Outside is warmer than inside of this apartment.” Yoochun blew softly on the surface of his cocoa, the vanilla-sugar marshmallows dancing and bobbing in a soft brown sea.

“I don’t know.” Junsu shrugged, carefully holding the steaming mug Yoochun handing him between his hands. Long fingers chilled from touching the icy glass slowly thawed, his mouth pursed at the rim of the cup. A tiny sup, barely enough to move the foam swirling over the liquid, tinged a fiery warning in Junsu’s mouth and he sighed heavily, the sweet cocoa still minutes away from being drinkable.

“Jaejoong is... the same.” Yoochun matched Junsu’s sigh with one of his own. “He doesn’t cry. I can feel him wanting to but he won’t. He won’t even talk about what happened at the studio. Just that he kissed Yunho and then everything...ended.”

“Remember, we promised we would not interfere?” Junsu asked. “Do you think it’s time that we interfere or just let them work it out.”

“I don’t know.” Micky rested his head against Junsu’s hair, recalling with deep fondness the calm he’d once had in his life.

His nights were spent lying awake, listening for even the smallest sign of Jaejoong’s fragile will to crack, but the singer had shut down, lost behind a wall of silence and brittle manners. Yunho stalked around him, just out of reach and trying not to snap at mistakes he saw in Jaejoong’s dancing or singing, choosing instead to bite back at the others with a cunning, stinging wit. The mirrors reflected nothing but their coldness towards one another, one moment Yunho’s face twisted with an unspoken need then falling back behind the anger he seemed to keep stoked on low embers. Jaejoong was a steady flame, a blue tier of deadly beauty, threatening to burn all those who came near.

“It’s been weeks.” Junsu tried the chocolate again, reveling in the simple pleasure of the early evening. “We can’t go on like this much longer. One of them is either going to start screaming or one of us will go insane.”

They rarely had time alone together and Su missed the countless hours he’d spent talking to Yoochun in the darkness of their room, the walls a

hazy blur from the soft lights outside. The wind often whistled beneath their words, drawn in through the small crack of the window over Yoochun's bed. Junsu found himself missing that whispering sound, a lulling quiet that lured sleep to quiet his busy mind. Sitting against Micky, he embraced the serenity he'd lost in the reshuffling of beds.

"If we interfere, Yunho will lash out at us. I'm not drawing any more of his temper. He already finds fault in everything I do and I know it is because I am comforting Joongie-ah." Yoochun reminded Su of their leader's brutal, curt manner when crossed. The easy-going, personable young man they called brother was smothered by something darker, an automaton working through the motions of a busy life. "Jaejoong is no different. He would be furious."

"I'd rather they be angry at us and happy with each other than angry at each other as well as us." Junsu drank his cocoa, sucking up a partially melted marshmallow, wondering how the sweet sugary sponge could taste of cherry soda on his tongue. "I say we plot."

"I agree." Yoochun murmured, his mouth brushing against the top of Junsu's crown, the tickle of the other's hair ruffling his supple lips. "I want us back in our room. It's been too quiet in there without you. I have a hard time falling asleep without hearing you breathe."

"Jaejoong is breathing in the bed right next to you." Junsu's mouth quirked, a laugh just at the tip of his tongue. "I'm sure he does it prettier than I ever could. If someone can breathe pretty."

"It's different." Yoochun insisted, his voice deep in his chest. "I just miss hearing you breathe."

Their bedroom was different with Jaejoong gone, an orderly collection of lives stacked precariously against one another. Yunho stretched out over the mattress, turning his cheek and closing his eyes, letting the cotton threads rub against his chin. After Yoochun helped Jaejoong pack his things to move into the smaller bedroom, Yunho stood in the emptiness of the space and wondered why the echoes against the wall were a muted whisper compared to the screaming agony of stillness in his heart.

His body seemed to move on its own, hands yanking the mattress off of the bed Jaejoong slept in, pulling it to the floor. Pillows scattered over the wide rugs between their sleeping areas as Yunho maneuvered his own mattress onto the now empty frame under the window, struggling to place Jaejoong's bedding on the low wooden platform Yunho slept on.

When Junsu came in, he didn't comment on the disarray of the room or Yunho's heavy panting, the vocalist carrying in duffel bags filled with clothes. A quick flirt of eyebrows was the only reaction Changmin gave to the leader, Yunho's hard eyes challenging the younger man to say anything but Min merely shrugged and helped Junsu arrange his dresser.

The thought of Jaejoong sleeping a foot away from Yoochun infuriated Yunho, more than the caustic words Jaejoong flung at him that afternoon when his world collided with the reality of Jae's affections. His mouth longed for that taste, the suckling sweetness of the young man's soul against his tongue. Yunho hadn't realized how much he'd depended on the day to day of Jaejoong in his life until it came to a screaming halt, the other singer just out of reach in his resolute distance.

He could sometimes hear them whispering when he passed the other bedroom, a sibilant caress that spoke of a deepening intimacy. Yoochun spent hours with his head bent over Jaejoong's shoulder, sharing jokes and whispering encouragements when their lead singer stumbled through a routine. Gracefully sensual, the young man struggled to master each routine, trying to keep track of when their positions changed and at the same time, not overextend his already tender thigh muscles.

It was Micky who helped Jaejoong into the van each day when they left for the studio, Junsu often left carrying their water bottles and chatting with Changmin about the day's events. Yunho found himself hanging back, watching Yoochun's hands glide over Jaejoong's slender waist, the hint of skin showing when Micky lifted him up into the back of the van, a glint of a sparkle winking from Jae's pierced navel.

Yunho now found himself wondering how the warmed gold would feel on his tongue, or how sweet the shadow beyond might taste... Jaejoong's abdomen twitching beneath a fierce laving. He'd watched Jae eating from across the dining room table, his attention mostly on the food but sometimes the coy, sensual singer would look up, his hooded gaze roiling with unspoken words.

The door opened, startling Yunho from his reverie. Guiltily, he glanced at Changmin who smiled winningly at the sprawled singer. Gathering up his text books, Min debated asking if Yunho minded sharing the room but the leader's distracted face assured the youngest singer that he would not be noticed amid Yunho's churning thoughts.

"I can go study in the kitchen." Changmin offered, holding up his notebook. The eagerness to please the older singer was plain on his face and Yunho felt more than a single poke of guilt for how he'd been treating the others, most especially the youngest of them. Changmin often mutely absorbed Yunho's biting directions, trying to live up to an impossible expectation honed sharp by Yunho's unhappiness.

"No, please... stay, Min." Yunho pulled himself up, crossing his legs to rest his back against the wall. A head bow, quick and pleasing, acknowledged Yunho's assent as Changmin settled down on his own bed, the foot locker at the end already stacked three high with novels the young singer planned to read.

Yunho watched Changmin meticulously open up a text book, comparing his even lettered notes with the histories written in his reference material. The squeak of a pink highlighter sometimes broke the light silence, then a notation in pencil before Changmin returned to studying the minute details of his notes. The end of the highlighter eventually found its way into the curve of Changmin's mouth, its plastic tip already nibbled on, teeth marks marring the smooth plastic.

"I don't think I'm that interesting, hyung." Min spoke suddenly, his glistening eyes curious as he looked up through his hair at the leader. "Unless you want the book in which case, I'll gladly give it over. History makes my head hurt sometimes."

"I'm sorry." Yunho muttered an apology. "I didn't mean to stare. My thoughts are elsewhere."

The open door carried the sounds from the living room into their shared space, Yoochun's deep laughter punctuated by Junsu's higher pitched trill. Yunho's jaw clenched at the sound, his hands tightening into knots. He wondered where Jaejoong was, in the midst of the laughter, and if the lithe singer had returned to the studio alone, ignoring the doctor's warning to take it easy on his bruised thigh. Changmin calmly took note of Yunho's change of expression, the softness of the leader's face suddenly hardened into a carved granite mask.

"They are good friends, yes?" Changmin said, feigning attention to his notes. He would have to be delicate around Yunho, the other singer's tender feelings scraped raw by Jaejoong's distant response to any overtures made in his direction.

"Who?" Yunho turned to face Min, jerked back to the room he sat in.

“Junsu and Yoochun.” Min turned the page, wondering how he even took legible notes considering how tired he’d been when he sat in class that day. “They are very close.”

“It seems like Yoochun is close to everyone.” Yunho’s eyes slanted, muttering darkly at the thought of the bass singer. His mind merrily rolled out images of a sleeping Jaejoong curled up in Yoochun’s arms, following the curve of the American-raised singer’s body. Yunho glanced into the other bedroom one morning, curious if the sheets on both beds were rumpled from the night before but the covers were neatly pulled up, folded over plump pillows, offering the leader no comfort in their perfect linens.

“May I ask you something, hyung.” Changmin slid his pencil behind one ear, placing his hands over the spread pages of his notebook. “And if I am being forward, please tell me.”

Yunho looked at the youngest member of their group, wondering what he might be curious about. If Min brought up the moved mattress, then he would have to quickly think of an excuse, something Yunho should have done days before.

“What is it like to fall in love?” Changmin asked, inquisitive and searching. Their philosopher, Jaejoong called Min, amused at the young man’s curiosity in the world. Where Jae let the world spin about him, letting his soul freefall into each experience, Changmin delicately sipped at each instance, moving the taste around in his mind and glorying in the newness of it all.

“In love?” Yunho couldn’t begin to absorb the shock in his system at Changmin’s words. “I’ve never been in love, not really. I couldn’t answer you.”

“I asked the same thing of Jaejoong. He seems like someone who falls in love all the time.” Changmin continued innocently. “But he told me that he’s only loved once and that it was the most miserable thing that he’s ever had done to him. That there is no such thing as roses and kisses, only thorns and bruises on your heart.”

“He’ll fall in love again.” Yunho replied, thinking of Yoochun’s closeness to Jaejoong, their bodies brushing nearly every moment of the day. “If he hasn’t already.”

“Jaejoong told me that I was too young for such pain.” Changmin shook his head at the foolishness of his elders. “That I should wait until I was

older before giving my heart to anyone. I told him that I thought love would be something that freed you to do anything you wanted to do...give you courage where you had none but he disagreed. He said love was a curse given to people whose hearts were dry from lack and that there was nothing more insidious than wanting someone to live inside of your soul."

"I hope that he's wrong," Changmin remarked casually. "It would be sad for someone as beautiful as Jaejoong to be unloved."

"Jaejoong... won't be alone." Yunho recalled the broken hitch in Jae's voice when he last spoke in the cold of the studio's shadow. "Someone will come and fill his heart."

"Jaejoong is never alone," Changmin said, marking another passage in his text book. "But there is a difference between being alone and being unloved. Being alone is just the physical presence of people. Being unloved is like standing in a maelstrom of grief and hurt. Or so I would think, hyung. Don't you agree?"

"I don't ... know." Yunho peered at the youngest singer, searching for any hint of prying into the pride he'd erected around him. Changmin's placid face held none of the machinations normally found on Junsu's features, an angelic curious young man exploring the mysteries of life. "I've never been unloved."

"Neither have I." Min nodded, chewing once more on the end of his pen. "I am glad I don't have that on my soul...not like Jaejoong, always wondering why I am not good enough to be held and cherished. That must be the hardest thing to bear, feeling so much for someone only to have it turned aside because of fear."

"Is that what you think I did?" Yunho asked suddenly, pushing himself to the edge of the bed and glaring at Changmin.

"Did?" The youngest looked up at the leader, his brow furrowed with concern. "What did you do, hyung?"

"Not love Jaejoong." Yunho pressed further, frustration mounting in him. "Did you think that? That I am the one that Jaejoong loves and did not return it?"

"I don't think that at all, hyung. And if it were true, I wouldn't blame you." Changmin reassured Yunho with a nod before returning to the string of sentences that didn't seem to make any sense, despite being in

his own handwriting. "I think loving Jaejoong would be scary. He needs to be told that he is loved. Needs to be held and cradled in the cold, sometimes for hours. The person who loved him would have to shield him from others who would take advantage of him and know when to give him space to let him be independent."

"He is like a cat, hyung. One has to know how to love a cat." Changmin said, solemn and serious. "Jaejoong would only go to someone that he trusted to love him as he needed to be loved. That person would have a great responsibility with Jaejoong's heart. That is not something to be taken lightly. No, Yunho, no one would blame you for not wanting to love Jaejoong."

"No, they wouldn't." Yunho whispered, wondering why his heart had slowed, no longer beating in the hollow of his pain.

"But then, I would also imagine that the chaos of Jaejoong would also hold great joy." Min didn't look up from his book this time, letting his words spill where they might. "There is nothing like the love of a cat when you think that it is aloof, only to find it purring in the crook of your neck. That surprise would be worth it, I think. That devoted love would be only yours...no one else's. That is, if you loved him, hyung."

"Love is not that easy." Yunho replied to Changmin's words, the apartment's silence suddenly loud in his ears.

"I am told that love is never easy." Changmin said in return. "But I think it would be worth it. Especially when it is given freely and so generously. I would hunger my entire life for a love like that and weep if I thought I had turned it away because of my own fear. A love like that is worth having for just a moment because you could live off of it forever."

Another highlighted passage and then Changmin bent over, his voice delicate in Yunho's ear. "Or so Jaejoong told me, hyung. He said a single moment of that love is worth all of living. And he is glad that he has the moment to live on. It will last him forever."

Twelve

Jubilant shouting filled the dorm apartment, its polished wooden floors amplifying the sounds, bouncing glee down the hall and into the tiny room the group used to vocalize in. Yunho shoved his headphones back, wondering how much louder he could turn the volume on his music player, the distraction of Jaejoong's laughter seeping past the rising torrent of X's Trance album.

A small slit of a window at the top of the east wall let in a watery sunlight, more for looks than illumination. The band of rays seemed to follow Yunho around, catching his troubled features as he paced about the room, marking off the square floor in long strides. Two desks took up most of the far wall, chairs tilted sideways in the middle of the room. A couch sat on the far side, a broad based lamp fitting neatly into a nearby corner. More of Changmin's school books occupied a goodly portion of one desk, spilling onto a side chair in a tumble of portfolios and papers, marked in the young singer's neat, block-like lettering. Yunho choose to study in the central room because it held the least of Jaejoong's presence in the house, the band's lead singer usually practicing in the quiet of a bedroom or even the small confines of one of the bathrooms, listening to the vibrating echo of his dulcet voice on the tiled walls.

Having Jae's laughter follow Yunho into the tight sanctuary poked at the bubble of his control. It had been three days since Changmin's whisper threw him askew, his thoughts tumbling around the possibility of Jaejoong living in his life until death finally claimed either one of them. It was a future that Yunho stared at, a misty distant nothingness that seemed only solid when he caught a glimpse of it out of the corner of his eye, a ghosting wish he could never touch...never hold between his cupped hands and drink until he was sated. The foolishness of loving another man was impossible... an abomination of desires Yunho didn't know how to excise out of his thoughts.

His mouth spent long minutes mocking him, even the touch of the wind on his lips reminding Yunho of the kiss Jaejoong breathed into his soul, marring any peace he might have taken with him through the winter. Now everything that he handled paled in comparison to the softness of the singer's skin beneath his hands, a satiny rub of heat and seduction beneath a smooth landscape of Jae's rosy pale leanness. Another burst of

laughter pulled at him, his studying lost beneath the revelry in the other room.

Yunho fully intended to walk into the living area and demand that they be quieter. He was studying, he would reason, couldn't they be more considerate towards the need for silence but as Yunho rounded the corner, the singer was brought up short by a barrage of sound and images striking him full in the face.

Yoochun's arms flung up over his head, a windmill of action, his head pulled back in victory. His tall body convulsed in an offbeat, uncoordinated dance, his feet dimpling the couch cushions as he bounced up and down around a laughing Jaejoong. Crowing loudly, eradicating any hope of Jae's soft giggles being heard, Micky declared himself the ultimate racing champion, a wireless black controller gripped in his hand, held aloft as a de facto. The wide screen television flashed with a dizzying array of colours, a blinking message proclaiming Yoochun's car first across the finish line.

"You cheated!" Jaejoong's laugh had become breathless, giddy in his delight. The silvery sound of his voice, imbued with happiness, splashed nourishing drops on the parched wasteland of Yunho's heart... a favourite song he'd only just remembered the words to.

"I did not cheat!" Yoochun stopped bouncing, grinning foolishly down at his dearest friend. "You are slow. Your reflexes are waning in your ancient years. Soon we'll have to be helping you get up and down on stage, old women calling you oppa and making room for your walker when you go past."

"Ah, you!" Jaejoong pushed at Yoochun's leg, buckling the other's knee in a playful shove. "I let you win. I felt sorry for you... especially after all the times you crashed into the wall and scraped up your car. It was pity! That is why you won!"

Yoochun growled, mockingly playful and flung himself down on the lean singer, the controller flying from his hand. His long fingers rounded down Jaejoong's chest, finding the ticklish spot beneath his ribs. Screaming in protest, the ebony-eyed singer twisted to try to get away, his hips trapped in the vise of Yoochun's strong legs. The smile on Jae's face widened, his eyes tearing with mirth with his attempts to dislodge the heavier young man. Another gleeful shout of victory, this time over wrestling a squirming Jaejoong to the flat of the couch, rankled Yunho's guts, the sight of Yoochun straddling Jaejoong too erotic for his taste.

Jaejoong's hips moved sensually, slowing when the singer sought to gain purchase on the floor with one foot, hoping for some leverage. Yoochun leaned forward, grabbing at Jae's wrists to hold them down firm on the couch's overstuffed arm, his mouth open and gnawing on the spot his fingers recently tickled mercilessly. Gasping with the loss of his breath, Jae screamed his surrender, not able to even move the other's weight from his chest. Yoochun refused to acknowledge the other's acquiescence, taking a few more bites into Jaejoong's t-shirt before pushing himself up.

Yoochun stood up over his fallen opponent, renewing his bouncing with a blissful yell, his feet skimming Jae's waist. Jae's oversized shirt slithered up his sleek body, a swath of burnished sinew. The dark rose of one nipple winked at Yunho, flashing with the diamond-chipped ends of a barbell piercing. His mouth dried, the sight of Jae's half-dressed body leaving behind an unwanted echo behind Yunho's veiled eyes.

The leader shut his eyes against the rage in his belly, his legs unwilling to carry him across the living room floor so his fists could pummel the taste of Jaejoong from Micky's mouth. It took every bit of effort he had in him to turn on his heels and head back to the small room where he left his sanity.

"You are mean." Jaejoong accused Micky, futilely kicking at the other singer's shin with the bottom of his foot. "If you were a graceful winner, you would express remorse for having shamed your elders."

"Ah, now you look for pity for your age!" Yoochun gasped, overexerted from his jumping. Sliding down to sit next to his friend, he inhaled large mouthfuls of air, catching his breath slowly. Jaejoong's legs were captured under Micky's hips, the lean vocalist comfortably leaning back and grinning back at Yoochun's exuberant expression. "This was fun. It's nice to spend time with you and hear you laugh. It's been too long since I've heard you laugh like that."

"It's been a long time since I've wanted to laugh." Jaejoong admitted, trying to loosen his toes enough to pinch at the back of Yoochun's thighs. "You're heavy. I can't feel my feet."

"You only say that because you have the toes of a monkey and want to leave bruises on my beautiful legs." Yoochun accused good-humoredly. Rolling up, he gave Jae enough room to pull free, grabbing at the singer's ankle when he tried to retaliate with a pinch. "See? You are still a graceless loser!"

“Hah!” Jaejoong snorted back, a final sigh before grabbing at the game console. “Do you want to play again or are you going to meet Junsu at the mall soon?”

“Ah, I nearly forgot. Do you want to come with us, Joongie-ah?” Micky searched for his shoes, pulling one sneaker up and unlacing the ties so he could slip his foot in. “Changmin will be gone until tomorrow. His mother came to visit and he’s going to stay in the hotel with her. I imagine he will come back to us more spoiled than when he left.”

“No, I’m fine.” Jaejoong shook his head, casting a glance back towards the hall. Yunho spent much of the past few weeks trying to catch up with neglected schoolwork, something he himself might consider doing at some point. Shrugging off the thought, Jae tugged at his shirt, picking at the dampness along his ribs. “I’ll probably cook something for dinner and maybe practice. It’s better now that my leg’s healed up. I should really master that second bit of the dance routine now that I can bend back far enough.”

“Just don’t overdo it.” Yoochun warned, his mood muddled with worry. “And if you want to join us later...”

“I’ll be fine.” Jaejoong’s hand rubbed against the breadth of Yoochun’s shoulder, his face open and wide. In the subdued light of the living room’s lamps, the singer glistened, a gloaming coy feyness to his features. “I promise. Don’t worry about me. You and Junsu go have fun. It’s been days since you’ve gone out with him. And I don’t think I could stand to be around crowds right now. They press in so tightly sometimes, I can’t breathe.”

“They just want to get close to your beauty. Junsu and I will be thankful we won’t have to fight anyone off of you.” Yoochun wrinkled his nose and laughed. “It will lift Junsu’s ego to be the one that the girls pay attention to. Far better for you to stay home.”

“I’ll tell him you said that.” Jaejoong teased. “If you stop by the bakery before it closes, can you bring me back moon cakes?”

“Of course, Joongie-ah.” Yoochun assented. “I would be glad to bring you the moon but you will have to settle for just a cake.”

“A cake is fine, oh foolish child.” Jae tilted his chin and sniffed, impersonating an imperious old teacher, arrogant in his superiority. A glimmering taunt reminded him of a dark-eyed angel nesting in the

outreaches of his soul. “Yunho likes honey cakes. If they have some, be sure to grab a few for him.”

“You still think of him.” Yoochun’s manner waxed serious, the mirth of their laughter spilling into the corners of his soulful eyes. “That’s nice.”

“I...” The singer stopped speaking, thinking of what to say as he gathered up the video game components. Calmly, he continued as if he hadn’t been lost in his own thoughts. “Why wouldn’t I think of him? He is our leader and part of the group.”

“No reason.” Yoochun left Jae his pride, bending over and kissing the slighter man’s forehead before heading to the front door. “Don’t stay up. I think Junsu and I will go to the movies and maybe go see some dancing later.”

“Don’t get into too much trouble.” Jaejoong called out as Micky closed the door behind him. “I don’t have money to bribe the dogcatchers to let you out of jail!”

The kitchen provided a small amount of solace for Jaejoong, the pleasure of gathering raw materials and preparing a meal soothing to his mind. With the task of balancing flavours foremost in his thoughts, he could forget about the troubles on his soul, his world shrunk down to the square of a wooden chopping block and freshly washed vegetables. Rice steamed in the cooker, a block of soft dubu draining on a paper towel over a low-curved bowl. He’d been craving bibimbap for days, waiting until the market across the street got fresh vegetables from the countryside and with the arrival of thick stalked green onions, Jaejoong decided today would be the day he would satisfy his craving.

The singer felt Yunho against the air, far sooner than he saw the shadow stretch over the kitchen counter. Jaejoong focused hard on the bamboo shoots under his knife, slicing julienne lengths of the beige vegetable, a few shreds catching on the flashing steel surface. Yunho’s vanilla shampoo filled Jae’s senses, overpowering the open jar of gochujang sitting on the counter.

“I’m making bibimbap, if you want some.” An olive branch of sorts, Jaejoong’s soft offering of food. Running his fingers over the flat of the blade, Jae scraped off the cut shoots and moved on to the sprigs of gai lan, rough chopping the green vegetables. “I’m not putting any mushrooms in it.”

“Thank you.” Yunho waited until Jaejoong placed the knife on the sideboard, reaching for the dubu square before coming closer, watching the way the light played over the singer’s exposed neck.

Black hair, a jet so deep it absorbed the light, fringed down towards Jae’s collarbone, a swath of skin visible beneath the cleft of the parted ebony silk. Yunho swallowed and wondered at the taste of the young man standing a mere few inches in front of him. Would the tender, down-brushed flesh have the same erotic spiciness of the singer’s mouth, or was the sweetness hidden there a powder dusting of sugared skin.

“I know you don’t like them.” Jaejoong’s fingers shook, the cheesecloth wrapped under the dubu trembling in his hands. Yunho stepped closer, an unbidden desire pushing him towards Jaejoong.

The leader couldn’t explain the why of his curiosity nor the want to wipe Yoochun’s touch from the lithe singer’s skin. Nothing seemed to make sense anymore, his world snarled into knotted threads of unwanted desires.

Jae’s throat convulsed, a nervous reaction to the young man coming ever so much closer into the circle of his awareness. The kitchen broiled in the heat of Yunho’s presence, a torrent of need barely sublimated by Jaejoong’s stubbornness. He needed some space...any amount of distance to stop the heady drunkenness clouding his judgment. Yunho’s body was potent across the coldness of a dance studio. In the tight confines of the narrow kitchen, it would be lethally addictive.

The singer shook the excess water from his hands, the milky fluid from the dubu soaking into the paper towel wadded up around his fingers. “It will be a bit before it’s ready. I can call you when it’s done if you have something you want to do.”

Something he wanted to do — Yunho’s mind screamed at the absurdity of Jaejoong’s words. Yunho’s brain crept with ideas, making deals with his control. Perhaps just a taste would satisfy the urges his body seemed to thicken with at the sight of the slender singer. He’d barely had the pleasures of a woman’s body beneath him, a coupling or two made hastily in the confines of a dark room where the spill of his seed seemed urgent rather than gratifying. Yunho couldn’t even imagine how to love another man, but here he stood, wondering if he remembered the taste of Jaejoong’s mouth or if his mind was toying with the sweetness he’d begun to crave.

Yunho's will stepped in, a small quiet thing finally disgusted with the wavering of Yunho's mind. His hands moved of their own volition, finding the dip of bone where Jae's shoulder blades jutted out, the wings of a fallen angel hidden from the world behind a curtain of worn cotton. Yunho's strong thumbs ran up along the strong lines, tracing the path of Jae's tightly muscled back until he crested over the singer's shoulders, his fingers brushing at Jae's neck where the collar gaped away from his body.

The group's leader told himself to stop... that touching the young singer would be an insanity that he would never be able to cure but the images of Yoochun's mouth on Jae's side, the shirt now under his own hands, wet with Micky's spit. The sight of the large damp spot marking Jaejoong as Yoochun's, a primal symbol that rankled Yunho's rage. He wanted to tear the shirt from Jaejoong's body, letting the singer stand naked before him until ... Yunho pushed away those thoughts, his mind clouding at the ravenous possibilities his sins cast into his thoughts.

The lean singer hissed, closing his eyes at the simple pleasure of feeling Yunho's hands explore his bared flesh, his throat closing around the protests rolling up from his anguish. He knew he should push the other man away but a seductive languor filled him, slowly chewing apart his resolve. A single half step would bring him fully up against Yunho's strong body. He knew he fit right into the curve of the leader's hips, something in his gut told him that no one else would ever mold to Yunho's body like he could. The tiled floor seemed a widening chasm, nearly impossible to cross, Jae stymied with the fear of seeing a cold rejection in the other man's eyes if he turned around.

Yunho's hands on his shoulder made that decision for him, his body being gently led to the side until Jaejoong found his eyes filled with the handsome face of the one who could hurt him like no other. Yunho's tongue darted out, moistening the leader's lips, a dryness in his throat that seemed to spread though his entire body.

Does he touch you like this? Does Yoochun make you pant like you're panting now?; the leader thought to himself, his words tight against the roof of his mouth. Yunho's fingers found the barbell under Jaejoong's shirt, the nipple pulsing beneath the leader's insistent touch.

"Don't..." Jaejoong wanted to move away, every nerve in his being told him to separate himself from the danger of Yunho's touch but the brutality of his desires assaulted him, the longing for a effortless stroke of Yunho's palm over him outweighed any common sense that he might have had within him. "I need you to stop this."

The unshed tears of his hindered suffering shimmered along the curve of Jae's lashes, a glittered dew born of a heartache he'd locked away when he left his desire in Yunho's hands. Those same hands now touched him anew, discovering the dip of bone above his chest then the strong column of his throat, stroking at the softness under Jae's chin.

The press of Yunho's thumbs moved up, his palms cupping Jaejoong's delicate face. "Answer me, Joongie-ah. Why do you tremble when I just touch you?"

"I've wondered if I do this to you. Like you do to me." Yunho's eyes narrowed, a simmering disgust at his weakness in his gaze. "I hate that you make me...want you. I hate that every time I close my eyes, you're there and I just want to dig my hands into you until your bones break beneath me. And when I think like that, I can't stop wanting... something from you."

"You told Changmin that a single moment should be enough. And maybe you're right in that." Yunho dipped his head down, licking at the fullness of the singer's parted mouth. Just a brush of his tongue, hopefully enough to rid himself of the need for the young man that haunted his waking dreams. "Get out of my thoughts, Jaejoong. I need you out of my head."

"Then leave me alone." Jaejoong put his hands on Yunho's chest, pushing him away. The space between them widened, a canyon of hurt bridged by a few words of corporeal longing. "I can't do this...I can't have you come to me wanting ...and then turning away from me again. You'll undo me. You'll break me. I've come too far to let you shatter what is left of who I am, Yunho."

"I want to leave you alone." Yunho's fists slammed into the counter, rattling the chopping board. His arms straddled Jaejoong, trapping him against the flat edging. "Do you think I want this? You're like a disease that is creeping under my skin and no matter how much I try to dig it out, I can't get rid of the sores that you leave behind."

"I don't know how to love another man. I don't want to learn how." Yunho snarled, his mouth nearly brushing Jaejoong's lips. Shock fought a path through Jae's beauty, his face a veil of trembling control. He wanted nothing like he wanted the mouth just within a finger-breadth from his own, the tang of the other man's tongue a fond memory of his dreams. "I think I just need to work you out of my system, Jaejoong. Then I'll be able to walk away and have my life back. I need that."

“You can’t have that. Not from me.” Jaejoong bit back at the trembling in his lower lip, the coppery stain of his own blood in the back of his throat. “I won’t be something that you use to wipe your desires with, Yunho. I am worth more than that. Even if you don’t think so, I *know* am worth more than that.”

Thirteen

Changmin spotted Jaejoong's memorable form slouched in a high-backed chair in the corner of the coffee shop. A mug sat cooling on a table nearby, the remains of a decimated brownie corpse lying helpless on a white plate, the raspberry jam between the two cake layers smeared over the moist brown sponge. Jae's fingers picked at the curve of the cup, his beauty stilled as he lost himself in thought. A couple of young women giggled at the counter, their eyes drawn towards the lean-bodied singer. Changmin grinned to himself, grabbing at the paper cup of tea he'd ordered and strolled over to Jae, nudging the singer's long leg with his foot.

"Hyung, I didn't expect to see you here." Min took a chair from an empty table nearby, turning it around and straddling the seat.

"Min." Jae's face lost all semblance of vulnerability, an amiable silver mask falling into place around the troubled soul in his eyes. "Aren't you with your mother today? Did you lose her or did someone finally see her beauty and steal her from you?"

"She's visiting with a lawyer near here. I didn't feel like sitting in the office and waiting. I would rather be bored with a cup of tea in my hand but then I find you...so boredom is far away." Min sipped lightly at the hot tea, careful not to burn his tongue on the scalding herbal blend. Seeing Jae at the coffee shop wasn't much of a surprise, it was a place they often went to after practicing themselves into a frenzied exhaustion. Seeing Jae here alone and contemplative wasn't something Changmin had ever expected.

Min regarded the other singer with an assessing eye. The coldness he'd first seen on Jae's face had slowly become just a veil the singer put over his visage to protect himself. Beneath the untouchable beauty, a delicate heart beat, surrounded by a barbed wire fence hammered into existence from a life on the street. The group's lead singer was a puzzle, a myriad of intersection lines that shifted as he moved, sometimes stilling long enough to see the landscape hidden within...a sight that thrilled Changmin each time Jae opened up just a bit to him.

“Trouble sits on your heart and laughs at the snow.” Min reached over, touching his fingers lightly on the other’s arm. “What’s wrong, hyung? Or do I need to ask?”

“Yunho.” Jae made a face, wrinkling his nose and capturing the tip of his pink tongue between his teeth, peeling back his lips in a demonic, silly disgust. “Isn’t it always Yunho?”

“Ah, in that case, I should ask what has he done wrong now?” The youngest singer moved the chair closer, a light scraping sound of wood on tile. He wanted to tighten the space between them, shunting off the noise of the outside world, hoping that the intimacy would encourage the enigmatic singer to share what he felt.

“You are too young to be having these conversations, Minnie-ah.” Jaejoong’s smile warmed his face but did not creep into his eyes, a dark storm of uncertainty. “I think I’m too young to have these conversations.”

“Jaejoong, so many people say that and yet, I still have conversations.” Changmin pointed out. “Even if I can’t give you advice on what to do, it might help just to talk about it. We’ve spoken about him before.”

“True... I just feel as if I’m going round and round in circles... talking to a wall that moves in front of me.” Jae nodded, his teeth once again finding the rise of his bottom lip. Sighing deeply, he said. “Yunho is driving me crazy. He pushes me away and then, when I have found some balance, he pulls me back towards him.”

“Hardly fair.” Changmin turned the mug handle towards Jae, encouraging the singer to pick up the coffee and sip at its creamy strength. The chill from outside whiffed in through the wide doors as customers came and went, carrying the kiss of winter with them inside. The coffee was still nearly hot, warm enough to make its way to Jaejoong’s belly where it would do some good. “So what happened?”

“He almost kissed me.” Such a small confession, whispered into the steaming mists of a coffee going cold but still potent enough to steal the breath from Changmin’s chest. “His tongue... just the tip of it touched at my mouth and when he pulled away, everything that I tried to forget about him came flooding back in, filling me and stretching me out. If he put his fingers inside of me, I don’t think I could have felt more...invaded...or satisfied...from an almost-kiss.”

“Almost kissed?” The youngest singer squeaked, nearly dropping his tea. “What happened to make him stop? Why didn’t he just kiss you?”

"I didn't want him to." Jaejoong nodded at Changmin's open mouthed stare. "Well, I wanted to but... he was going to kiss me for all the wrong reasons. Never any of the right ones."

"There's a wrong reason? Is there ever a wrong reason for the right kiss?" Min's brain buzzed, trying to formulate the possibilities of Yunho's attraction to the eldest singer in the group. "I *must* be too young...I don't understand any of this."

"He tries to make me...less. He wants to take what I am and folds me into something pretty he can touch then toss away." Jaejoong's shrug was heavy, carrying the weight of his grief on his shoulders. "Yunho said that he just wanted to take what he needed and walk away from me, hoping that anything he felt would just wisp away."

"But suppose he kissed you and discovered that he needs you?" Changmin dropped his voice, keeping the volume low. What happened inside of the group stayed there, an unspoken commitment they all shared. "Wouldn't that be a reason that is right enough?"

"He wouldn't...he won't." The lead singer refuted, burrowing down further into the chair. "He would walk away and then come back, each time swearing that it would be the last time he came to me and I would spend all of my time swearing that I would turn him away the next time he knocked on my door. But there would never be a time that I could shut him out...and I would be miserable, doubting if I even deserve the small scraps of his touch."

"I want to believe that Yunho loving me for one precious minute in every day should be enough. Shouldn't I be happy with that? I've not had that before...and it should be enough...for someone like me. I've never been loved...even that briefly...but my soul..." Jaejoong's words trailed off, a poignant dip into his grief. "My soul knows that all it would mean is that I sit crying for the other minutes when my heart is broken. I can't live like that. I keep telling him that... that I couldn't live like that. I'm not sure he hears me. I'm not sure he wants to hear me."

"Where did you leave it then? Did he tell you he was going to think about it?" Changmin whispered, seeing his mother's silhouette on the picture window of the shop. He hoped she would give him some time...hopefully noticing the close proximity of his bent body to Jae's misery...but Changmin couldn't take that chance. Jae was skilled at obscuring his thoughts, often feinting someone's attention away with a nonsensical phrase or coy smile.

“He didn’t say anything. I didn’t give him time to. I left him standing there in the kitchen.” Jaejoong replied.

“I didn’t even put the food away...the rice was cooking and the vegetables unchopped. I’m pretty certain that I hadn’t taken out any of the meat. It would be rotten by the time I got home if I did.” The singer continued, finding the edges of the brownie again with a poke of his fingers. “I told him I was going to the studio to practice and not to wait up. I’m not sure what makes me more of a coward, running away when he presses me or not willing to let him take what he wants and be happy with it.”

“You shouldn’t... don’t accept that you should only get what someone gives you in the spare time he has.” Changmin’s fingers ached to run his hand over Jae’s shoulders, anything to give comfort to the older man. Their relationship was not close enough for that intimacy, a familiarity very few could claim with the mercurial singer. Still, Changmin knew Jae was fond of him, protective of the young man he liked to call his young brother, a fierceness Jaejoong often showed when they were surrounded by pushing crowds and shouting throngs.

Jaejoong spotted Changmin’s mother, his hand automatically lifting in a greeting as the woman spotted him through the crowd. The private Jae, the one Changmin rarely saw, dove back down into the pretty faced, charismatic singer who enchanted women with his shyness. The woman waved back, a cheerful motion that reminded Jae of her son, her legs crossing her over to where they sat.

Sighing in resignation, Changmin stood and grinned down at Jaejoong, placing a hand on the sloe-eyed singer’s shoulder. “Don’t get up. We have to go to a dinner and if she sits down to talk to you, we’ll never get there. I think my mother is half in love with you.”

Jaejoong muttered darkly, his face flushed with embarrassment. “Well, I’m glad someone is.”

Yoochun thought he couldn’t have been more surprised when he came home and discovered Junsu’s things back in their room, a smattering of clothes piled neatly on the bed farthest from the window. Linens were changed, even the tiny stuffed bunny they’d won at a carnival a few months back, its button-eyes sewed on crooked, sat back in its traditional place...resting against Junsu’s pillow. Su had picked through the rows of toys, having cheered Micky on during the hoop game, before finally pulling out a lavender furred rabbit, one of its unkempt ears

flopping over a chipped blue plastic eye. An imperfectly sown toy amid yards of cute cuddly puppies, Junsu's heart melted for the sad-faced rabbit, plucking it from its exile. The vocalist called it their child, cheerfully singing it a lullaby every once in a while before going to bed, an excuse he said, to practice his range.

Micky believed Junsu just loved singing to the rabbit.

The room wasn't as he and Junsu had it before, more care had been taken in placing objects around the beds, a clothes basket full of Su's soccer jerseys sitting at the far end of the room. A dresser drawer had been left ajar, round balls of socks folded in on themselves, the ends tucked over. The sheets smelled clean, a lime green spring hue festooned with small dots of dark red. Junsu's comforter was missing but the room looked familiar, comforting despite its lack.

As Yoochun turned around, he discovered he actually could be more surprised...Yunho walked through the bedroom door carrying Junsu's worn bedcovers and a stack of feather pillows, their cases matching the soft cotton sheets.

"Hello..." Micky was at a loss, unsure as to what he would ask first. Was Yunho there to punch him or had Junsu pushed to return back to their shared room. Amid the many questions that rose to the surface, one stuck out plainly. A discomfiting thought occurred to him... the lack of their adored but feral singer. "Where's Jaejoong?"

"He said he wanted to go practice the routine. I think he's still at the studio." Yunho bent over, dumping the pillows into the clothes basket before flipping the coverlet out, letting the wave of fabric and batting drift over the bed. He busied himself with adjusting the lines of the comforter, aligning the seamed edges with the side of the mattress below. "Where's Junsu?"

"Junnie-ah said that he's going to meet his aunt then we were going to a club. I just came back to drop off the pastries I promised Jaejoong I'd pick up." Micky glanced around the room, wondering where Yunho planned to put another bed then finally noticing Jae's things were missing. "Yunnie-ah..."

"I put Jaejoong back in the other room." Yunho pulled at the hem of the comforter, not happy with the lay of the cover. He fussed with it, a perfectionist in all details.

“Why?” Micky asked, drawling out the word on his tongue. Having Junsu back where he belonged definitely brought a thrill to his spine but his worry for the chaotic singer spiked, concern drawing a fine line in his thoughts.

“I want things to go back to being how they were...before.” Yunho’s voice cracked, dipping deep into the well of untapped, dark emotion he’d nursed since the night he found Jaejoong dancing breathlessly on the steel catwalk of the underground club. “Yoochun, I *need* things to be how they were...”

Micky thought he had been waiting for Jaejoong to finally fold in on himself, the fractures of his control shattering apart his sanity but in that moment, Yoochun realized that it was the group’s leader who in fact had been struck raw by the torment between the two singers. Pain was...unlovely, Micky decided, seeing the angry flush work through Yunho’s face, spilling sobs up into the singer’s throat where he caught it on the back of his tongue.

Jaejoong’s words were razors, cutting deep with sharp, hot edges, peeling back thin layers of Yunho’s soul and rubbing in the fine salted grains of the leader’s unshed tears. The cuts bled now, tendrils of his life seeping from the minute slashes, a single tear drop welling in the corner of Yunho’s right eye. The water trembled, refusing to tumble free lest it open the torrential flood of emotion Yunho dammed up inside of him. His body drew its last final vestige of strength, willing itself not to give in to the machinations of its heart.

It fell, sliding free from its prison of lashes and determination. The drop wove down the rise of Yunho’s cheekbone, leaving a slalomed wake of silver on his tanned skin. Another followed, more willing and daring to brave the harshness of the terrain, skin left untouched by runnels of tears. The taste of his anguish cupped over on the leader’s mouth, swiftly easing between the pressed cage of his lips, working into the flat of his tongue, more insistent and damaging than any taste of Jaejoong that might still be there.

“I don’t want you touching him...not anymore.” Yunho bit back another onslaught of tears, turning away from Yoochun, not wanting the other to see him in pain. Anger and jealousy raged inside of each tear, searing away at his heated skin. “I see you with him...and I want to... I want to take you and break you apart. And that’s worse than...my wanting him. Because you’re my friend...and I love you. Why is it so easy to say that to you and not to him?”

"It isn't like that between us. What's between you and I isn't what is there between the two of you." Yoochun sat on the corner of his bed, shifting aside the collection of pillows spilled over his mattress. "Yunnie-ah, Joongie and I are...friends...the best of friends...brothers, even. Please, understand that."

"I stole his mattress off of the bed he slept on before Junsu moved into the room." Yunho paced along the rug, his bare feet rumpling the fibres. "Did you know that? Changmin probably saw me pulling it over onto the frame of my bed and thought I was going insane. But I wanted...him underneath me. I wanted to be able to touch where he slept...so I could feel just that smallest bit of him...so I could fall asleep at night with the scent of him in my lungs."

Yunho slid onto Junsu's bed, his legs giving out from under him. His tears leaked slowly, running down over his chin and falling onto his clenched together fists. The wetness pearled between the creases on the mons of his thumb pad, threading down into the fold of his palms. A brackish stigmata welled in his hands, a stain on the shroud of his misery.

"His face lights up when you're around him." Yunho repeatedly cut back his sobs, biting on the inside of his cheek. The aftertaste of his tears drowned out any hint of blood in his mouth, a stinging reminder of how deep his anguish dug its talons into him. "And it kills me...it's like every time he smiles, it's a knife inside of my gut. And it's worse when he laughs."

"Not that soft giggle he uses when he's only a little bit happy but that throaty purr... those times when his laughter comes from his open mouth and all I can think about is wanting to hold him so I can feel his body shake with it." The young man rubbed at his face, trying to scrub the want of Jaejoong from his skin, the desire coming up through his pores and sinking back in through the lines of his hands. "It's making me crazy, Chunnie-ah."

"I want him to look like that when he's around me." Yunho said as Yoochun leaned forward, his fingers gripping into Yunho's thigh. The leader's voice continued to crumble, gravel on whiskey velvet. "I am tired of being jealous...and I don't want to be jealous of you. But I am. I am crazy ...angry ...jealous that he looks at you and not me. That he talks to you and ducks his head down near yours to whisper something in your ear, even if it's to tell you to shut up."

“Those are your things, Yunho, your smiles and laughs. I am just keeping them for you until you are ready to hold them for yourself.” Micky moved over to the other bed, tugging at the young man with a swoop of his arm. Leaning in, Yoochun hugged the other tightly, resting his temple against Yunho’s bowed head. “Jaejoong would give you his heart if you wanted it. He would give you his life.”

“He won’t.” A shake of his head and Yunho hissed out a single breath, trapped in the mire of the words he tossed into Jae’s face. “I told him ... I just wanted him out of my blood. He’s in deep... like he’s a part of me that I can’t get out.”

His control strengthened, the elder singer leaning back into Yoochun’s loose embrace. The sting of tears lessened, still a very real threat as Yunho scraped back the scrum of his feelings, hoping to find something he could hold onto. “He wanted just one kiss, and it was... nothing like I ever even imagined my mind could feel. Then when I realized that here was this...man...and he was making me hard just by putting his mouth on mine, I panicked.”

“There is so much... the group is so important to me...and my family.” Yunho said haltingly. “Being with Jaejoong would jeopardize that, I think. I can’t... you know how family is here. Do you think that my family would accept Jaejoong in my life? Do you think we could go on as a group? How do I have him and lose everything else? How do I ask him to lose those things?”

“I think you can be with Joongie-ah if you want to. I think that loving anyone should be possible, even if it is another man.” Yoochun stared into Yunho’s teary eyes, his own face wet with emotion. “I have to believe that we can. Not just for your sake...but for mine.”

“They’ve tried to separate us before and it failed.” Micky continued, his own unspoken feelings haunting him. “The world wants us all together, we know that. We are destiny, Yunho. However silly that sounds, I know it to be true.”

“Then how do I fix this, Chunnie-ah? How do I have him with me...convince him to let me try this? And how do I stop being afraid of it all?” Yunho straightened his torso, working the kinks out of his spine. The spent tears drained him, his chest heavy and thick. “And if I try... this sin with Jaejoong, because it is a sin...Yoochun...will I be damned for it?”

“It’s only a sin to people who close their minds off and harden their hearts.” The younger man brushed his hand against the lavender bunny resting quietly in its nest of pillows. “Can you tell me that loving Jaejoong would be a burden on you? Isn’t he someone that you should cherish and never let go? I love him just for knowing him as a friend. He’s generous with his heart and affections, even just to a friend. If I were in love with him and he with me... I would never ever want him to be apart from me.”

“I know I don’t.” Yunho’s jaw throbbed, his teeth set tight against one another. “And I hate that he can do this to me just by breathing. I’m terrified of how I feel when I’m near him but I also can’t help but feel...happy. Even when he’s crying because of me, all I can think is...how pretty he is when he’s crying. How beautiful is that face.”

“You do this to him as well, Yunnies-ah.” Micky pointed out. “He has as much to lose as you do and is willing to risk it...just for you...because he thinks you are worth the danger to his dreams.”

“I think he is important to me...to my dreams. I turned around and found him staring back at me from my dreams...in the middle of everything I’ve ever wanted, I find someone there that I could never imagine having.” A final gasping whisper...a softly spoken truth exposed before a button-eyed bunny and a dear friend who asked no apology... shook Yunho to the core. “Chunnies-ah, I think I am in love with Kim Jaejoong.”

Fourteen

The sound of his key in the apartment door lock worked a nerve in Jaejoong's forehead, a slight pounding of a headache threatening the edges of his vision. Sconces lit the outer hallway, a length of corridor wrapping around the side of the building, trapped behind frosted over glass. Letting himself through the door, Jae stood for a moment in the frame, girding up his strength to face Yunho inside. A sickness bloomed inside of his belly, the parasitical need for Yunho pressing against him.

"I'll have to give everything up." Jaejoong pondered his options. The group was truly the only thing he had left in his life. With his family still estranged, his world had become the other four, a support system that he never imagined he would be able to embrace. "I need to get some distance from him. This isn't fair to the others...they shouldn't have to live in the middle of this madness."

Jaejoong was accustomed to madness, having drank deeply at its river, drenching his weary body in its water in the hopes of washing away some of his sins. His dream-shaken nights still held the faces of horror, leering faces of rough-faced men when he worked tables down in the Itaewon district, groping hands grabbing at his ass or crotch, hard fingers digging into tender flesh. Jae knew that touch...that creeping insidious feeling of another's unwanted sweat on his skin and the thought sickened him. He didn't want to give Yunho that sensation...didn't want to press the young man with his attentions if Yunho truly did not want him...despite the confession of desire.

Jaejoong knew about desire...an intimate knowledge of singular want clouding the mind until everything became a kaleidoscope haze. His skin crawled with memories, both wicked and sinfully delightful. Jaejoong wanted Yunho's hands to rub at the stains of others reaching for him, erasing the greasy fingerprints they left on his being. He'd never succumbed to any of the unwanted advances forced up on him... a few frightening instances when the singer believed that he would not survive the night unscathed and whole...perhaps not even surviving at all.

Now, on his feet and stumbling towards the dream that kept him awake at night, he saw another glimmer of happiness fading in the distance... the possibility that he would lose both the band and Yunho.

A soft ballad hummed through the living room, the lights down low, as if setting a twilight behind the clouded windows. Winter stormed outside, the snow picking up its fury. Walking into the kitchen, Jae noticed the vegetables he'd abandoned on the counter had been put away, the surfaces wiped down with a sponge and the chopping board draining on the wire rack. Someone...probably Yunho... washed and clean the knife, wiping it down and sliding it back into place in the block.

"I left the rice in the cooker." Yunho startled Jaejoong, a slender strength leaning on the wall of the hallway towards their bedrooms. "It's cold enough that the rice won't go bad...I don't think."

"No. It should be fine, I think." Jae agreed, his words stiff. The roller coaster ride of emotions left him too tired to fight, much too tired to even do anything other than sleep off the exhaustion riding his bones. Yunho standing there was too much of an obstacle for his aching blood and the singer wondered if he could make it past the young man without breaking down into a flood of tears.

You'll be fine, Kim." Jaejoong scolded himself, pulling on the steely grit he had in his soul. *Just make it past the hallway and you can just fall asleep...leave all of this outside, behind you. Look at things tomorrow morning.*

"If you're looking for your things, they're in the bedroom...our bedroom." Yunho's eyes closed as Jaejoong brushed past him, shoulders barely skimming one another.

The intensity of the singer's body inflamed him, the scent of his musky skin thickening the softness between Yunho's thighs. Cupped up against his body, his arousal twitched, a firming Yunho forced aside. If he was going to examine his feelings towards the lead vocalist, he would have to do so without the lust hovering in his throat, Jaejoong's insistence for respect an echoing refrain in his ears.

"What? Why?" With a turn of his shoulder, Jaejoong looked back at the leader, his pretty mouth twisted with suspicion. There was a sulk on Yunho's mouth, the remains of a sour expression washed clean with something... delicious, Jae thought. "Did Junsu say something to Yoochun? Are they...?"

"No, neither one of them said anything." Yunho spun slowly, taking his time walking up to Jae. "It seemed like what was necessary... it was the right thing to do."

"I need to talk to you Jaejoong." He continued, his hands tucked deep into the pockets of his loose cotton pants. The emptiness of the apartment ricocheted the slightest sounds back onto them, Jae's inhaled breath a loud inflammation of suspense. "Please, Joongie-ah... we need to talk about...us."

"There is no us, Yunho." With a cock of his head, Jaejoong glanced into the bedroom he'd shared with Changmin and the group's leader. His cherished sweatshirt lay on the smooth sleek of his blankets, a grungy stained garment that held each beat of his heart. A graveyard of things lost to him, fabric ghosts haunting his life. "You had a choice...you made that choice."

"You didn't give me enough time." Yunho suddenly was beside him, nearly inside of him. The air, warmed first by Yunho's mouth, drifted into Jae's lungs, the scent of the leader's erotically flushed skin pushing into Jaejoong's senses. "I... please, we need to sit down and talk."

"Not in the bedroom. I haven't decided if I'm staying in there with you." Jaejoong turned away, trying to drive the image of himself under the leader's exploring hands from his mind. "The living area, that should be fine to talk."

Where others touched with gluttonous lust, Jaejoong ached for the simple exploration of a nubile lover's tongue, a wet tip finding the rise on his throat, feeling the movement of his eyes beneath closed lids. Jae rubbed at his arms, trying to feel the remnants of Yunho's touch on his forearms, the bruises left by angry fingers faded through the time they'd spent avoiding one another's gaze.

Yunho followed Jaejoong, watching the predatorily sensual stalk of his long legs eat up the length of the hallway, moving quickly to escape the closeness of their bodies. His mind still fought a war...an epic battle of familial obligations and cultural stigmas. The only weapon his heart could arm itself with was the softness of Jaejoong's lips and the sweet, adoring smile of coy sex wrapped around the singer's angelic face. Yunho feared for his heart, forging onto a battlefield it was little prepared for, entering into a conflict that could destroy him forever.

"Do you want some tea?" Yunho asked, wondering if he could his hands steady enough to measure out leaves and fill the tea pot.

"No, thank you, Yunho." A brittle politeness from Jaejoong. "It's late. I don't want anything but a shower and some sleep. Provided I can find my bed."

Can I afford to lose this creature that shakes me? Can I lose you and keep everything else? Yunho asked of himself, the thoughts of his family's disappointment in him strong in his mind. *But can I afford to have this? What will doing this ...wanting you...do to me?*

His path in life was so simple, one etched in stone by centuries of a culture that prided itself on its elegance and dignity. Yunho had thrown over convention by turning his back on his parents' desires to see him take up a more sedate life, one not ruled by hours of dancing and singing. His dreams led him to a spotlight on the stage, broad swaths of black-drenched arenas filled with the screams of people calling his name. Could he ask the people who nursed him into adulthood to turn their faces toward the pretty and wild Jaejoong, calling him son of their heart? Or was he too late to coax Jaejoong into giving him a single change to explore his affections.

Jaejoong worked himself down into the corner of the soft-sided crimson sofa, its throw pillows a riot of woven rainbows. The singer's trim figure gleamed, a pure winter kiss on a sea of blood velvet. He'd shed the thick parka he wore, slung over the back of a side chair. The puffy down jacket held the perfume of the icy night, a black blueness that reminded Yunho of Jaejoong's soft hair. A peek of the singer's chest slid out from under his partially undone shirt, a string of pearl buttons unhooked from their holes. A faint inky purple belled the ridges of Jaejoong's expressive eyes, ruins of sleep fallen on his pretty face.

It would be a sight that Yunho would carry with him forever, a snapshot of that moment in life when he would either know happiness or misery. He would be sure to remember...always remember the plumpness of Jaejoong's mouth, a gift of sinful seduction on the package of demure innocence. Yunho sat down on the other end of the couch, wondering what to do with his hands.

They should be in his hair, wrapped around tight until his head is forced towards yours. Yunho's darkness whispered, firming his awakening flesh. *Will his mouth open wider if his head is leaned back? Would his tongue be moist against your own or does his mouth dry at the thought of you? Did he catch a snowflake in his mouth and will you still taste it there?*

Concentrating, Yunho wiped his moist hands on his thighs, hoping the cotton would absorb his nervousness. Jae's expression, hooded and wary, burned a stream of regret through Yunho's guts. The tension in the other's body was clear, any trust the leader might have had with Jaejoong now lay in the gutters of their arguments.

"I made the decision to move you back... put you back to where you belonged. No one else." Yunho braced himself for the onslaught of Jaejoong's anger at being manipulated into a corner. The lead singer wasn't known for his tolerance of interference... a fierce streak of independence nearly as wide as his stubbornness.

"Why did you move my things back into the room? Suppose I don't want to be moved?" Yunho's words flattened Jaejoong's apprehension, the singer working at the puzzle of the leader's actions. He'd been expecting to come back to the apartment and find his things outside in the cold, a call on his cell phone from SM saying that he would be removed from the group's dynamic. Never did Jaejoong imagine that he would return to his own private hell and discover his place near Yunho restored to him. "I'm trying to manage this... thing that's between us. Being in that room... I can't deal with it there."

"I don't want it managed. I don't want it dealt with." Yunho looked up from the contemplation of his own hands, his knuckles white from his fingers clutched tight on his knees. "I want it...explored. I want to see how you taste. Everywhere. Just a taste."

"No." A single word.. that final slicing cut to Yunho's soul...slivered apart his grief...the final blow to his heart. "You want nothing more than... something moist to slide yourself into, leaving a wet sticky mess inside of my body. If I wanted that, I could get that anywhere...from anyone who didn't mind that there was a cock between my legs."

"That isn't..." Yunho began, cut off when Jaejoong interrupted.

"I'm not some dirty hole you can get relief from, Yunho." The singer's coarseness, bred sharp and cunning from the years spent struggling on the street, welded a powerful punch to Yunho's guts. "Every thrust you will give my body with your blunted cock or tongue will be a hot knife into me. Can't you understand that? Can't you just see that? Why do you have to be so selfish in your wants? Don't I mean any small thing to you that you'd want me to survive you?"

"Let me finish...just hear me out." The leader asked, shifting his body closer to the young singer, the couch cushions dimpling under his weight. His heart pounded hard, a thumping menace in his ears. "Just a few minutes...and then you can decide what you want to do. I promise I'll live with anything you decide."

“Alright, I’ll listen.” Jaejoong nodded once. He knew in the depths of his soul that the group’s leader would give him one final rejection but he wanted to hear Yunho’s words... perhaps a hint of a plea in that control.

“I found your hoodie when I packed your things from Yoochun’s room.” Yunho thought he saw a diminutive glimmer in Jaejoong’s face, hidden quickly behind his porcelain features. “I saw how grimy it was and wondered again why you kept it.”

“Then I dropped and when I went to pick it up, I noticed my name written on the tag, my mother’s lettering and that black marker she likes using so she knows whose clothes she’s folding.” The leader pressed in, Jaejoong’s body curling tighter in on itself. The young singer pulled up his long legs, hands wrapped around his ankle bones as he leaned into his thighs.

“That jacket was mine. All this time I thought you were just... carting around something that was long past its use because you don’t want to throw anything away. Because you hoard things around you, like a tiny dragon puffing up his territory and hoping no larger dragon will steal your treasures.” Yunho found the back of Jaejoong’s wrist with the tip of his finger, running a light touch on the bump of bone there. “Tell me that you weren’t... tell me that you didn’t keep that because it was mine. Tell me you only wanted it because it was...comfortable or warm...”

“Why do you have to dig into my tears?” Jaejoong hiccupped, gritting his teeth together. “I’ve already told you that I feel for you. How much more do you need, Yunho?”

“I need to know why you didn’t throw that sweat shirt away...after the studio...why didn’t you toss it in the trash like I threw your feelings aside?” Yunho asked, his breath a whispering touch on Jaejoong’s exposed neck.

They nearly were sitting on top of each other, Jaejoong was sure of it despite his seemingly rapt attention on the glass table in front of the couch. Yunho’s persistence wore at him, the feral resolve that gave him strength easily sliding off to the side in response to the leader’s heady presence.

“Because...” Jae stammered, unwilling to give another piece of himself. There were only tatters left, a stitched together rag doll of a broken boy. Each limb dragged heavy, weighted by the rocks tied there by others’ disappointments. Jae thought there was nothing that could compare to

the yearning aloneness he experienced crawling through the streets in the hopes of reaching his dreams.

Jaejoong could deny Yunho nothing. If the leader asked him to pull a dull razor across the tender skin of his inner wrist just to quench Yunho's thirst, Jae would do so without question, even squeezing at his dripping arm to sate the young man's wishes. What more could his addiction want from him? What else could Yunho seize from his soul? An undertone of craving spoke for Jae, a hooked sibilant sting.

"I couldn't... get rid of it. It would kill me...there's so little of you that I can touch." Jae shuttered his eyes tight, closing the world out behind a veil of greyed-in submission. "You are my temptation. You'll be my downfall. When they cut me open and find the remains of my burnt heart, it will hold the image of your face in the sear."

"Ah, Jaejoong..." Yunho's hands finally rose, cupping at the back of the singer's head. That touch shuddered Jae's shoulders, the torment of Yunho's fingers on him. Yunho's cheek pressed in on Jae's forehead, turning to brush a lingering kiss along Jaejoong's jaw line. "If I am your temptation then you're...my sin. I want to drink from that mouth and taste heaven. If there's any sign of God on this world, it's in your mouth... your body...your eyes."

"You said you wanted me out from under your skin..." Jae continued, his mind breaking with Yunho's touch. He briefly wondered why insanity tasted like soiled blood on his hungry soul. Jae's throat found his voice again, straining and struggling to find some sense.

"I do." Yunho admitted, his fingers gripping Jae's black hair as the other attempted to shove away. "No! Stay and listen to me."

"This isn't easy for me...not as easy as it is for you." The group's leader said. "I don't know where you find the strength or courage to turn your back on everything that we've been expected to do in our lives. I struggle with wanting you because I know that you'll undo my convictions... you'll slither into my life with that rolling, sexy walk of yours and I won't be able to explain you to my family...or why I would need to love a man."

"It's easy for me to turn my back because there's no one there for me, Yunnie-ah." Jae chewed on his lip, pulling the flesh along the sharpness of his lower teeth. "My family... knows how I... my father has known for quite some time. My family does not want the only son they had. I left for my dreams...but also because I couldn't live there any more. The day

that my father found... my perversion... he called it... he told me that I would never wake up among family again. Certainly not his own."

"All he could say was that I was an evil cursing his blood." Jaejoong looked up, his chin brushing Yunho's cheek. "You've seen them here... uncomfortable and wondering if I have seduced any of you, turning you into a useless horror that your family won't be able to look at without throwing up in disgust."

"They love you." Yunho shook his head against Jae's words. "I've seen your mother touch your face. They both love you so much."

"They love the son they have in their hearts...not the son that lives in the world. Maybe one day, that son can be one person but that is something that they have to do themselves. I can't change that for them." Jae corrected. "I know what you would lose. That's why I don't...don't bother you. I'm not asking you to love me, Yunho. I told you that."

"But I am asking you to not use me to slake your desires. I feel too much for you. It would be a torture that I couldn't stand." Jaejoong said, the edges of Yunho's hair brushing his mouth. How easy it would be to nibble on the coarse ends, biting off small bits of the leader's locks and swallow them, a stagnant, barren stone resting inside of him. It would be the closest he would be to sliding Yunho into his throat, convulsing around the young man's flesh until it spilled past his tongue, choking him with the saltiness of his seed.

Jaejoong denied himself the taste, wishing the torment of Yunho's closeness would end.

"And see, Joongie-ah..." Yunho's finger found the edge of Jae's chin, gently lifting his face from its burrow of hair. "I'm asking you to give me the chance to... explore how I feel and if I can find the courage to face those rejections. I can't promise you that I'll be strong enough. I just can't. You've made me discover that I'm not as strong as I thought I was."

"I have to try, Jaejoong." Yunho's thumb pushed down on the soft velvet of Jae's mouth, finding the moist triangle divot on his lower lip. His lips found the edges of Jaejoong's, the tip of his tongue darting into the corners.

The hell in his turmoil became a sweet heaven under Jaejoong's parted mouth, his chin canted up as Yunho pushed forward with his affection.

Everything became clearer in that sole drugged sip of Jaejoong's kiss. The world shrunk down, a damp wetness filled with mysteries Yunho's being begged to explore.

The young man's teeth raked across Yunho's investigating tongue, the leader's curiosity leading him to the lick at the back of the pearly enamel. Jaejoong's ardor flared, passion moving his senses and drowning him the other man's savouring taste. A nibble on Yunho's mouth buried another onslaught on Jae's mouth, their tongues mingling and twisting, a Jörmungandr welded together in the heat of their desires.

Jaejoong's lungs exhausted its reserves before his want was sated. Pulling back, his head held captive by Yunho's clenched fists in his hair, the singer placed a firm hand on the leader's chest. His own body heaved with the effort of drawing away, the brush of his fingers finding the length of steeled flesh beneath the cotton of Yunho's pants.

The touch of the other's hard flesh shocked Jaejoong, never having touched another man's desire.. just his own in the safety of a steaming shower or the subterfuge of a heavy blanket in the depths of night when the others breathed slowly in slumber.

"I just wanted a taste... even if you walk away from me right now..." Yunho's words were an echoing refrain of a snowed in pain, the remains of a devastation he'd wrought on the man under his hands. "It will take time...I know it will take time for me to show you that I'm speaking the truth. But please... I'm asking you to give me that chance...even if I can't... give you everything that you want and need."

"I can't promise you anything." Yunho slowly released Jaejoong from his grip, rubbing at the rent in his hair, smoothing down the stygian silken tresses. "My every instinct says that this is wrong between us...and that if that wrong is too much for me to bear... I will have to walk away. I can't risk losing myself in you, Jaejoong. I have too many people who depend on me. The sin of you will test me but I want to try to withstand it. To learn if I have it in me to want you...to maybe love you."

Jaejoong held himself in, the ashen corpse of his love resurrected with a single kiss, a prince breaching the walls of the stone castle he'd erected around himself. Yunho promised nothing...could offer him nothing other than heart ache and the ache of lost dreams.

Swallowing Yunho's kiss, Jaejoong pulled himself free of the other's heat, finding some much needed equilibrium. Committing to the madness raging in his soul and heart, Jaejoong found his mouth shaping

the one word he knew in the depths of his own insanity that he would eventually regret.

A fury of longing battered at Jae, a tempest he could no longer fight against. Still, there would be conditions to this, a negotiation of his willingness to splay himself open to the young man. A push off the couch lengthened the distance he needed from Yunho, searching for any air not already touched by the siren of the Yunho's body. "You are more than my temptation... so damned much more. You'll be the death of me but... yes, I'll give you that. But I won't promise you another if you turn away from me in this and I will kill you if you try after this. You only get one chance to break my heart. No more."

Fifteen

Yoochun hushed the partially giggling Junsu, the other man resting his head on one of the foyer walls. They both had dissolved into fits of laughter in the cab ride home, snorting at nearly everything the other said, much to the disgust of the driver, his narrowed eyes shooting them looks in the rear view mirror. Yoochun could have sworn he passed out from lack of air when Junsu did an impression of BoA, trying to reach a note in her song that instead, slid over into an aria that only a dog could hear.

They overpaid the cabbie, sure that he would spend the night driving around and muttering about silly young men he picked up at a club, their clothes reeking of cigarettes and their minds filthy from laughter. It had taken Yoochun four times before he was able to slid his key into the lock, nearly snapping it in two when he turned it the wrong way. Junsu was no help, his arms finding their way around Micky's waist, a mumbling protest that air was just too heavy on his shoulders and wouldn't Yoochun just please help him hold it up.

Their progress through the apartment was steady, a round of hissing, shushing noises then a misplaced guffaw, muffled with fumbling fingers over wide mouths. A small snore from the broad, red couch in the living area froze the two friends in place, Yoochun fumbling for the light to the hallway, turning the dimmer until a low ambient glaze washed over the muted seagrass paint. Another noise, raw and masculine, then a flung arm as Yunho twisted to lie on his back, a thin blanket cast over his hips and tangling down around his legs.

"So.." Junsu peered out from around the larger young man, staring at a sleeping Yunho. A spill of throw pillows littered the floor, shaded lumps tossing shadow ogres against the rug on the floor. "I am guessing that they didn't kiss and make up."

"There aren't any bruises on his face." Yoochun tried to see through the shadows under Yunho's arm, a slumberous veil hiding his features, looking for any telltale marks of Jaejoong's anger.

"If Jaejoong were mad, he'd hit Yunnies in the balls and then kick him in the stomach." Junsu clutched at his own belly in sympathy. "He

wouldn't leave any marks that the makeup artist would have to cover up. He's very considerate."

Yoochun waited until opened the door at the end of the hall, turning off the lights when the other singer made it into their bedroom. Holding the wall, his balance slightly impaired by rounds of rum and Coke followed by a lack of oxygen from laughing too hard, Micky walked steadily, following the ridge of the chair molding. Junsu flicked on the lamp between their beds, falling backwards onto his pillows, glad to be back in the tight womb he shared with Yoochun.

Tugging at the soft plush under his neck, Junsu pulled his lavender rabbit out from under him, setting the toy on his chest. Sighing in happiness, the young singer looked about the room, a wide grin over his happy face. Things were oddly different, a welcome hang of clothes on a chair... his own stack of sports magazines on the end table on the other side of his bed. A pair of slippers peeked out from Yoochun's bedskirt, a floppy worn blue terrycloth end winking from its hiding place. Everything was as it should be... the nights would once again be filled with whispers and shared secrets.

"It's nice that things are back to how they should be." Junsu sighed again, lifting his head to stare at Yoochun standing in the doorway. "What?"

"The light is on across the hall." Micky glanced over his shoulder, nodding with his chin towards the other bedroom. He really wanted nothing more than to perhaps take a shower and then lay down in his bed, listening to Junsu ramble until he finally nodded off, laughter slowly working free from his voice as sleep filled the singer in the bed next to him. A twinge of responsibility echoed, the thought of his young friend lying in an empty room with Jae's thoughts prodding at the guilt of wanting Yunho. "Joongie-ah is still awake."

"He might have fallen asleep with the light on." Junsu reasoned, turning to rest on one elbow. His other hand ruffled at his mane of hair, trying to get the feel of sticky gel from the strands. "Or you could go check on him. Maybe turn it off or get lost in an hour or so of talking."

"I could go check on him but not more than an hour of talking." Yoochun agreed, sniffing at his shirt. The night clung to the weave, a motley collection of odors reeking of sweat and clandestine adventures. "Then I think I should shower before I go to bed."

“You go talk to him.. and I know you, you’re going to be there until he falls asleep. I ...however...I’m going to bathe. Take a nice long hot shower... no one banging on the door and yelling at me to hurry up.” The singer stretched his arms over his head, sitting up before working his shirt from his lean body. “Maybe I’ll use up all the hot water too.”

“You better not.” Micky warned him. “I’ll drag you from the shower if I have to. I stink.”

“Maybe I won’t let you.” Junsu teased, his grin wicked and a gleam in his eye. “I might share the shower though. If you’re nice to me.”

Micky’s knock on the door went unanswered, no lilting response from the lead singer. Slowly cracking the door open, Yoochun peeked in, staring at a long-bodied Jaejoong lying prone on his bed, his comely face turned towards the window cut high in the wall. A pair of headphones covered his ears, shutting the world out with a barrage of song, the gentle thump of electronica seeping out of the pads. Jae’s fisted hand rested on his mouth, his lips parted against a knuckle, eyes lost in a thoughtful stare at the night just beyond the glass.

Yoochun’s weight on the bed startled the singer, his body jerking tight. Jaejoong sat up, scrambling back to lean against the corner of the room, nearly kicking the taller singer in the leg. Chuckling, Yoochun slid back, waiting for his restless friend to settle down. With the wall supporting him, Jaejoong shook his head at Micky’s intrusion, sliding the headphones off of his head, resting them in his lap. A flick of his nimble fingers paused the music player, a splash of red on the piles of white pillows Jaejoong nested against as he slept.

“I think you made me swallow my tongue.” Jaejoong accused his friend, swallowing hard at the pounding in his throat.

For a moment, he’d thought the weight on his bed was Yunho and he dreaded having to wrestle with his desires. The lead singer knew he wouldn’t be able to turn the other away, wanting the feel of Yunho’s hands on his body. There were parts of him that ached, needed the insistent feel of the leader’s fingers on him... in him. He’d had more than his share of lewd proposals, a slithering dirty whisper in the cup of his ear as fingers pushed at the waistband of his jeans. Those touches always made Jaejoong feel as if he could never wash the filth from his soul. Yunho’s stroking at him felt different, a fresh warmth spooling into his belly. It was that promise...that seductive purr of a touch.. that drove Jaejoong to risk his heart once more on Yunho’s flickering needs.

“You don’t have any bruises on you either.” Micky lightly grabbed at his friend’s chin, turning Jae’s face so the light filled in the hollows under his dark, luminous eyes.

“I can’t talk with you smushing my face.” Jae mumbled past Yoochun’s pressing fingers. Micky released him, hooking his arm over the singer’s shoulders, pulling him to a hug. They sat there for a time, resting their weary bodies on one another’s strength. Jaejoong caught a whiff of Micky’s shirt, wrinkling his nose at the smell. “You stink.”

“That’s what I told Junsu. I didn’t think you’d mind.” Micky held the shirt to his nose, plucking at it with his fingers.

“No, it’s fine. God knows I’ve come in smelling worse.” Jaejoong recalled the night he stumbled into the apartment, bruises left by Yunho’s fingers spread over his upper arm. “He kissed me tonight, Yoochun, and it was all I could do not to melt under him. “Fuck, I want him so much.”

“He kissed you, huh?” Yoochun grinned amid the brush of Jaejoong’s hair. “And now he’s sleeping on the couch?”

“We both agreed that would be best.” Jae nodded, burying his cheek into his friend’s chest, listening to Yoochun’s heart beat beneath his ribcage. “Well I agreed. He came up with it.”

“Did you like the kiss?” Micky asked, curious about Jae’s reaction.

“I wasn’t expecting it.” The vocalist admitted, softly, turning over. Yoochun supported Jae’s shoulders, guiding the young man until his head rested in Micky’s lap, his pretty face open to the light from the overhead fixture.

“I can’t even describe it to you. It’s like if chocolate were melted out of an ice cube. You expect water to hit your throat, stale from being trapped in the frozen ice but instead, warm and sweet liquid pours onto your tongue.” Jae gulped, smiling at Yoochun’s fingers in his hair, a gesture to soothe and calm so familiar between them. “There’s just enough so there’s the taste and you swallow, wanting to make it last but there’s only so little... only so much that you can suck clean from the ice and then... it’s water again.”

“That’s what it was like, Chunnie-ah.” Jaejoong brushed at the moistness on his lashes, trying to wipe the old tears he’d shed in the quiet of his solitude. “I don’t ever want to drink water again.”

The light in his eyes nudged Yunho awake, a shimmer of gold just under his lashes. Giggles, sublimated by muffled whispers told the leader that Yoochun and Junsu had finally crawled home, the pair rarely ever able to come in quietly. He lay there under the protection of his ebbing sleep, listening to the two singers walk down the hall to their bedroom. A few minutes later, a gentle knock and the soft voice of Micky asking Jaejoong if he were awake reached his ears, any answer lost with the door closing.

Turning onto his stomach, Yunho clutched at the tiny blue pillow he'd taken from Jaejoong's arms right before the young man headed back to the bedroom to sleep. He listened, his ears pressed hard against the slightly chilled wall but the thickness of the beams and plaster muffled out anything he might have heard through the hallway's expanse. Yunho flipped over again, restless with the crawling desires under his skin and in his blood.

Jaejoong's musky scent still clung to the pillow, a promise of forbidden satiation mingled with the unknown. Yunho never contemplated what it would mean to touch another man, never wondered at the feel of Jaejoong's mouth on him, a long tongue gliding up his hard flesh. The thought of Jae's pretty, pouting lips wrapped at the bulb of his sex hardened Yunho quickly, the blood filling him and lengthening against his thigh.

The memory of Jaejoong's soft hair on his cheek drove any sensible thought from Yunho's mind, his fingers reaching for the drawstrings of his pajama bottoms. A quick twist of his fingers loosened the knot, trailing along the ridge of his belly until he felt the burr of his pubic bone. Tasting Jae along the ridge of his teeth, Yunho pressed down further, pulling at the slack of his shaft until the skin stretched with a nearly painful tightness. Yunho lost himself in the thrill of Jaejoong finding him in the living room, hand dug down into his pants, only hidden by a thin blanket across his spread thighs.

Brushing his palm under his shirt, Yunho rubbed at the his tightening nipple. His fingernails cut into the tender flesh, imagining the nip of Jaejoong's teeth along the bud's ridge. Gasping at the stiffness of his body's response, his other hand drifted down, playing at the sparse hair along the curve of his belly before stroking along the dip of his groin.

Lifting his hips, Yunho pushed at the cotton waistline, hoping to loosen up enough slack to afford him access to his hard shaft. The brush of his boxers along his cock made me nearly lose control, his scrotum tight up in the pocket between his thighs. Huffing a long, hard breath, Yunho willed himself to calm the emotional torment back down, If the sheer

thought of Jaejoong's mouth on his body did this to his control, then he would be ashamed of what he would do if the singer's exploring hands would bring him to.

Yunho closed his eyes, wanting to push himself into the depths of his imagination. Jaejoong loomed large in his thoughts, a sensual glide of grace, want parting his full, moist mouth. His hand fondled at the looseness of his sack, running the roundness over his thumb until the seed boiled and throbbed from the touch. His cock wept, a single milky drop of need pearling at the dip of the head. His other hand roamed over his stomach, rubbing at the memory of Jaejoong's body writhing up around him when they danced.

His mind took him back to the scent of the singer, Jaejoong exhausted and panting with sweat from a long workout on the spit-stained wooden studio floor. Jae had fallen once, hands spread out to catch himself before his head hit the hard wood. Yunho grabbed at the singer, an instinctive motion to stop him from injuring himself. They stood there, not moving with Yunho's arms wrapped around Jae's back, hands on the singer's flat belly. A poke of a belly ring bit into the back of the leader's hand, a ravenous chew of gold on flesh. He still felt that nibble of gold on his hand, every time he saw Jaejoong's bare stomach, that single pinprick came back to him.

Stroking at the satin feel of his shaft, Yunho worked the loose skin at the base until he felt a rush of heat fill his face, the poignant throb of his control shaking his nerves. Touching lightly at the glans, Yunho brushed against the spongy flesh, thumbing back on the head, sensitive to the bundles of shockwaves coursing down his shaft and pulling at the cup of his balls. The spot was hypersensitive, a rumble of nearly painful sensations running down his thighs.

Lifting his hand up to his mouth, Yunho dipped his thumb past his bared teeth, laving at the pad until it dripped with spit. Sucking one last time on the digit, thinking of Jaejoong's tongue wrapped around his own, Yunho slid his hand back down to touch the moisture to his dripping cock head. A few long strong strokes of his palm and then another touch along the rub of the glans made him gasp, pushing his sack up closer to his guts, a tight rolling mass begging to be released.

His tongue bathed the curve of his lips, running along the pout of his mouth as his breath shortened, each stroke harder against the shaft. His fingers clenched then released, the slick spit from his mouth easing the friction until it burned a supple kiss into his length. His sex ached, wanting more than the harsh skin of his palm over its riding need.

His teeth clenched, neck straining with the pulsating desires shaking his soul apart. The twinge of Jae's scent hung in the air, Yunho gasping with the effort of holding back for another second...just long enough to remember the kiss he held in his heart. Hugging the pillow scented with Jaejoong's breath, Yunho worked at his sex, running his hand up and down until he broke free of the chains in his mind. Another long pull and then he exploded, a rush of seed spilling into his open hand.

Nothing prepared him for the rising tide of Jaejoong in his imagination. His mind filled with the images of the singer, a slender body wrapped around his own. Jae's legs were tangled around his ankles, then rising up to press his hands on Yunho's chest, straddling his hips and pressing down on Yunho's softening hardness. The emotional glut of his need rocked at his senses, his semen spilling out of his body. He wanted nothing more than to fill Jae's mouth, letting the overflow of his seed sparkle on the glut of the young singer's lips.

Panting, Yunho lay back, feeling the wetness spread over his hand and into the soft cotton of his boxers, a cooling liquid that did nothing to wash free the burgeoning desire in his heart. He debated sliding the underwear free from his body but the languor of depletion worked at his strength, taking the motivation to move out of his bones.

"Joongie..." Yunho's eyes moistened, a murmur of satisfaction undulating in the cocoon of his blankets. The fear that clouded his mind lifted, the faces of his family and the press of his obligations shaved off in long peals of nothingness under the beauty in Jaejoong's face, a generous, laughing fey creature that filled the empty spaces in the echoing chambers of his heart.

"I am so sorry I hurt you. I just want to be able to love you." Yunho cried, a long strand of tears spilling from the clench of his lashes. "Oh Jaejoong, please, let me try. Please...please help me try."

Sixteen

“Do it again, please.” The choreographer’s grating voice rankled Jae’s nerves, a rash sickly-sweet voice oozing with a whining demand. “Jaejoong, perhaps you could try to have your feet in the right place this time.”

They’d been at it for three long hours, legs aching with the complex dance steps that seemed just out of reach of their talents...or rather Jae’s ability. Junsu and Yunho easily slid into the routine, marking their steps perfectly. Changmin and Yoochun seemed to have at least the same amount of difficulty, stepping left instead of right, rotating the wrong shoulder or slamming into the singer next to them. Jae’s right arm bore a singularly spectacular bruise, the result of hitting Junsu’s chin when he raised his arm... the wrong arm.

Jaejoong was tired, worn down to the bone from the emotional drama the night before, his body still drawn taut from Yunho’s mouth on his. His stomach rumbled from lack of food, its emptiness poking at his brain to remind him that he’d eaten no dinner the night before, just the shreds of a brownie and a cup of overly sweet coffee. Time was too short when the dawn finally broke, he woke, his eyes swollen and gritty from lack of sleep. The thought of breakfast had been abhorrent, the call of a shower much more alluring than putting any food in his belly. He’d ignored the worried gazes from the others, filling a tall paper cup with Indian spiced chai and heading to the van, barely aware of his surroundings.

The beat set up again, the wired in speaker panels vibrating with a heavy bass. Yunho counted off their starting point from his place behind Jaejoong’s back, moving in symphony with Junsu’s opening glide. Concentrating hard, the lead singer slid forward, dipped then rolled, trying to count off the steps in his head. Another dip brushed the vocalist against Changmin’s shoulders, the youngest member’s lips counting silently in the hopes of keeping his moves in line with the others. Jaejoong’s thigh ached, a muscle memory of the tear along the ridge warning him of overextending. Yunho met Jae’s eyes, a nod of approval when the singer continued with the rolling glide around the leader, a quick intertwining of their legs before breaking apart and spinning off.

A quick dab of a tongue on the back of his neck shocked Jaejoong, his body arched forward. With his head down, his hair had fallen forward, the loose t-shirt he'd thrown on before running out the door scooping forward, exposing the top of his shoulders...too succulent of a target for Yunho to resist. The cat-rough texture jerked Jaejoong back, his hand flying up and slapping at the wet spot, Yunho's wicked grin and wink a passing ghost of reaction. The group's leader continued dancing as if nothing happened, Jaejoong falling out of rhythm and tumbling from the formation in a windmill of limbs.

Jae's sneakers caught on the floor, a high pitched squeal as the rubber sucked onto the wood, sending him sprawling forward. The momentum carried him into Yoochun's back, toppling Micky over, providing a soft landing spot for the lanky lead singer, his mouth agape at the Yunho's boldness. His elbow struck the side of Yoochun's temple, a clunk of bone hitting the nerve ends, making his arm spasm and jerk. Yoochun twisted, catching Jaejoong's waist as they landed in a tangled heap.

"Jaejoong!" The choreographer shrilled, the cane she affected as a walking aid stamping hard on the ground, rattling Jae's teeth. "Why must you be so graceless?"

"I am sorry, Auntie." Yunho bowed with a curt nod of his head, walking towards the sprawled singers. "It was my fault. I think I tripped Joongie-ah when he passed me."

Jaejoong muttered darkly at Yunho, the leader's hands sliding under his arms and lifting him easily from the floor. The lead singer's knees ached, the hard floor marking bruises along the cup of his bones, reverberations running down into his shins. Teeth bared, he growled under his breath, making it quite clear to Yunho exactly what he thought of the interlude, already worried about whether or not he could get the complicated routine down, much less perform it on stage.

"I am going to kill you, Yunho. I thought your feet weren't the ones we had to worry about." Micky pushed himself up from the floor, his body aching from the tumble. The spot on his temple where Jaejoong's sharp elbow struck him throbbed, a sore tenderness spreading under his sweat-dampened hair. "We almost made it through the whole routine..."

"Almost." Junsu agreed, crouching next to Yoochun's kneeling form. "Are you going to live? Or do we need to borrow one of Super Junior to work with us?"

“No, they just want to take Jaejoong from us.” Changmin interjected, working the last final steps of his piece out. “They’d want him in exchange for giving us someone and having to take Yoochun...then who’ll cook for us?”

“I cook.” Junsu protested, wincing as he remembered the pan of eggs he had to throw out that morning, a blackened mass of scorched whites. For good measure, he tossed the frying skillet as well, hoping he could stop at a store to get a new one before Jaejoong noticed its absence in the kitchen. “I don’t cook well but I try.”

“Enough!” The hated choreographer clapped her hands, rumpling the soft flesh hanging under her stout arms. Her chins rippled when she spoke, a single black hair bobbing in concert with her fleshy lips. “You may continue this squabbling elsewhere. The studio has to be turned over to other students...ones that are probably more dedicated to learning what their instructor teaches them.”

“I need a shower. Maybe a soak. My bones are complaining that I abused them.” Yoochun groaned, standing slowly and rubbing at his forehead. The short walk to the locker rooms stretched into an eternity, their abused bodies moving gradually down the hall. “Joongie-ah, did you sharpen your elbows this morning or are they always that bony?”

“I’m sorry. Blame Yunho. He bumped me.” Jaejoong slanted an ominous look towards their leader. Walking off, he hurried away from the others, hoping to put some distance between himself and Yunho. It was bad enough that his neck ached in the spot Yunho’s tongue laved, he also had his body refusing to move any quicker, soreness seeping into every tendon he had wrapped around a joint.

“Yunho licked him.” Junsu whispered into Micky’s ear. Nodding at Yoochun’s surprise-widened mouth, the singer continued, tapping at the ridge sloping on his skull. “I saw him. Right on the neck.”

“I didn’t think...” Yunho jogged to catch up with the long-legged lead singer, Jaejoong rubbing at the back of his neck, one hand buried beneath his thick black hair. He didn’t believe he’d taken a taste of Jaejoong during the routine, the boldness of it still stunned him. “I couldn’t help it.”

“She already hates me.” Jae hissed in irritation, stepping into the locker room, pulling his shirt off in one tug. “You know she thinks I should be replaced... I can’t dance as well as all of you and getting hurt just made things worse. I have to try twice as hard. When you’re done playing with

how I feel, remember that you were the one that made me trip this time. No yelling at me then.”

The shivering memory of Yunho’s mouth shuddered a wrenching reaction through Jae’s body and he stopped, holding the shirt in his hand, bared to Yunho’s eyes. The other raked his gaze over the lean expanse of pale skin, a sparkle of metal in one nipple and below in the hollow of his navel. The jet of fringe around Jae’s face brushed a silken hematite over the ivory of his skin, dark rainbows caught in the strands as the light reflected through it. Yunho stepped forward, drawn by the image of his temptation then stopped when the others joined them, a loud boisterous trio bursting through the hazy affection clouding the air between the two singers.

“I’m sorry.” Yunho apologized, contrite for forgetting Jaejoong’s need to work hard on what seemed to come so naturally to him. “This is work. I know that. I’m always the one riding you to get better at our routines and then I... do that. It was unfair.”

Jaejoong stopped, realizing that the leader had held open a small bit of his heart for him to see, lost in the shock of his tongue on him and the irate words of their choreographer. Turning, he cocked his head, staring at the other’s dark eyes, wishing he were brazen enough to stand into Yunho’s arms and kiss him, not caring if the teacher’s other students saw them, their clustered bodies working to get their work out clothes on before their class began.

“I’m too tired for all of this, Yunho.” Jaejoong grabbed at his towel, stalking into the shower stalls, his pants riding low on his hips. “I just want to shower and go home to sleep.”

The trip back to the apartment was subdued. Junsu mocking Yoochun for having a soft head, Changmin grinning widely as they poked one another in the back of the van. A quiet Jaejoong rested his forehead against the glass, watching the piles of snow as the van drove by, clattering the street gutters with a choppy grey slush. Yunho peeked around the singer’s hoodie, the cap drawn down over Jae’s forehead, his mind wandering with stray thoughts. Sliding over, Yunho pressed up against Jae’s shoulder, relaxing back when the singer sighed in resignation, giving up his sulk.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you. I know it seems like I’m always saying this but... it’s true. I didn’t even think about what I was doing.” Yunho

whispered. "It just seemed... like something I could get away with. Right then, no one would have noticed. I didn't expect you to fall."

"It shocked me." Jaejoong looked back, seeing the other three laughing amongst themselves, Changmin getting the worst of the other two's jokes. "I didn't expect..."

"I didn't either." The leader admitted, reluctant to show his emotions now. Impetuous, the action cost him more than he realized, the horror of his attraction sinking in. Jaejoong was... another man...a male that he worked with and needed to get along with. If they weren't careful, their entire lives could be ruined because of his actions. "I need to talk to you. Alone."

"I need some sleep first, Yunho...before I can talk to you...before I can even begin to listen to you." Jae sounded worn, his voice crackling around the edges. "It's been too much and if you are going to tell me that you've decided that we're not to be, can it at least wait until I have enough energy to cry? I don't think I have any more tears to give you right now."

"Joongie..." The ache in Jae's words touched Yunho's heart. "No, that's not what I wanted to say."

"Later, Yunho. *Please.*" Jaejoong looked up from his contemplation of the landscape, bruised moons beneath his eyes. He'd lain awake nearly all night, listening for any footsteps in the hallway outside, hoping one moment that Yunho would crawl under the covers with him and disparaging his weakness for needing the leader as desperately as he did. Jae knew he needed to gain some balance, thrown off by Yunho's whispered confessions on the couch. "I need to have some time. My heart's too tender right now."

The group's leader laid his head back, resting against the high backed seat. The road bumped along underneath them, more laughter filling the van's interior from the three behind them. Sitting there, in the quiet of Jaejoong's presence, Yunho began to plot on how he could win the singer's trust.

A familiar perfume tickled Jaejoong's nose, something aromatic and pungent. Opening his eyes, he blinked at the stark darkness, a film of white from the lights outside milking the ice of the glass window. The perfume grew stronger, a wispy tab of pink scented noise on his tongue. A gluttony of scents assaulted him, drawing him into wakefulness. Each

layer crested over his skin, a rush on his senses. Sitting up, Jaejoong reached over to turn on the end table lamp, its thin white shade draped with a luxurious purple silk.

The white light shimmered into an evening glow of violet, kissing his pale skin with a splash of lavender smolder. His bed linens rustled, moist petals crushed under his body, the creased folds releasing the delicate scent of carnation and rose into the air. Sitting up fully, Jaejoong stared down at his body, his bared chest mottled with petals, a crimson and butterscotch sunset over the icy landscape of his torso and shoulders. Hundreds of soft cupped drops spread over his worn covers, catching in the folds of the blankets at his feet. White candles flickered at the edges of the low table against the far wall, its surface normally littered with magazines, swept clean and covered with columns of pure beeswax, a calliope of golden light captured on wicks at differing heights.

"It's late." The door creaked open, Yunho pushing past the frame, holding a tray of covered food. "I brought you some dinner."

"Did you...do all of this? Jaejoong picked at the rose petals on his stomach, lifting one up to his nose and inhaling its scent. The red of the rose blushed a kiss across his cheeks, a sweep of dark lashes flicking butterfly shadows on Jae's high cheekbones. Yunho's breath caught in his throat, the sight of the young man sprawled over a bed of flowers erotic in its sensual innocence. "Just to put me in a good mood to talk?"

"Partly." Yunho admitted, sitting down on the edge of the bed, Jaejoong shifting his legs to make room. The petals scented another release, a spill of oils into the air. "I also thought it would be... romantic. I wasn't sure if you would... like romance. It's not something... I don't know what another man would want."

"This is nice." Jaejoong felt the burn of embarrassment in his cheeks, trying hard not to press his hands to his face to cover his blush. The scent of the roses gave him a funny feeling in his heart, a flipping over twitch he couldn't control. "I've... I don't know what I would want. The roses...the carnations are nice. Unexpected. I think that's good."

"So we're the same in this, then? Neither one of us knowing what to do? We'll have to forge ahead by ourselves." Yunho lifted the covers of the bowls, a purple blend of rice mixed in with vegetables under the lid. "Ah, I like this kind of rice. You too, yes?"

Jae nodded, mute in his shock. Unsure of where to put his hands and feet, he lay against the mound of pillows behind him, crossing his legs as Yunho dished out portions of food into smaller dishes. "Did you cook?"

"Hah, how long did you think you've been asleep?" Yunho teased, trying to keep his eyes from straying up Jae's body. The young man's face enraptured him, dips and rises of bone beneath translucent skin. A divot of a small scar curved near Jae's nose, leaving Yunho to wonder if the tip of his tongue would fit in the scallop. "I would have to be reborn into my next life to be able to cook this well. I ordered this in from Pishon. I paid the driver extra to deliver it hot. Then you slept so long I had to keep it warm in the oven...so if it's dry, I get to blame you."

"I'm sure it's good." Jaejoong bowed his head slightly, biting at his lower lip. "Excuse me, I need to... bathroom first."

A hasty retreat to the cooled tile confines of the bathroom he shared with Changmin and Yunho gave Jaejoong a chance to catch the running chaos in his mind. Large swaths of his body were covered in luminescent rose and gold, a floral tattoo caught in the heat of his skin. Turning on the faucet, he used the water to drown out his movements, wondering if he could bring himself to release in a short enough time that Yunho wouldn't know anything was amiss.

Cold water poured into the sink, running up its side with a gleeful enthusiasm. Jae stuck his cupped hands into the chill, splashing his face and shaking the sleep from his face. Gulping down a mouthful, he swallowed before taking another handful, forcing the cold to work through his body. Jaejoong hoped that his sprint to the bathroom hid the erection clearly visible through his thin cotton scrubs. Peeing proved to be painful, having to force down the hardness long enough to release the press of his bladder and the brush of his hand, coupled with the echo of Yunho's smile in his mind complicated matters to the point of tears, Jaejoong nearly giving up and heading back into the bedroom. A sigh of relief escaped between his pressed lips as he finally convinced his bladder to release its waters, washing his hands quickly and looking at himself in the mirror.

The wan face and dark hair still remained the same, a cobbled together mash of uneven features and too full mouth. Running his fingers over his cheeks, Jae wished for a hint of the manliness Yunho possessed, wondering if the other would find him too effeminate or perhaps even rejecting him because of it. Worrying at his lower lip, Jae shut his eyes tight, willing himself to walk back out and face the young man sitting on his bed preparing something for them to eat.

“You’ll be fine, Jaejoong.” The singer mumbled to himself, working at the strands of his hair around his neck with nervous fingers. “It’s not like it’s a date. It’s eating. You’ve eaten with him before.”

He slunk back into the bedroom, poking his head around the door to see if Yunho was still sitting on the bed. The leader had placed the tray on his own mattress, keeping their food covered until Jae came back. Sliding past Yunho’s legs, Jaejoong worked himself back into the corner, staring at the other man’s handsome face.

“Do you want to eat? Or talk?” Yunho asked, watching Jae’s chest move with hitched breaths. “Maybe both. You haven’t eaten since yesterday.”

Jaejoong took the offered food, setting the rice dish down to dig at it with a spoon. Large shrimp boiled in red hot peppers poked out from the purple sticky grains, shreds of thin white mushrooms laying against the side of the bowl. He used a pair of chopsticks to maneuver the enoki free from the rice, crunching down on the white crisp stalk. It was a simple feast, food that he found comforting. He quirked his mouth as Yunho picked out the mushrooms, deftly placing them on Jaejoong’s rice.

“Talk to me, Jaejoong.” Yunho found a wide sliver of shitake, holding it up for Jae to take. Leaning forward, the young singer’s mouth parted, sliding the long brown meat over his tongue, a bite of his teeth taking it from Yunho’s chopsticks.

“About what?” Yes, his attraction was still there but Jae’s stomach complained of its emptiness and his mouth seemed intent on shoveling as much food in as possible. Slowing down, Jaejoong looked up from his eating, swallowing what was in his mouth.

“Anything.” Yunho grinned, chewing on a piece of shrimp. “Yoochun says I don’t know you very well. Or at least maybe the Jaejoong that’s inside of you. I thought I would get to know you. Find out the things that make you... smile.”

“Food.” Jae lifted the bowl he held, bowing in appreciation to the young man who brought him dinner. Placing the ceramic dish by his bare foot, he fingered a rose petal, rubbing the red fragrance between his fingers. “And I think I like roses now.”

“I’m glad.” Yunho brushed at the petal with his fingers, running the tip of his index along the half-moons of Jae’s nails. “I really wasn’t certain if it was the right thing to do. I’ve never... not even for a woman... I’ve never done anything like this for someone.”

“Me neither.” Jae put his dish aside, pulling his knees up to his chest. Resting his chin against his thighs, he felt a safe comfortable distance from the other young man, a fake barrier to keep his heart from leaping from under his breast bone.

“Have you...loved other men before?” Yunho’s dish joined Jaejoong’s, a forgotten feast cast off as the young men moved to other fares. “You mentioned...your father. How did he...know?”

“The neighbour... a young man that lived with his mother... came over to borrow my father’s tree saw.” Jaejoong’s eyes clouded at the memory. He remembered feeling the first tinge of desire, held in the broad body and wide face of a college student sounding worldly to his innocent ears. “I think I was...thirteen. He was... good looking. Older. He had a job and a car...he seemed so adult. And he spent time talking to me. Asking me how I felt about music or some piece of clothing he wore.”

“He got me drunk for the first time. A few mouthfuls of whiskey from a bottle he’d bought off an American...or so he told me.” Yunho edged closer, seeing the discomfort in Jaejoong’s face. The leader’s arms itched to cradle the singer against him, taking away the flux of emotions paining Jae’s soul. “I thought he wanted to just be friends and then the first time he touched me... touched my face, I thought I would be sick from delirium. It was just his hand and fingers on my cheek.”

“He came over a lot, sometimes talking to my father but always looking at me, in my direction....always with a smile and sometimes winking when no one else could see. Then one day, when I was in the garage, he came up behind me and kissed me, turning me around and sliding his tongue into my mouth.” Jae’s voice got quiet, barely a whisper of sound broken against the shards of his innocence. “I couldn’t get his hands to stop moving over me and then... in some sick way, I wanted that feeling he’d given me before...but not this.”

“Then my father came through the open door. He’d seen the young man come over and wondered what he wanted.” Jaejoong’s snort of derision echoed, a sour note curdling the sweet scent of the flowers. “My father beat me. So hard I thought my bones would turn to liquid. Father screamed that it was my fault...I lured a good man into my sickness and that I was something to be ashamed of. My mother begged him to stop, not because it was hurting me... I think she thought he could beat it out of me...but because she was afraid the neighbours would hear.”

“I left home when I couldn’t stand the tension any more. Nothing I did made them happy. Not any more. I tried telling them that... I didn’t do

anything but my father wouldn't listen. I was dead to him." Jaejoong played at the shadows of Yunho's hands, lightly touching at his palms. Having the young man at his fingertips thrilled the insecure fractures working through his soul, a spackle of joy filling in the cracks. "I thought I would try to be someone they could be proud of. I would sing and be famous, looking for some sort of... acknowledgement that I did well by them but ... you've seen them here."

"They *are* proud of you." Yunho insisted. "I've seen your mother's face when she comes through the door. She's very proud of who you are. And your sisters..."

"I think they're more happy to see the handsome men I live with than me." Jaejoong's eyes lifted with a smile to his lips. "But yes, without them, I wouldn't have made it through those times. They were always there for me, holding me up and telling me that I didn't do anything wrong. My eldest sister told me that one day, I would find someone to love me and that it didn't make a difference if that person was a man, so long as he made me happy."

"I want to be that person...I want to try to be that person. It scares me but I want it." Yunho slid his hand under Jaejoong's hair, cupping the back of his head and pulling the lead singer towards him. "Boojae, I am sorry that... I'm sorry for everything. You deserve so much more than that. You deserve someone who loves you with everything they have."

Touching noses, they stared into one another's eyes, seeing the depths of their uncertainty between them. Yunho's lips found a nibble of a spot he wanted to taste, unsure if he should delve into the singer's sensuality. "I want to kiss you...so badly. So very badly but I don't know what I'm doing here. Understand that. I also don't know how to be between us. I know what... I think I know what I want to do with you but..."

"You talk a lot. You never used to talk this much. Or maybe I didn't listen enough. I'm sorry if I didn't listen enough." Jaejoong's tongue darted out, licking at Yunho's mouth with a questing dab. "I don't know either. I never... I've kissed before... but I've not... done more. Not with a man."

"Me too." Yunho stammered, his mouth a mere skimming breadth away from Jaejoong's. "I mean, women... two women...but never another man. Not until you. I've never even imagined being with another man until you. And I don't know what to do."

"Maybe there's a book?" Jaejoong asked as he rubbed his chin along Yunho's mouth, parting the flesh beneath the dip on the young man's nose. The feel of the leader on him thrilled Jae's heart, its erratic beating skipping with each brushing pass he made. Jae no longer could taste any of the rice he'd swallowed, lost in the space between them, finding a galaxy of stars in his soul.

"A book sounds like a good idea." Yunho agreed, his fingers moving down from Jae's hairs to the soft skin on his throat. "Have you forgiven me, then? Fully?"

"No, not quite." Jae considered his feelings, still feeling the raw rub of his tender heart. He pulled back, hesitant to go any further forward. The ache in him throbbed, knocking his breath into soft pants. "I need to... I need to be able to trust you. Not to hurt me."

"I'll hurt you sometimes, I think." Yunho admitted slowly. "I think you'll hurt me too. We can't be perfect, Jaejoong. I don't think that's possible. But let me...try to learn to love you. Let me love you."

"At least let me kiss you." The leader whispered against Jaejoong's parted mouth, breathing through the young man's lips, heating the sigh Jae held in the back of his throat.

Jaejoong sat still, unmoving as Yunho explored his face with a light suckle of his mouth. The minute scar that tantalized him earlier fit perfectly against his tongue, the tip catching the small dimple, filling with a drop from Yunho's mouth before he sucked it clean from Jae's face. Yunho pressed on, pushing in with a flick of his tongue.

Yunho found the warmth of the other's mouth, Jae's chin slackening as Yunho pressed on the softness of his jaw, coaxing the singer to open himself fully to his advances. Moist, he pulled Jae's kiss from him, easing the young man into his arms, slanting him down and covering Jaejoong with his heavier body. Jae's hands found an unsteady grip on Yunho's shoulders, pressed in by the young man's muscular arms. Blood roaring in his ears, Jaejoong drew in his breath, savouring the taste of Yunho in his throat.

He wanted this, too much...Jae thought to himself...but there wasn't any stopping the insistent probing of his mouth, or the hands working up to play with the softness of his nape. Yunho gasped, working his mouth down over Jae's jaw, leaving red welts along the bone, nipping harder with each moaning please Jaejoong whispered into Yunho's shoulder, his

own lips finding the other's curves, exploring through the thin cotton of Yunho's shirt.

Shuddering, Yunho pressed his hands on Jaejoong's shoulders, reluctantly pulling the young man away from him. His chest heaved with the effort to control his breathing, every bit of his air swimming with the feral beauty of the man he just held in his arms...and savoured just the tip of the pleasures Jae had to offer.

"We need to... slow." Yunho gulped, relieved at Jae's slow nod of agreement. "You... you're setting my blood on fire. I don't think I could stand just kissing you tonight if I stay here much longer. And I don't think either one of us is ready for that. Not yet."

"Slow..." Jaejoong repeated, touching at the raised marks on his jaw and throat. They hurt, a sting so pleasantly erotic he knew he wouldn't be able to find the strength to stand if he wanted to.

"I'm going to go sleep on the couch again." Yunho stood, his hands shaking and rubbing at his thighs. "Changmin is staying with his mother still. I don't know where Yoochun and Junsu are... I think they might have gone to get something to eat. They'll be home in a bit. I'll come back for the dishes then. It'll be safe. Safer."

"Tomorrow, let's go on... a date." Yunho asked, stopping in the doorway, looking back at the disheveled sexy young man he was walking away from. "I owe you some romance...I think. Or maybe a movie?"

"A movie would be nice. Romance, I don't know if either one of us knows what to do with romance." Jae wondered at the inanity of their conversation, the casualness of their words as their hearts bled with want. Missing the heat of Yunho's body on his, Jaejoong leaned back, wrapping his arms around his chest. "You better go."

"Yeah, I might not be able to stand here much longer." Yunho agreed, not wanting to leave the room. Jaejoong did draw at him, a fierce urge to protect the rough, brittle beauty from the world's cruelty.

"It's not just that." Jaejoong bit back on his lip, already swollen from Yunho's teeth. "If you stay there much longer, I might not want to let you go."

Seventeen

“Why is it when we’re fighting, there’s no one around...” Yunho stared at Changmin’s back, the young man standing in line to buy a skein of spun sugar. “But when we want to be alone, suddenly the three of them can’t live without us?”

A break in the heavy snow provided a welcome relief from the wintry deluge, the air a crisp chill, easily thwarted by a thick layer of clothes. Jaejoong tugged at the lapels of his purloined down jacket, debating if he should pull up the furred hood to cut out the wind sweeping down into the Jangchoong district of Namsan park. The press of a hand on the small of his back made the singer glance back, Yunho’s upswept eyes twinkling back at him.

When the leader suggested going to the Snow Flower Festival in the park, Jaejoong wondered if he would be able to survive the biting cold, the city frozen nearly to its root with ice. Morning broke through with a stunning warmth, cutting back the chill in the wind, trees bowed beneath the tremendous weight of icicles dragging down at their limbs. The promise of a carnival appealed to Jae, the ringing voices of hawkers calling out to a passerby to play games of chance or a mysterious fortune teller throwing stick rune forecasts on a bed of silks. They’d dressed warmly, bundling up to not only ward off the cold but to obscure their identities to any fans, hoping for just the day to pass without notice, lost in the illusion of privacy as they began their clandestine courtship.

Yunho had just sat down in the living room, trying to get his boots laced when Junsu popped his head in, peering out from around the hallway opening. The leader was caught unawares when the young man asked where he was going, Yunho working out a knot in his ties. A chance remark of the carnival made Junsu shout to the other three, yelling down the hall that they were all going out into the warming afternoon.

Jaejoong stood in the door of his bedroom, working the white-furred jacket over his shoulders as Changmin rushed in, sliding past the lithe singer to get ready to leave. From his vantage point from across the hall, a quirk of a smile hung on Yoochun’s mouth, wreathed in a knowing that they were going to intrude on the date set up between whispers at breakfast. Reluctant to shut the others out, Jaejoong sighed heavily,

shrugging at his friend standing across the hall. Resigned, Jae plodded into the living room, throwing himself down on the chair near Yunho, shooting him hot glances beneath his drawn hood, the fluffy ice-white fur stark on the ink of his hair.

“What could I say?” Yunho asked, sighing heavily. The others were scrambling, hurriedly getting dressed, seemingly oblivious to the pair sitting on the couch, partially disgusted by the additional company. “Should I tell them they can’t come?”

“No. I couldn’t say that either.” Jaejoong muttered with dark intent, disgruntled and sulky. “Maybe they’ll fall into the river and we’ll have to share a cup of hot tea while the firemen rescue them.”

“One can only hope, Joongie-ah.” Yunho breathed a sigh of relief when Jaejoong rested against his arm, both of them resigned to the others joining them.

Yunho waited impatiently, calling a driver to take the five of them down to Namsan, wondering if he could somehow lose the other three in the crowd. While he enjoyed the camaraderie returning to the group, Yunho’s insidious mind begged to find a quiet, dark spot alone with the lead singer, perhaps even coaxing a butterfly kiss from Jae’s sensuous mouth. Instead, they stood near the food kiosks, Changmin hopping up and down from foot to foot, trying to keep the warmth in his long, slender legs as the other two pondered what to snack on during their stroll through the canopied attractions.

“Do you want some cotton candy?” Yunho whispered into the cup of Jaejoong’s ear, grinning when the young man’s ear lobe turned pink. The crowd around them was thick...too thick for Yunho to dab his tongue along the rosy bulb, biting it redder and leaving a mark. Clearing his throat, the group’s leader forced himself away from his thoughts. “Or do you want something else?”

“Cotton candy is too sweet.” Jae wrinkled his nose, his full mouth twisting playfully. “Do they have something else?”

“That one over there has hot chestnuts. You like those.” Yoochun pointed at a steaming cart, the vendor scooping a flow of the brown treats into a paper bag, adding closed packets of salt and chili sauce to the top.

A small line formed around the steamer, the rotund man’s beet red face sweating from the hot mists rising from the cart. At the next kiosk, Junsu called back to Yoochun after catching up with the youngest

member standing in the long cotton candy queue, bumped into him with a rough shoulder. Micky waved back, wagging two fingers in the air, asking Junsu to grab him a treat as well.

“I like chestnuts better than anything sweet.” Jaejoong agreed. “They squeak when you eat them. You can hear them scream when you bite.”

“You are strange, Joongie-ah. Stay here. I’ll get some for you.” Yunho was off before Jaejoong could reply, the singer huddled inside the folds of his hood. His expressive eyes wide, he followed the leader’s progress down the small hill as Yunho dutifully trotted off through the snow, his hands dug down deep into the pockets of his fleece jacket.

Turning to Micky, Jaejoong ducked down further, a bit nonplussed at Yunho’s willingness to fetch him something to eat. Abashed, he said softly, “I could have gone myself.”

“It’s something small someone does that shows you that they care. Yunho wants to show you that he cares.” Micky said, wise to the leader’s eagerness to please their beautiful singer. “You look cold, Joongie-ah. Maybe we should get you out of the wind.”

Micky cast about, looking for someplace warmer to sit and discovered an empty wooden bench, its long wide planks partially covered by a open-walled tent displaying good luck charms. Pulling Jaejoong over the short distance, Yoochun sat down, patting the space next to him. Shivering from the brisk wind curving up from the river, Jaejoong gratefully sank down onto the bench, the wood warmed by the strong lights strung up to illuminate the canopy’s interior.

“I would like to say that I’m sorry for coming along with you but I’m not.” Micky huffed out his breath, watching a misty phoenix curve up from his throat. “We need to chaperone you two. He might have nefarious plans in store.”

Jaejoong couldn’t stop the flood of red across his cheeks, a fire that doused any chill in his bones. Covering his face with his bare hands, he hoped for the icy press of his fingers to chase away some of the blush before Yunho spotted it. Seeing the leader’s head turn towards him, Jaejoong’s mouth ran dry, his hand lifted up from his face when Yunho waved first, the cart still five people deep before he reached the chestnut seller. Balling his fist, Jaejoong struck at Micky’s hard shoulder, smacking the other singer with a resounding hit.

“What?” Yoochun’s innocent face mocked Jaejoong, a monkey expression flattening his nose. The smirk returned, curving Yoochun’s wide mouth. “You deny that you two were planning on sneaking out to the carnival without us?”

“Yes.” Jaejoong whispered, then decided to tell the truth when his friend slanted him a telling look. “No, I won’t deny it. Not now. But it doesn’t matter. You three are here and he’s down there, getting me chestnuts.”

“Like a good lover.” Micky said smugly, leaning back on his hands. Another fist glanced off Yoochun’s arm, a rejoinder to Micky’s boldness. “What? He’s certainly wanting to be more than a friend. I would have to be blind not to see that.”

“Do you think the others notice?” The singer wondered aloud, watching Yunho move along the line, his face hidden by the upturned collar of his jacket. “Changmin is... too young. Junsu would just tease.”

“I think Changmin notices more than you give him credit for.” Yoochun felt his own neck flush. “Probably way too much than he should notice. Junsu better not tease. I have a record of the shameful things that he’s done. We have blackmail material.”

A pair of young men glanced up towards where Jaejoong sat, his head resting now on Micky’s shoulder, the fraught of his emotions ebbed low from the week’s events. Yunho spoke quickly to the men, his head cocked in a slight challenge. Their heads bobbed, a meek apology then moved along, hurriedly losing themselves in the crowd. Yunho raised his head, his handsome face full to the sun and beamed up at Jaejoong, winking one eye at the singer before turning back to wait his turn.

“So you decided that he was worth the chance? And so soon.” Micky asked, casually watching people walk by. Entire families were out, taking advantage of the warmer weather, parents leading round balls of coated toddlers down the gravel path. Balloons bobbed through the crowd, brightly hued dollops of rainbow drops against the trees and pale steel sky. The mingled Korean dialects sang as everyone passed, cheery notes of conversation dropping small hints of a life outside of the tedium of the week.

“I woke up to flower petals in my bed yesterday.” Jaejoong pressed his palm together, his pocket filled with a cheesecloth bag of Yunho’s rose offerings. The scent clung to his hand when he removed it from the slitted downy jacket, a perfume of the night before caught in the kiss of its scent. “And food. Because I hadn’t eaten.”

“Very romantic.” Yoochun commented sagely, his mahogany tinted hair caught in the light breeze, ruffling a wave of curls over his forehead. “It sounds nice...if you like that thing.”

“I think I might. Maybe a little.” The singer toed at the ground with his sneaker, his innate shyness creeping out of the bravado he wore around him like a shield. “It made me feel...special...wanted. No one has ever made me feel like that before. I didn’t know what to do. Neither did he. We both agreed that it was nice and that he should spend the night on the couch. It would be better for blood pressures.”

“And if he hurts you? Did you talk about that?” The other man’s forehead furrowed, worry for his friend plain on his face. “I like Yunho but I would have to find someplace to hide his body. And I would have to ask Junsu to help me carry it down the stairs. Maybe Changmin...Junsu would be lazy and say to just dump him over the balcony and hope someone picks him up with the trash.”

“No! No talking like that.” Jae’s eyes burned, bright with censure. “If... if we can’t make this work and I can’t live with it, I’ll leave the group. I don’t want any of you to suffer because of a selfish decision I made.”

“Love isn’t selfish, Joongie-ah. And you are not leaving us. I won’t let you. Neither would Yunho.” Micky curved his arm around his friend’s waist, drawing the young man into his warmth. His mouth brushed a soft affection on Jae’s temple, leaving a small kiss. “If any of us deserve that love, it’s you, Jaejoong. I know that.”

Yunho stepped in behind two college students, their heavy sweatshirts boldly greened with their logo university. He paid them no attention, not much, his attention more on the coy, shy young man standing on the hill. Jaejoong’s slender body was nearly swallowed by the big white jacket he’d found, a cast off of Yoochun’s closet when Micky’s shoulders grew too broad for the jacket to fit comfortably. Jae gleefully claimed it as his own, walking around with the furred hood over his face, peering out of the quilted down like a little child playing peek-a-boo.

“How much do you think it costs to rent a pretty ci-pal like that?” Yunho looked up, hearing one of the young men snort through his nose. “Maybe it’s cheaper during the day time. He probably gets more business at night.”

“Wonder if he calls he calls the other one oppa? If you put a dress on him, I don’t think you’d know he was a boy except for...” The taller of the

two chuckled, rubbing at his chest with cupped hands, a coarse laugh shared between them. Curious, Yunho followed the direction of their gaze, finding a sleepy Jaejoong at the end of their attention.

I'll have to listen to this the rest of my life. Yunho thought, the realization of being with Jaejoong suddenly piercing the bubble of his afternoon. Being around the others... knowing that they were aware in some way of his attraction to the singer... made Yunho oblivious of the reality of loving Jae. He didn't know if he was ready for the ostracization once he declared his love for the singer. *My parents...my father won't understand. He'll say that Jae is just something to be ashamed of. I don't want to hear my father say to me what his father said to him. I couldn't bear it. I couldn't bear that disappointment.*

My mother... she might... understand how I feel. Yunho's heart touched briefly on the sweet, gentle face of the woman who guided him through his childhood, a benevolent maternal touchstone he never doubted. *But the rest of the world... can I face that? Can he?*

Another glance, under the cover of his bangs gave Yunho a clear view of the singer and his friend now sitting on a bench, warmed by the heat of a sales tent. Yoochun's wide, open face braced for the cut of the wind, his hands moving as he spoke, gesturing widely to make a point. Jaejoong slid back into the mask of his persona, wearing the delicate visage of coldness he cultivated. The passion hidden behind that thin pale face, a concubine to others' desires, his emotions culled from his mannerisms to present only what other people wanted to see, a puppet-like beauty easily manipulated into appealing poses and sweet-voiced phrases.

No one saw the delight in Jae's face when Yunho's chopsticks held up a bit of shrimp for him to eat, the simple joy of life filling the young singer's features. The frustration and ambition of Jaejoong's pounding fists on the floor when he faltered in his dance steps, resolute in his determination that he would conquer the obstacles of his own body...sometimes trilling a descant of notes to ensure his voice remained strong and clear. Yunho's heart wept at the thought that he wouldn't be able to share a kitchen with the slender singer, sweats riding just above the jutting bones of his hips, the flash of a knife slicing through slightly frozen meat as they prepared dinner together.

Yunho remembered the stolen kisses they shared, clandestine truffles of erotic sweetness and the heady promise of Jaejoong's moist body wrapped around his own hardened shaft...those things didn't just enter into his mind...they defined Yunho's world. Just the sheer glut of Jae's passionate embrace of life to fill his soul was enough for Yunho's heart to

overflow...anything else he could share was an unexpected sweetness. That was the gift that Jaejoong offered to him...that window into his heart, the brilliant chaotic sun of his laughter in the cold darkness of their troubles.

“Look at his mouth.” The smaller man, sharp faced and young, jerked his chin towards in Jaejoong’s direction. “With your eyes closed, you could imagine ...”

“*That* is my boyfriend.” Yunho spoke suddenly, a dangerously low growl in his throat.

The declaration stilled any other thoughts he might have nursed in the doubts of his heart. Hearing the university students talk about Jaejoong as if he were nothing more than a piece of meat to be handled...to be maneuvered around until his body gave them pleasure sent a rage into Yunho’s bones.

Taller than either of them, Yunho lifted his chin, daring the other men to challenge him. His fists begged for an argument, a fury hardening them to an unyielding granite. He wasn’t sure where the words came from or if Jaejoong would even appreciate being claimed, but Yunho didn’t care. All he wanted to do was wipe the coarse taunting jibes from their mouths, smearing the vilifying slurs over their faces with one hard jab.

It ended too easily, a mumbled apology followed by another, the shove of Yunho’s shoulder against one of the young man’s chest. The anger remained, a fierceness curling around the centre of his belly. He wondered if others had said such things before, hoping that the Jaejoong who scraped by on the streets had never heard the mocking tones of a sexual advance whispered in his ear. Some dark part of Yunho’s mind told him that he was living in a dream if he thought that was the case. Others had said such things... done worse to the delicate featured fey creature he’d fallen in love with.

The chestnut vendor paid no attention to the intense young man gruffly asking for a full bag, the seller holding out his hand for money and shoving a hot steaming bag of treats at Yunho, before moving along to the young couple behind him. The hill seemed to last forever, the wet gravel slipping beneath Yunho’s feet. Yoochun greeted him first, Jaejoong’s hand brushing over his lips, slender fingers hiding the grace of his mouth. The gesture was endearing, the shyness normally hidden, bloomed in front of Yunho, an elegant unfurling of Jae’s personality held out as a gift.

“You should go find Junsu.” Yunho nudged at Yoochun’s shin with his foot, his tone brooking no argument. Mickey glanced once at Jaejoong who nodded once, his face then buried in the softness of white fur. Yoochun stood, brushing up against Yunho’s shoulder in a slight warning to take care with the tender hearted singer’s soul, a subtle but firm hint that Yunho would have to answer to him if Jae’s tears were shed in the icy afternoon.

“Thank you for getting the chestnuts.” The singer patted his flat stomach. “I was hungry.”

“I was glad to. I didn’t know you liked them so much or I would have offered first, without Yoochun telling me to.” Yunho sat down next to Jaejoong, their thighs tight against one another. Jae shivered, the cold of Yunho’s bare hand on his arm, his jacket sleeve pulled back up past his wrists. “He’s protective of you...Chunnie.”

“Yoochun is... he means well.” Jaejoong said with a nod, picking at a chestnut at the top of the bag. “He watches out for me sometimes. I watch out for him.”

“It’s good to have friends like that. You’re a good friend.” Yunho commented, watching Jaejoong struggle to slide the chestnut free of its membrane. After a few aborted tries and a lost chestnut popping from the singer’s fingers, bouncing down the arc of the matted winter grassed knoll, Yunho took matters into his own hands, pushing Jaejoong’s hands away from the bag. “Let me. No wonder you’re so skinny. You can’t feed yourself.”

Yunho pushed at the star crosscut in the tip of the chestnut, working the thin brown membrane loose. A few rubs of his thumb lifted the dry, flaky pellicle free from the meat, a golden morsel roasted to a moist perfection. Cleaning the last remaining bits of skin from the nut’s folds, Yunho pinched a bit of salt on the treat, holding it up between his index finger and thumb, its tantalizing smell pulling at Jaejoong’s appetite.

The lead singer was about to take it from Yunho’s hand with his own but the leader grunted a no at him, gaping open his mouth in mimicry. Jae blushed, parting his lips slightly, letting the other slide the nut meat onto his tongue. A warm burn spread into Jaejoong’s mouth, his tongue lightly brushing on Yunho’s salt-sprinkled fingertips, the chestnut meat holding a small crunch when his teeth bit down.

Yunho dipped his head down, intent on following the morsel with his own tongue, needing to taste the salty-sweetness of Jaejoong’s mouth.

The lead singer's fingers pressed on the bow of Yunho's lips, stopping the kiss from fulfillment. A spread of dew lifted on Jae's lashes, a flicker of pain in the young singer's soulful eyes. Regret sat heavy in his heart, the need for Yunho on him...in him... a terrible anguish churning in his belly.

"We can't." Jae whispered, his breath hot on Yunho's face. "I want to but..."

"We can't." Yunho agreed softly, his forehead resting against Jaejoong's temple, their sighs intermingled. "I just want to go home and... explore you. I want to hear you make that sound in your throat...the one you just made for that chestnut. I never thought I would be so jealous of a sweet nut before."

"Open your mouth." Jaejoong's hushed low voice and wrapped fingers in Yunho's shirt drew the other to the singer.

Parting his teeth, Yunho made an O with his lips, curious as to what the other intended. The cold in the air bite at the roof of his mouth, the sun slowly retreating beyond the far horizon, Seoul's night flirting with a winter evening. Leaning closer, the softness of Jae's lips scarcely bruised the lines of Yunho's part, his eyes closed tight.

A huff of his breath spilled into Yunho's open mouth, the affectionate heat hitting the back of the leader's throat... an invisible kiss carried through the chill to warm at the root of Yunho's tongue. The young man gulped, swallowing at the nothingness that carried everything of the singer leaning against him, the cup of his hood hiding inquisitive eyes from prying into their intimacy.

Sitting back, the young man dug out another chestnut, expertly peeling the membrane with a twist of his palm before dousing it with a dab of salt and chili sauce. Wickedly seductive, Jae popped the meat into his mouth, chewing around his words, the tilt of his tongue dabbing at a grain hovering in suspense on his lower lip.

"Hold that for me, please." Jaejoong's husky contralto purred, tightening a verbal noose around Yunho's tortured, weeping sex. "I'll want it back later."

Eighteen

Junsu held out a strip of cotton candy, expertly sliding the confection into Yoochun's waiting lips. The sugary treat melted as it hit the singer's tongue, spreading a pink infusion throughout his mouth. Micky grabbed at Junsu's waist, holding tight. The winter festival's crowds made moving around difficult, it was far easier for Yoochun stand still against a tree, arms hooked over Junsu's shoulders, watching people pass them by.

Red slippers topped with golden bells danced on the feet of a young girl, her black hair pulled up to a single tail on the crown of her head. Her grandmother chased her, small dainty steps nimble along the gravel path, her back crimped from years of working in the country. Shouting with laughter, the toddler squealed when her grandmother caught her up in thin, strong arms, the woman's mouth a fractured toothed smile, wrinkles deepening into her tanned face.

Hands worn brown from years of tobacco smoke and working in the soil were rough on the little girl's dress, the fine crinoline threads sticking to the burrs of the old woman's calluses. Nearby, a middle-aged man stood, his hands behind his back, careful not to wrinkle the fine cloth of his clothes, his stern face softened by the sight of his mother lifted from a life of tedium and labour, tickle his child belly with her mouth, sending the little girl into peals of giggles.

"Where's Min?" Yoochun took another bite of the candy, chewing off the top of the swirled treat around the paper cone. The heat of his nose melted the soft, warm threads, leaving a sticky rose-sugared mess at the tip. Laughing, he strained his tongue to lick it clean, only frustrating himself with the small dabs of saliva he seemed only to be able to spread into his nostril.

"Hold still." The tousle-haired Su stifled a laugh, slipping from Micky's loose hold and turned around. Shoving his fingers on Micky's darting tongue, getting the pads just wet enough to wipe at the other's nose, he ordered the other singer to stay still. After wiping the sugar off of Yoochun's face with his damp fingers, Junsu stood back, cupping Micky's chin with his other hand, turning his head one way and then another. "It looks like you're clean."

Sticking his wet fingers into his mouth, Junsu sucked Yoochun's sugar leavenings from his hand, spotting Changmin amid the crowd of spectators watching a juggler tossing firebrands into the air. A circle of fire arced above the people, sending sparks along the ring of snow at the man's feet, a child's scream of delight slicing through the astonished voices. With a shout, Changmin clapped as another juggler entered the fray, snatching torches from mid air and lopping them back to his partner.

"Minnie-ah is over there... pretending he is seeing dragons in the sky. How are they doing... Yunho and Jaejoong?" Junsu jerked his chin at the couple sitting on the bench. "Do we have to kill Yunnies or is Jaejoong going to do that for us? It would be nice if he did it himself, though. I like Yunnies-ah a lot."

"It would be nice if he took care of that." Yoochun mulled the thought over, rubbing at the wet spot on his nose. His thoughts on Yunho and Jaejoong drew him elsewhere, Micky responding to Junsu's grin with one of his own, a taint of wickedness on his mind. He took another piece of candy, carefully chewing on the sugar treat. "No, I think Yunho will live to see another day. Jaejoong on the other hand, is going to die of .. well... yeah."

"Ah, there are children around, Chunnies-ah. It's bad enough that I think we've corrupted Min. Come on, let's herd him away from the jugglers. We don't need him to catch his hair on fire." Junsu strolled along the circled clearing, keeping one eye on the youngest member of their group.

Yoochun stepped away from the tree, falling into step next to his friend. They were a companionable pair, sometimes comfortable with the silence of not-needing to say anything to communicate and other times, they worried at the edges of small little worldly things, happy with the thrill of a puzzle and not caring much about the outcome.

"I worry about Joongie." Junsu stopped just outside the cluster of people circling around the juggler, Changmin hanging back a moment, watching the pair begin to toss about paper rings, long streamers unfurling with each circuit. "He may seem rough...but he's very vulnerable. I can't believe I ever thought he was cold."

"I think Jaejoong will be fine." Micky reassured the other singer, a quick nod in Yunho's direction. "Yunnies will be taking care of him from now on. We don't have to be as protective, I don't think."

“We can turn our attentions to Changmin, too long neglected.” The other burst into a quick dash of laughter as the youngest member of their group stomped over to them, his face dabbed with tiny yellow painted stars, a swirl of blue just under one of his eyes. “Ah, you look like you’ve fallen face first into the sky.”

“She was pretty.” Changmin made a face, sticking his tongue out at the young man teasing him. “I’ll show her to you and I bet you’ll walk away with your face painted.”

“No, I’m fine.” Junsu disagreed, shaking his head. Bumping Yoochun with his shoulder, he replied to Changmin’s snort of derision. “I have enough pretty people in my life. I don’t need to fall in love with any more.”

“Ah, I’m too young to fall in love. Besides, I’ve seen what it’s done to Jaejoong.” Changmin’s cute face melted into a syrupy handsomeness, his arms spread out wide as he turned in a slow circle, walking in front of the other two. “I don’t think I’m ready to hurt that much.”

“When it’s right...” Yoochun said slowly, his eyes on the two young men still sitting together, Jaejoong’s hood nearly obscuring their faces, Yunho pressed in close as if listening to what the other was saying. There were no words being passed between them, just a long heated stare into one another’s eyes. “When it’s right, Min... the pain of love is all worth it.”

That day passed into the deep starkness of a winter night. Tired, the five returned to the apartment they shared, Changmin cradling a large stuffed polar bear, a prize won by a skilled Junsu. Micky refused the offer of selecting from the toys hanging from a wire over the stacked milk jugs, whispering into the cheerful Su’s ear that he was more than happy to share the lavender bunny that slept in their room. The others exhorted Min to make a selection, the carnival worker grabbing down the white ursine, Yunho remarking that it matched Jae’s jacket.

A few days later, Yunho found he’d discovered a new level of frustration in trying to find time to spend alone with Jaejoong, their hours filled to the brim with practices and interviews. Evenings were passed in the company of the others, sometimes their bodies too exhausted to do anything other than collapse into any flat surface they found. There were scant seconds of privacy, not much time for more than a stolen kisses in the kitchen. Yunho still winced at the memory of Jaejoong’s shocked expression when Changmin rounded the corner, the youngest’s

ears a burgundy flush at the sight of the group's leader cupping Jae close to his groin, the singer tucked into the V of Yunho's spread thighs.

Jaejoong waited until the others were occupied with other things before slipping out of the front door. Yunho and Junsu watching a soccer match, yelling in encouragement as the ball bounced over the cropped grass field, the announcer screaming with a string of excited Spanish in the background of the game. Micky retired to the music room, picking out a tune he was working on, the keyboard silenced with a pair of headphones, his hair sticking up around the band. Changmin grunted a goodbye when Jae told him he was leaving, not looking up from the comic book he was reading, his long legs draped over the arm of an overstuffed wing chair.

"Where are you going?" Yunho caught up with Jaejoong in the foyer, their bodies hidden by a wide wall, the noise of the television carrying into the small space, bouncing off of the walls and the marble floor.

The leader placed his hands on Jae's slender waist, spanning his fingers around the other's trim back. Yunho felt the power of muscle beneath the soft, velvet skin hidden from his view by thick clothing and his mouth dried instantly, a parched desert that would only be satisfied by a thunderstorm of Jaejoong's body under him.

"I'm going to go see Scarlet." Jae tugged at Yunho's shirt, leaning over to inhale the cologne the other wore. The spiced green tea blend aroused more than his smile, a push of flesh against Yunho's thigh making the leader grin in return.

"I don't want you going down there alone." The vocalist peered around his shoulder, looking for any of the others before teasing a sensually long kiss from Jae's mouth.

The lead singer parted his lips eagerly for the invasion, sucking on the honeycomb sweetness of the other man's tongue, licking at the back of Yunho's teeth with a slow precision. Jae knew the intimate licks drove Yunho crazy, the other man's legs bracketing his body, holding the singer against the wall as Yunho attempted to crawl into Jae's soul, using his mouth as a portal to a personal heaven he dreamed of nightly.

Gasping, Jae panted when Yunho pulled back, their attention plumbd by a noise from the kitchen. Junsu shouted down the hall for the group's leader, thinking Yunho had sprinted to the bathroom during a commercial.

“Hold on. Let me get a coat and I’ll go with you.” Yunho frowned, teasing Jaejoong’s lower lip with a nip of sharp teeth, sucking hard on the plumpness there. “It makes me crazy thinking that you’ll be down...there...all of those men looking at you.”

“No one will touch me...but you.” Jaejoong reassured Yunho, smoothing down the crease between the other’s eyes, trying to work the frown off of the young man’s forehead. “I know those streets. I’ll be fine. Look, I’m taking my cell phone. If there are any problems, I’ll call.”

“I don’t know...” Yunho hedged, his emotions running hot. He’d not let Jaejoong travel to Itawon alone, not since he’d...discovered how deeply he cared about the singer. Yunho had been down to Jae’s old haunts once, an experience leaving an uncomfortable stain on his thoughts.

“I can’t talk to Scarlet with you there.” Jae insisted, pushing at the other man’s chest lightly. “I need to talk about...things. And it would be better if she didn’t know I was going to talk about you. We need to be discreet...remember?”

“I hate this.” Yunho gritted his teeth, resting his head briefly on the other’s forehead, pressing an imprint of himself on Jae for the singer to take with him. “I want you to promise that you’ll call.”

“I promise.” Jae crossed himself solemnly. Reluctantly, the singer pulled free from the womb of Yunho’s hard body, taking with him the other man’s kiss in his mouth. “Now go back before Junsu finds you gone. You’ll have to explain why you’re in the hallway looking at blank walls.”

A cab took Kim Jaejoong back to a place he thought he’d left far behind, the cluster of densely packed streets of Itaewon, south of the soaring Seoul Tower, the needle scraping at the clouds in the South Korean sky. Stepping out of the car, Jaejoong paid the driver, then turned to drink in the neighbourhood that nursed him during the hardest times of his life.

Groups of Koreans strolled the busy streets, the crowd lightly sprinkled with the cropped haircut sporting American servicemen that lived on the base nearby. Several blond men glanced as Jaejoong walked by, his face nearly hidden by the fringe of his dark hair. A knitted cap covered his head, the yarn warm from the heat of his body. Winter still hugged the windswept landscape, bits of snow clinging to the ledges of the buildings, neon signs flickering to advertise the attractions within.

To keep warm, Jae had taken Yunho's jacket, the fleece smelling of vanilla and CkOne, mingled with the erotic scent of masculine sweat, the brush of the man who fascinated rubbing on Jaejoong's clothed body. Sticking his hands in the pockets, Jae felt the rustle of what he thought was paper, pulling out the scraps to discover dried rose petals softened by the heat of his fingers. Smiling to himself, the pretty faced singer headed down the alley, looking for a door that would give him much needed knowledge.

Climbing the three flights of stairs that wrapped up the side of a brick building, Jaejoong found himself standing outside of a familiar red door, its frame battered from the elements. A cheerful plastic cat hung from a nail at the side, its button nose glowing. Pressing at the feline's face, Jae heard the bell ring inside the apartment, a singsong Thai chant announcing company.

A few moments passed without an answer and another press to summon the apartment's inhabitant, Jaejoong rubbing at his arms to keep warm. The treadfall of a heavy foot echoed behind the door, the slashing jangle of chains then the door opening just a crack for a bloodshot brown eye to peer out at the beauty standing in the cold.

"Ah! Marikit!" A large, buxom man opened the door, his fleshy arms flung open to embrace the pretty boy standing quiet. "Oh, you are a beautiful sight for an old woman's eyes!"

The older man's face bore the ravages of a hard life, pitted along the ridges of his cheekbones, his dusky skin a pallid landscape sagging under the weight of time. A faded beauty hung on his bones, a grace holding in his mannerisms, hands waving in a gentle dance of welcome to the young Korean man he'd not seen in a few months. A wrap turban hid Scarlet's balding pate, a fringe of greying black hair peeking out from under the bright blue terrycloth.

"Auntie." Jaejoong hugged the man back, swallowed up by the girth of the man's chest. "It's good to see you, again."

A loose floral caftan swaddled the man's body, nearly hiding the hourglass figure he preened before audiences at a nightclub a few blocks away. Fluttering his lashes up at the taller man, Scarlet pressed a series of moist kisses on Jae's face, pulling him out of the cold and into the small apartment. The interior boasted a wealth of furnishings, pieces gleaned from bargain shops and estate sales, Scarlet's discerning eye always on the lookout for a deal. The Filipino led to a couch, dislodging a

fat, insolent cat sprawled over most of one cushion, its yellow eyes baleful at being ejected in favour of another feline.

Over the dining room table, a framed poster of Jaejoong surrounded by the others in the group hung proudly, scrawled signatures in a glittering gold ink brilliant against the seedy print of water-stained wallpaper. Scarlet slapped at Jaejoong's shoulder, hurrying to the kitchen to make tea, ignoring Jae's protests that he was fine. Water rushed into a stainless steel teapot, the fire on the stove welcoming its flat copper bottom. The man hurried back into the living room, grasping at Jae's hands as he sat. Leaning over, Scarlet planted a final kiss on the young singer's cheek, wiping at the faint trace of lipstick he left behind.

"It's always good to have you come by. It's so nice to see our Beauty visit the old neighbourhood. Even as popular as you are, you still have time for Auntie Scarlet." The man grabbed at a jeweled tobacco case, his long nails clicking on the rhinestone cover. He selected a pastel-papered cigarette, lighting its end with a practiced flick of his thumb on a disposable lighter. Inhaling the rush of acrid smoke, the older man turned his head, exhaling away from the young singer. "Tell me, how are you?"

"Good." Jae nodded, resting his elbows on his knees. The room felt so comfortable, a letter from a home left behind in childhood. A few new touches had been added, stray objects collected for their beauty and value.

It had been too long since Jae last returned to the pink light district of South Korea's underbelly. He felt he owed the other man nearly everything...especially after Scarlet had taken him in after he'd stumbled upon a job at Trance. The club was popular, the Filipino gathering a large following for his spot-on impersonation of faded African-American singers a huge hit with tourists and locals alike. One look at the gaunt beauty clothed in ragged jeans and a worn Henley and Scarlet's heart melted, entranced and more than a little in love with the lost boy washed into Seoul's gutters.

The cat-hair covered couch Jae now sat on had served as his bed in the past, Jae's meager paycheck as one of Trance's waiters barely enough to feed a mouse, much less a growing young man. While the yellow-eyed Persian was a new addition to the apartment, Jae knew that a few more lurked in the back rooms, gleefully plotting to strike as his ankles should he stray into their territory.

Scarlet often set out food for his young charge before leaving for the midnight show, admonishing Jaejoong to lock the door behind him, the impersonator knowing full well of the predators that lurked in the dark alleys outside. He'd come home more than once to find an amorous drunk pounding on the apartment door, intent on reaching the delectable Jaejoong barricaded inside. A few of Scarlet's escorts served double duty in walking the wilted beauty home... sometimes being called upon to roust an overly aggressive local looking for something wet to sate his lust on.

The soft expression in his face caught Scarlet's canny eye, his hand reaching out to court the permanent pout on Jae's lower lip. Jaejoong's shy smile creased under Scarlet's index finger, his sloe-eyed gaze bashful under the probing investigation in Scarlet's malleable face.

"You're in love." Scarlet sighed, placing a hand against the rounded cleavage rising from his chest. The man patted at the spot above his heart, feigning a swoon. "Ah, someone has caught my dear little Joongie's heart."

"Is it that obvious?" Jaejoong blushed, wondering if he had any blood left in his body to go to his face. He seemed to have spent the last few days either covering his face or his groin, the rush of his desires flooding from one end of his body to the next.

"Someone there?" Scarlet asked, pointing towards the hanging poster. "Or someone else? That delicious Kang-ta boy?"

"Eh, no." Jaejoong shook his head at the mention of the former H.O.T. member. "Someone in the group."

"Ah, it's best then that Auntie doesn't know his name then." Scarlet followed Jae's eyes to Yunho's image, the leader standing to the side, his sleek body draped in a form fitting black. "And you came here because..."

"Because I'm...unsure of some things, Auntie." Jaejoong wanted to find a soft spot in the couch cushions and sink down into the feathers. His fears that he would be permanently red by the end of any conversation involving Yunho were realized. Even the sheer thought of the other young man made his body weep. The twitch of his sex and his palms wetting with sweat made Jae even more nervous, telltale signs of his obsession with Yunho and the want of the other man's mouth on his body.

“Some things or everything?” A quirk of a plucked eyebrow firmed this conversation into reality, Jaejoong realizing that this would be a bold foray into places that his body seemed to be all too aware of, his mind lagging too far behind.

“Kissing...I’m sure of.” Jaejoong worried at his thumb, pulling at the skin by his nail. “He doesn’t seem to have any complaints about that. But the rest...”

Jae gulped, trying to force himself to remain clinical in his questions, the image of Yunho lying naked on a bed, under the wet of Jae’s tongue not helping matters. Another swallow rippled his throat, still stained with the taste of the other man in his throat. “I know what feels good to me but... how do I...”

“Anything past kissing.” Jaejoong admitted, throwing his hands up in the air. “I...want him to feel like...he’ll never need anyone else but me. But I don’t know how to.”

“Well then, little boy, let Auntie Scarlet tell you what to do.” The older man patted Jaejoong’s thigh. “But honey, let me tell you... just a kiss from you every day will keep that boy at your side. You’re a forever thing.”

Evening crested into the early morning, dawn whispering a seductive come hither to the horizon. Yunho sat on the couch, checking the reception of his cell phone, the pale blue light catching on the worry etched deep into his troubled eyes. The clock ticked away seconds, long spans of anguished breaths unfilled with the sight of Jaejoong next to him.

The doorknob turned, a soft click that drew Yunho to his feet. Bounding around the retaining wall, the leader’s legs made quick work of the tile floor, skidding to a stop just as Jaejoong closed the door behind him. Hands slamming into the wood on either side of his head startled the singer, a yelp scraping up from his belly.

“Where have you been? What took you so long?” Yunho tossed aside his worry for fury, fists ensconced against the wall, pinning the singer in place. “You said you would call. Are you alright?”

“I said I would call if I got into trouble.” Jae unzipped the jacket he borrowed from Yunho’s closet, holding it open for the other to see that he was unhurt. “I’m fine. It just ran long.”

“Did...he...she...” Yunho struggled with the concept of Scarlet in his mind, wondering how much of his future with Jaejoong would hold the foibles of the singer’s unorthodox life. “What do I call him?”

“She. You call her a she.” Jaejoong pressed a light kiss on the corner of Yunho’s mouth, sliding under the young man’s arm. “And yes, Scarlet gave me good advice. Probably better than a book. But I have to talk to Yoochun first. Then I’ll come spend time with you before we go to bed.”

“Before I go to the couch.” Yunho muttered at the empty, cooling space Jaejoong left behind. “I haven’t seen a bed in two weeks.”

“Chunnie-ah?” Jaejoong tiptoed into the far bedroom, shivering at the sight of the open window, the icy winter night oozing a nipiness on Jae’s pretty face. He regretted leaving Yunho behind. His body was already complaining about the lack of the other young man against him, rough hands on his back, pressing him closer to a firm heat Jae wanted to bite down into, letting the skin roll between his teeth. Shaking himself back to the bedroom around him, Jaejoong stepped further in, peering towards the beds.

Junsu lay asleep, the covers kicked off of his body, a loose pair of boxers holding back the cold. A disreputable plush rabbit winked with button eyes at the singer as Jaejoong eased into the tight space between the beds. Yoochun curled around a pillow, lying on his side, his handsome, gentle face peaceful in the repose of sleep. Leaning over, Jae shook at Yoochun’s shoulder, holding a finger to Micky’s lips when he woke with a start.

“Is everything okay?” Yoochun cast a wild eye at Junsu, the sleeping young man mumbling as he turned over, his back tight with the grooves of supple muscle. The sight made him ache, a familiar sensation to his gut, easing the concern of injury to at least one of the group.

“Every thing is fine. Everyone is fine.” Jaejoong nodded, tucking his knees underneath him as he sat on Yoochun’s bed, curled up against the cold wall. “I just need to ask you a favour.”

“Couldn’t this wait until morning, Joongie-ah? I don’t even know what time it is.” Reaching over, Micky tugged the covers back over Junsu’s torso, tucking the ends under so they wouldn’t work loose as the other slumbered.

"It's a fast question." The singer leaned over, speaking conspiratorially into his friend's ear. "I need you to take the others out tomorrow or maybe the day after. For a few hours at least. I need...some time alone with Yunho."

"What's in it for me?" Micky's sly grin whispered over his face, a wicked coaxing to negotiate. "Chocolate for a month? Maybe my laundry? Two weeks of clean clothes can buy you a lot of cooperation on my part."

"Something better. When you need me to, I'll keep Changmin and Yunho occupied for a few hours." Jae promised, scratching at the back of his head where the wind nibbled. "What do they say, quid pro quo?"

"What about Junsu?" Yoochun asked, curious as to what the other singer was saying. "He..."

"I'm a mess and chaotic. And I'm not always aware of what's going on around me, I know this." Jaejoong scoffed. "But I'm not stupid, Chunnie-ah. We both know about Junsu...how you feel about Junsu."

"You haven't..." Micky's eyes widened in alarm, looking over at the young man asleep on the bed.

"I haven't said anything to him, Chunnie-ah. I know you have to do that yourself. If anyone knows, it's me." Jaejoong replied. "But I can see it in your face. Like I see it in mine for Yunho. I need this time with him, Chunnie. Please. I'll help you if you help me. Do we have a deal?"

Nineteen

Changmin's body fell under the wave of head colds pushing its way through South Korea, his thin-framed body wracked from bouts of coughing, his lungs pressed from lack of air. The others hovered near, each taking turns in fetching the youngest singer hot soups and teas, cupping their hands in small rapid beats on his back and chest to loosen the cold. Yunho returned to his bed, sleeping between Min and Jaejoong, his sleepless nights spent listening to the others breathe, the tortured rattle of Changmin's throat coupled with Jae's restless slumber.

They'd turned the heat up, a concession to Changmin's cold...even Yoochun closing their bedroom window tight to prevent a draft. Pairs of socks periodically were pulled out of the dryer, the warm fluffy tubes a delightful toasty feeling for Min's chilled toes. The room smelled of Tiger Balm, a familiar cloves and cinnamon scent rubbed over the youngest's chest and over his temples, his nose red from sniffles.

The group was reluctant to leave him alone, sometimes going to practice in shifts, always one of them sitting in the apartment, checking on the sleeping boy and making sure he drank enough liquids to sustain his body. Jaejoong worked at boiling down chickens, spicing the broth with fresh sage and garlic, adding just enough soy sauce to bring the stock a rich fullness but not too much that would leech the salts from Min's tired body.

Two weeks of Min's illness wore them all down, frazzled with worry and the sheer exhaustion of caring for their youngest member. Changmin's mother spent time at the apartment, trying to balance her son's needs with the rest of the family, leaving in the afternoon assured that the group would spend the evening at Min's beck and call.

Within a few days of the cold leaving Min's system, Jaejoong heard the dripping sparkle of ice melting off of the tree branches outside of their apartment. The singer enjoyed listening to the crackle of icicles falling, a wind chime shattering of frozen lace against the hard, wet cement below. Closing his eyes, Jae listened to the beat of the music the world hummed, from the fresh aria of ice drops to the bass thrum of cars lilting through the city streets.

Today was the first day of practice with all of them present, a new choreographer stepping in to alter the complicated dance routine that troubled Jaejoong's feet. The new setup was easier, if only for the pleasant coaxing of the instructor, her soft voice and pleasant mannerisms an easy guide to follow along to. She often stopped, making certain that Changmin wasn't overtaxed, sliding her hands onto Jae's thighs and moving his supple body into the proper position. Yunho's stirs of jealousy rankled in his gut, a firm set to his jaw each time the dancer handled Jaejoong in front of him. A quick smile from the singer usually set his ruffled temper to rights, the flash of white teeth coyly sweet.

Yoochun sidled up to Jaejoong's side, the singer braced against the far wall of the studio, resting after completing a turn of his section. The tall, slender young man leaned against his friend when Micky stood next to him, offering his shoulder as support for his head, their eyes following the other three breaking down the more complicated pieces of their steps.

"I'm glad Changmin is better but..." Jaejoong groaned softly, a gentle reproach of longing. "my life has been on hold. And listen to me, I sound like a whining child."

"Just because you're the elder doesn't mean you are any wiser than the rest of us." The other singer scoffed. "Changmin seems to have a better grasp of the world than the four of us combined."

"I miss having time with Yunho." Jaejoong watched the young man who captured his heart, the leader's eyes meeting his in the reflection of the mirror. A quick wink caught a smile on Jaejoong's mobile face. "I've... we've not had any time alone. Except for that trip to the grocer to get noodles for Min."

"Time with Yunho?" Micky spent hours perfecting his look of wicked innocence, a sidelong glance he now tossed at Jaejoong's frustration. "I can't imagine why you would want time with Yunho."

"Oh, you are funny, Chunnie-ah." The lead singer bared his teeth in a wild snarl, mocking a threat.

"Especially since that trip to the grocer took you forty-five minutes and you came back covering your mouth because it was swollen from being kissed." Micky easily absorbed the light fist Jaejoong shot to his stomach. "And the grocer is just downstairs off the main lobby."

“We wanted the very best noodles the shop had to offer.” Jaejoong replied, remembering the nearly-frantic bout of kisses he shared with Yunho in the stairwell, ducking out only when the old woman from the floor above snuck into the upper level to have a cigarette. “It took time to sort it all out.”

“You are a bad liar, Kim Jaejoong.” Micky shook his head, watching Junsu dive down to the floor, his sweat pants pulled down underneath his legs.

“I think Yunho is forgetting how I taste.” Jaejoong dug another jab at Yoochun’s belly as the other singer rolled his eyes back in disbelief. “Just a little time, that’s all I’m asking.”

“Besides, you will have plenty of time, today after practice.” Yoochun said quietly, keeping his face schooled in a faint innocence. “I’m going to take Changmin and Junsu to watch the Lord of the Rings at the Dongsung Cinematheque. It’s a special event...uncut and subbed, lettering on the side instead of on the bottom like English. I already have the tickets and told them we are going to celebrate Minnie-ah’s recovery.”

Jaejoong’s head lifted from Yoochun’s shoulder, the implications of what his friend was saying slowly dawning in the recesses of his mind. “I am in love with you. What little space is left in my heart after Yunho fills it, belongs to you, Chunnie-ah.”

“Joongie!” Yunho opened the front door to their apartment, his hair damp from the shower he took at the studio. He was surprised and rather hurt when Yoochun told him he, Changmin and Junsu were going to the movies, an American film that none of them had seen before... a theatrical event he would have loved to attend. That is until Micky told him Jaejoong was at home waiting for him...and had been for nearly an hour.

His jacket flew, a cast off shred of civility stitched into a strait jacket he could barely work free from. Yunho checked the kitchen first, the smell of food wafting through the apartment. There were signs the singer spent some time in the kitchen, the dish drainer packed with drying bowls. Tiny circles of light shone down on the granite counters, splashes of yellow melon kisses on cold stone. An echoing rejoinder sounded from the inside of their bedroom, Yunho’s nose drawing him through the lit main hall.

The door to their bedroom was open, a cracked sliver of a dream forged from wood and metal. The overhead light was off, the interior lit by candles, resurrected from an evening of angry words and rose petals, given a new life under the guise of seduction. A tea pot steamed hot over an extinguished sterno burner, the water bubbling above a sweet pink flame, a gentle heat working through the liquid. There were bowls of food on a low table by Changmin's bed, laid out in a balance of rice, meat and vegetables, a delectable offering to a starving young man but not what captured Yunho's hunger.

Yunho came to a skidding halt, his breath taken away at the heaven inside of his bedroom.

White flimsy crepe draped over the lamps, softening the light brushing gentle strokes over Jaejoong's face, the young man standing besides their beds, abutted up against one another, the mattresses covered with soft faux furs, rich chinchilla blankets spread with downy pillows. The singer hooked his thumbs into the belt loops on his jeans, the denim worn nearly white in the thighs. A tear along the knee winked a pale swath of skin, a blood-red t-shirt riding up over Jae's stomach, giving Yunho a nice long look at the singer's rippled abdomen.

"God." A sweet prayer escaped from Yunho's gaping mouth, the leader's breath taken away as he drank in the vista laid out before him. His fingers reached out, trembling when he reached the span of flesh, dipped black with the curve of Jae's belly button, a ring of gold strung through the skin above his navel. His own green tea based cologne ran fragrant fingers over Jaejoong's bared neck, an enticement made erotic at finding his own scent on the singer's hot flesh.

"You need to go talk to Scarlet more often." Yunho whistled under his breath, hot air rushing over his clenched lips.

Moving towards Jaejoong, the leader cupped the singer's face, feeling the velvet of Jae's skin on his palms. The soft downy black near the singer's ears ran silk under Yunho's thumbs, the singer's mouth parting at the pressure on his jaw. A sip of sugared sex burst under Yunho's tongue, Jae's lips sucking at the tip, pulling the leader into his own moistness. Supple and loose-boned, Jae wrapped one leg over Yunho's shin, wanting to devour as much of the leader as he could into his being...into his very soul.

Yunho's breath came back to him, big gulping spasms of air leaping into his body, energizing the blood running hot along the inside of his legs. A step closer brought Jaejoong into Yunho's arms, the singer pouring into

the crook of Yunho's neck, a press of a full-bodied mouth nipping on the soft skin under Yunho's chin.

A dark moan crested in Yunho's throat, one hand wrapped tight in the singer's lush hair, a rich black satin Yunho knew no fur could rival in softness. Honey sat just beyond the promise of Jae's mouth, plumbed when Yunho drove Jaejoong down onto the bed, the singer's knees buckling at the edge of the mattress. Woofs of air burst from the feather pillows, Jae's raw giggle burst into stars of laughter against Yunho's throat, the singer's tongue lapping at the juncture of the sinewed column.

"You look nice." Sharp teeth bit down into Jae's shoulder, dimpling his golden skin. Strong hands yanked the singer in close, digging into the curve under his rib cage. A sheaf of streaked brown hair rasped Jae's collarbone, a tongue laving the spot just bitten. "Taste nice too."

Yunho licked at the wet spot he'd left, trying to swallow the taste of the singer and roll it around the moistness of his mouth. The leader let his palms spread across the singer's stomach, feeling his strong pulse along the lifelines slipping up between his fingers.

The hem of Yunho's soft t-shirt gaped free from his pants, stretches of sun-darkened skin peeking out. Strong abdominal muscles were hinted in the rippling shadows, fitting the curve of Jae's body into the furrow below his diaphragm. Jaejoong tilted his head back, staring up at the handsome face, seductive with crinkled smiling cinnamon eyes and wide grin. Yunho's hand reached out, snagging the golden ring piercing Jae's navel between pinched fingers. Crooning lightly, Yunho held the singer closer, bending down to capture the young man's mouth with his own.

"Tell me you like this." Yunho husked, urging the singer to give into the inferno building between them.

"You feel... so good. So much like sin and temptation. And fire. You make me feel as if I am plunging into the fires at the centre of the world...and not caring because it is you." Jae gasped, finding Yunho's mouth again and suckling the breath from it. "I want the taste of you to erase everything...the world... the moon. I want the feel of you... the thickness of you inside of me until I can't feel anything but you any more. I want to take every bit of my body that has been untouched...every single inch of it and rub it so all that is left of me is you...the taste of you. The feel of you. Everything about you."

Another kiss, deeper and hitting something primal inside of Jae he didn't even realize lay beneath the churning surface of his thoughts. He wanted this man...this entrancement... in ways that made him ache and Yunho's answering rake of teeth over Jae's exposed nipple enflamed the uncontrollable tempest scorching its way through his bones.

"Say you want this." Working his hands into *his* Jae's long silken mane, Yunho muttered against Jaejoong's chest, working his way back up to the singer's shoulder. Jae writhed under Yunho's desire-darkened eyes, peering up at the leader from under thick sooty lashes, head bowed and intent on the hammering pulse working under his own skin. Yunho gripped Jae's biceps, digging into the flesh until it dimpled beneath his intensity. "I want to hear you say...something...say that you need me."

"I want this." Jae's husky smoke of a whisper flared. Swallowing, he looked deep into Yunho's face, a sigh of relief slipping past the desire threatening to choke him, he said it again, slowly to let the words sink into Yunho's heart. "I've wanted this. Every time you touch me, I die inside because I'm afraid that it will be the last time you touch me...the last time you kiss me. And ...that would kill me, Yunho."

"Let me...show you how I feel...what I want." Jaejoong worked his way down Yunho's body. "We promised we would take this slowly. I want to do things to make you... want. Make you cry my name."

"I don't...want to hurt you. It would kill me to hurt you, BooJae." Yunho stroked at Jae's cheek, rubbing at the scallop of a scar on his face. Some of the things Scarlet conveyed to the attentive Jaejoong worried Yunho, the leader barely reassured when the singer told him it would be alright if they took their experimentation slowly. Save for a few dark overhangs filled with passion and his fingers working themselves over Jae's partially nude body, Yunho's chances to explore Jaejoong had been limited.

"Let me do this first." Jaejoong broke free of Yunho's embrace, crawling back on his knees until he straddled the leader's thighs. A quick pull of a drawstring loosened Yunho's waistband, the young man urged with a press of Jae's hands to lift up his hips. The cotton pants fell quickly to the floor, Jae's mouth laving at the elastic band of Yunho's boxers.

"Joongie..." Yunho held Jaejoong's shoulders, lifting him slightly from his intent. "I don't know..."

"I do." Jae nodded solemnly, laying a single kiss on the other's stomach. He gathered his will to push forward, facing the unknown of what he

was about to do. His guts broiled with fear, mostly for his concern that Yunho wouldn't find pleasure in his mouth. "I want to taste you. I want to taste everything from you. Please. Let me."

Yunho made no further protest when Jaejoong slipped his fingers into the elastic, pulling it down until Yunho's hardened flesh revealed itself. Jae stroked at the skin below the leader's belly, watching the skin curl down over the long blue vein wrapped around Yunho's shaft. Intimidated by the girth lengthening under his probing fingers, Jae bent his head down, taking an experimental lick with the top of his tongue.

The taste surprised him, a musky roll of flavours more exotic than anything Jae had ever had on his tongue. With a shocked look, he glanced up at Yunho's face, the other's slit-shut eyes and parted lips urging Jae to continue with a gruff command, the leader's hand gripping the back of Jaejoong's head.

"Don't stop." Yunho's voice broke, his control wavering under Jae's mouth dropping down, his full mouth stretched to cover the spongy flesh of Yunho's shaft. Jaejoong's innate curiosity driving him forward, led by the guiding hand tangled in his long hair.

A ridge ran along Yunho's glans, Jaejoong lightly brushing his teeth over the delicate flesh, feeling Yunho's shaft jump in response. Delighted at the power he had over the other, Jaejoong licked again, a stronger push of his tongue over the head. His fingers fondled at the plum-tight sack under Yunho's cock, stroking at the wiry hair barely lipping over the wrinkled flesh. A sweet pungency permeated Jaejoong's senses, the intimate scent of a lover now ingrained into his heart.

"Careful..." Yunho hissed, his body jerking sharp when Jae's teeth grazed too hard on the sensitive nub, a shivering nerve shuddering in his spine. Jaejoong opened his mouth wider, running his tongue down the shaft and then sucked once, pulling up to curve his lips around the weeping bulb.

Jae's free hand worked at the buttons on his jeans, splaying the fly open so he could reach his own sex. Yunho lifted his head, trying to reach at the young man's body, fingers roaming to find anything he could touch, the nub of a nipple... the curve of a strong chin... the brushing sweep of a delicate earlobe run through with silver.

"Come here. Let me at least touch you." Yunho begged, satiation filling him as Jaejoong angled his body, jeans pulled off with a twist of his hips. His shirt lay in near shreds, torn at the collar by Yunho's questing,

impatient hands. Naked, Jae lay on his side, his hard flesh cupped in Yunho's hand, the young leader's palm made wet from the leaking fluid of Jae's seed.

The suckling continued, Jaejoong reaching the back of his mouth with a thrust of Yunho's hips. Jae nearly gagged when the tip hit his soft palate, a harsh breath through his nose working the influx until the sensation dropped off. Throwing a thankful prayer to Scarlet, Jae continued, exploring every inch of Yunho's hard flesh, taking his time with his tongue and fingers.

Quickening, the tempo of Jae's strokes beat a hasty shiver over Yunho's shaft. Within the soft moistness of heat, Yunho clenched at the singer's flesh, working him between his fingers until Jae cried out, his body aching from holding himself back. In a rush, Jae laved apart the crease on the shaft head, sucking the salted pearl from its depths and over his tongue, marveling at the guttural hissings crawling out of Yunho's tortured throat.

Jae felt the hot seed pouring out, a fountain of need spraying a delicate mist of Yunho's first spurt. Wanting to take everything into him, Jae wrapped his mouth around the other man's shaft, holding the tip between his pout, his tongue working the sensitive velvet underneath. Yunho's hips thrust upwards, driving deeper in Jae's heat, searching for the moistness he knew lay in Jae's depths.

"Jaejoong." A single word, carried everything inside of it. Crawling up from the depths of Yunho's heart, it filled Jaejoong nearly as much as the length of Yunho's body. Tingles built on each wave of sensation, the sounds of Yunho's breathing mingled with his won and then the night stretched out before them, minutes bleeding away beneath them. Their bodies melded, sweat binding them as their souls reached out and wrapped around one another.

It took them both by surprise, the losing of their control. For the longest time, neither of them wanted to give in to that sensation...the building and cresting of their bodies' seed spilling loose. Gritting his teeth, Yunho watched what he could of Jaejoong's face, his hands roaming over the young singer's shoulders and gripping tightly, cupping Jae's head to match each thrust of his hips.

Unable to take the overwhelming tide of emotions, Jaejoong's fists clenched, working fistfuls of sheets under his fingers and cried out, taking his lover over the edge of reason. The singer's body responded to the taste of the other in him, his own seed bursting against the

roughness of Yunho's palm, filling the leader's hand and running through his fingers.

Yunho stared down at the milky fluid, grateful for the release. He'd come as close as he could to holding Jaejoong's insides just by cupping his hand and catching the spent of the singer's body... a treasure he never imagined he would ever hold. Yunho sighed, reluctant to wipe his hand clean, wanting to absorb Jae's soul through his skin until the other lived inside of him. A moan brought him back to the now of their tangled bodies, Jae licking Yunho's thighs with a skilled, supple tongue.

Working his hands under Jae's arms, the leader pulled the young man up, lifting him around until they faced one another. Yunho's mouth found Jaejoong's, drawing out one final kiss as he suddenly released again, finding the taste of himself in Jae's sexy mouth more than he could handle. Cradling his lover close to his body as they shuddered inside each other's arms.

Panting, hair beaded with sweat, Jaejoong pressed his face into the crook of Yunho's neck, licking the salt away from his lover's skin with a gentle press of his lips. His body convulsed as Yunho's hands slid free from Jae's shoulders, leaving behind an emptiness that filled immediately with the tender love from Yunho's kiss on his nose. The flat of Jaejoong's hand rested on Yunho's stomach, lifting with each breath the leader took, listening to Yunho's heart, finding the music in a beat that matched his own.

Jae heard it when Yunho dropped off past the threshold of sleep, his body easing into a gentle slumber. Held tight by the leader's strong arms, Jaejoong closed his eyes, trying to fight the sleep that threatened to claim him. A whisper of a moan, the remains of Yunho's sensuality escaped through the young man's dreams, a sweet candied kiss of a sound warming Jae's heart.

Tucking his head into the nook below Yunho's collarbone, Jae gave in to the wandering, languid sensation working through his bones, the night finally claiming him to rest. Mumbling an apology to Changmin for the mess they made, Jaejoong lay one final kiss above Yunho's nipple, hoping that the young man's heart would feel the affection it contained.

"I love you, Yunnies-ah." Jae sighed, closing his eyes and drifting off. "I am glad you held that kiss for me. You still hold my heart."

Twenty

Yunho sat outside of the bathroom door, his head leaned back against the firm wood. A few thumps of his skull resounded softly, a faint knocking to reach the young man inside. Yunho's body purred with languid pleasure, wanting nothing more than a stretching relaxation along the lean body of the lover he discovered inside of the inquisitive Jaejoong. His mind however had other issues, concentrating on setting some of Yunho's disrupted life to rights. Rubbing at his face, the leader sighed heavily, wondering how much more drama he would be able to take in loving Jaejoong.

He stared at the baseboards of the hallway, mentally digging in each detail, having gone over the terrain for more than a few minutes. Yunho could have described the wallpaper in detail, an eternity of memorizing each scribble and scrawl of the seagrass pattern below the chair rail. His body still held the tingle of Jaejoong, something he rubbed into his chest as he sat thinking.

There were parts of him that were seared from the singer's touch, the imprint of those nearly-pornographic lips trailing still in Yunho's memory. Every inch of Jaejoong's skin left a realm of possibilities, forming and reforming as the leader imagined another hour...another night.. a lifetime of exploring the singer until he wept from pleasure and begged for its release. Yunho's shaft responded with the mere thought of Jaejoong's face, burred soft from a moan and sensual with desire.

"Minnie-ah..." Yunho called out, a melodic query. He would try to distract himself from burying his mind into time, back into the bedroom of candles and a lithe, naked Jae writhing to bring him to bliss. "When are you coming out? I need to talk to you about..."

"I am not done." Changmin shouted as he scrubbed at his shoulders, thinking of what to say to the older man. The hot water from the shower steamed through the bathroom, filling the enclosure and filming its glass panes. The rough length of scrubbing towel scraped away the day's oiliness from his tender skin, a blushing tan dappled with sunsprays of freckles on his chest. "I'll come find you when I'm done!"

“Is he still in there?” Yoochun sat down next to Yunho, the leader’s legs pulled up to make room for the other. Placing his hand on the floor between them, Micky clasped at Yunho’s fingers in comfort, a quick subtle embrace. Yunho smiled in lukewarm thanks, troubled still at the image of Changmin’s horrified face when he opened the bedroom door, exclaiming loudly enough he woke the two elder members.

It wasn’t quite a scream Jaejoong reasoned to himself when he mumbled in shame into the crux of Yunho’s chest, his face engorged with embarrassment. Yunho grabbed at the blankets, trying in vain to wrap any semblance of modesty around his lover. The two singers twisted and scrambled, doing nothing more than exposing more of themselves than covering. Changmin stared for a long moment, retrieved his towel from the hook by his bed and announced he was going to take a shower.

Micky could hear the water hitting the wall inside of the bathroom, drowning out nearly everything that could be happening inside of the tiny stall. “He could just be taking a shower. That’s what it sounds like.”

“I feel as if he’s washing away any sin he took into his brain at seeing Jaejoong and I...” Yunho’s features squished together in an elaborate show of remorse. “We fell asleep. I don’t think either one of us...imagined.. Changmin...”

“...Would walk in on you?” Micky bit at the inside of his cheek to avoid laughing, the sight of Yunho’s anguish precious to his glee. “It was rather... um... educational. I think that’s a good word for it. Educational. Junsu was thinking instructional but that would be... well, leading to other matters that I don’t think either one of us is ready for.”

“Please, Chunnie.” Yunho rested his forehead on his knees, wrapping his arms around his shins. “I’m already ashamed of what happened. Not of Jaejoong...never of Joongie-ah. Just... Changmin. Don’t make it worse.”

“It was nice. I’m glad that none of the candles caught anything on fire. And the tea definitely was cold. The pot was nearly iced over.” The tall singer ticked off the positives of the situation. He’d tried to stop Changmin from entering the bedroom but the youngest member had complained of feeling clammy, a residual of his cold. The door was open before either Junsu or Yoochun could stop him, the two lovers displayed before them in an erotic intertwine.

Yoochun swallowed hard, his throat rasping raw at the sight of Yunho cradling a naked Jaejoong to his body, the lean bodied singer’s legs wrapped between the leader’s thighs. Yunho’s hand lay on the curve of

Jaejoong's hip, fingers trailed down over the gentle pale rise of the vocalist's trim ass. The tiny bump of Junsu against the back of Yoochun's hip bluntly told the singer how erotic the image was, a gulping swallow audible over Yoochun's laboured breathing.

"It was good to see you and Jaejoong doing something together." Yoochun teased, failing to stifle his chuckle. He winced at the hot-tempered glance Yunho threw at him, the pointed look reminding the singer that their leader had very little sense of humour when his world spun a little out of control.

"Remember what I said about making it worse?" Yunho muttered, tapping the wall with his head, wishing the youngest out of the shower.

"Changmin will be fine, Yunho." The other singer consoled his leader, throwing an arm over Yunho's shoulder. "Min is a very open-minded person. He won't be offended by what he saw. He might not understand it...but he won't be offended."

"Why did we fall asleep?" Yunho lifted his eyes to the heavens. Squinting at the other man, the leader pondered. "Actually, why did you come home so soon?"

"Movies only last as long as they are filmed. That's how a movie works. There is a beginning...a longer middle and then the end. They expect you to leave when it's reached the end. We were gone for over four hours." Yoochun pointed out. "Besides, falling asleep was.. probably the least of the sins you committed today. You'll just have to sit and wait to speak to him, Yunnies. If he's traumatized, we'll work it out."

"He is too young to have been.. exposed to that." The leader thought for a moment, the cherished moments he shared with Jaejoong poignant in his heart. Yoochun's head slanted, a cocked warning of caution in his motion. The young man was fiercely protective of their feral street cat. "No, not *that*.. us. Changmin shouldn't have seen us like that. Not because it was wrong but because... he's just too young."

"Knowing Minnie-ah," Yoochun tsked knowingly, forgiving Yunho for his indirect slight. "You should have counted yourself lucky that he didn't just stand there and take notes."

Jaejoong sat hard on the edge of the bed he just pulled away from his own. Yunho's scent permeated his nose, running down his throat in a caramel salt heat. Junsu stood folding the faux-chinchilla coverlet,

sniffing at the weave, surreptitiously watching the other singer. The sex clung in the air, a perfume of musk and vanilla, drawing Junsu's thoughts to the young man he shared a room with.

They'd spoken of coupling and mingled kisses, clandestine whispers in the dark while the wind broke through the crack in the window, a agreeable sonnet to the poetry of their secrets. So many of their conversations of late centred around the sensual conflict between Yunho and Jaejoong, an aloud wondering if they would ever consummate the relationship the two other singers were working towards. Apparently, tonight Jae and Yunnies had...or at least the took steps towards some kind of fulfillment.

"Changmin.." Jaejoong started, stopping when Junsu held up his hand, shaking off the singer's words.

"You shouldn't worry so, Jaejoong." Junsu touched the singer's shoulder, his hand falling down to grip at Jae's bicep, skimming over the faint bruises Yunho's fingers left behind. "Minnie-ah... Yunho will talk to him. You'll find he will be fine."

"I just...worry." The singer collapsed, the mattress sinking down under his weight. "What I am....what I want... I don't want Changmin to think badly of Yunho just because of me."

"Is that what you think he believes?" Junsu's eyebrows lifted, surprise written on his face. "That what you shared was...bad?"

"No..." Jae's heart sank, fretting at the worry he caused to Yunho. The farthest thing he had in his mind was to make Yunho lesser in anyone's eyes. His heart wept at the thought of hiding who he was...what he was to everyone in the world but the day hadn't dawned on a time when he and Yunho could stand together on the beach, Yunho's arms wrapped around him as the sun stroked both of their upturned faces. Seoul, as metropolitan of a city as it claimed to be, still was haunted by the conservative strictures of an ancient culture.

"I think I might be...lying to myself, Junsu." Jaejoong continued, a heavy sigh dragging down the joy in his throat. It soured the taste of his lover, covert happiness ripened under the glowing aftermath of the time he'd spent cuddled against Yunho.

"Minnie's eyes were... shocked. Clouded. And I wonder... if I saw right. My gut just ached thinking about Changmin hating...Yunnies-ah. Hating me." The singer breathed a heavy pant through his parted lips, the night

strung over his face in dappled of shadows, the leaves from a tree outside dancing in front of a street lamp outside. "I wish to hell that we could be hand-in-hand, walking through Paris or London, just spending time outside with one another but the truth is...we can't. And I don't think Yunho would want to live a lie."

Junsu listened as Jaejoong poured out the weeping remains of angst in his heart. "Changmin's face tonight... that reminded me that outside of these walls...hell, inside of these walls, we can't be one. Not without risking Yunho...not without risking all of you."

"Changmin didn't see anything ugly, Jaejoong." Junsu insisted, pacing down between the beds, now separated by a gaping canyon of doubt. "Listen to me, Joongie-ah. Please, listen to me."

"It was beautiful, seeing you with him." The young man flopped down on Yunho's bed, tucking his hands behind his head, resting back on a pillow. Junsu felt comfortable, inured by love he felt when he walked into the room. "It wasn't wrong...it wasn't sin. It was just beautiful to walk in and find... you. Like that. Together. There was love there, even asleep, it was so thick around you, a blanket wrapped tight over your souls. It was ... like waking up and seeing the sun after lengths of storms that blocked out the day."

"It felt that way...when we were together." Jae whispered, holding his heart in his throat. "It was as if my body felt life for the first time. My heart started beating...shaking off the sawdust packed into my chest. I don't want to ever give that up...ever give him up. I can't have Changmin or anyone else look at him like that. I would rather give him up than see him...disrespected and tossed aside because of his love for me."

"I know that we... the group..." Junsu began, working for the words he wanted to speak. His joyous countenance solemnly still, a serious reflective nature revealed, a window pane cleared of a frosted, pretty lace. "We want you two to be happy. Even Changmin, I'm sure. He would want both of you to be happy."

"What everyone sees outside... should be what you want them to see. It's no one else's business but yours...but ours." The young man turned his head, staring up at Jaejoong's open face. "We're a family...bonded together, Joonie. Everything that you do inside of these walls is yours. No one else's. We won't let anyone take that from you."

Sitting up, Junsu cupped his friend's chin, placing a gentle kiss on Jae's mouth, a friendly affection. "We will protect you, Jaejoong. We'll protect both of you."

Changmin's bare foot struck Yunho's leg, the leader left barren in the hallway, devoid of any company after Yoochun's stomach growled in protest. The kitchen held the remains of Jaejoong's cooking, a dinner left forgotten under wanton kisses and exploratory fingers. Min's pajamas were damp between his shoulders, a small wet patch clinging to the curve of his spine, the light blue cotton dark with water.

"Yunnies-ah!" Min stared down at the elder, his almond eyes dewed from the shower spray. "I almost stepped on you."

"Is there any water left in Seoul?" Yunho stood carefully, the chill of the floor aching his hips. Steam poured from the open door, long tendrils seeking the cold outside. Yunho leaned against the wall, regarding the young man rubbing his hair dry with a towel.

"What's so important, hyung?" Changmin glanced down at the hall towards the bedrooms. "Did you.. and Jaejoong... are things alright?"

"Things are fine." Yunho breathed a sigh, guiding the youngest to the tiny room they used for music practice and in Changmin's case, a hard bout of all-night studying so he wouldn't wake the others. "I just wanted to talk to you about...what you saw."

"Ah." Min nodded, cocking his head, looping the towel over his shoulders. His streaked hair stuck out around his head, a porcupine of fringe laid down over his wide-eyed expression. Yunho had a crazed look about his eyes, something hovering just at the edge of unreason. "You're concerned about my...impressions."

"I'm more than concerned..." Yunho straddled a chair, leaning forward, his hands clenched over the seat's back. "Changmin...Minnie-ah, I just wanted to make sure that you understood about..."

"You and Jaejoong?" The youngest smiled, pushing himself forward on the futon sofa, his legs stretched out under the chair Yunho commandeered. "I knew about you two. I've known for a long time. Probably longer than you have. It took you long enough. I thought I was going to have to draw you a diagram soon."

“Min, I want you to understand that Jaejoong and I...we’re working ... we’re trying...” Yunho stumbled, his fingers rubbing at the pressure points of his temples. He didn’t know what he was saying. He didn’t even know what he could call his affection for Jaejoong, except for love...something forbidden to him in the world Yunho lived in. “I won’t be ashamed of what I feel for Jaejoong. I refuse to but I want you to understand that we’re... becoming closer and that sometimes it’s...”

“I’ve already had this talk with my mother, Yunnies-ah. We sat down together over a cup of tea and she explained a few things to me.” Changmin patted Yunho’s hands, their fingers worked together into a spider web of nerves. “She told me all about how our bodies work and what pieces to where. I don’t think you need to tell me as well.”

“Our Jaejoong has been draped in sorrow and pain for so long, it was a part of his very skin. It wept every time he spoke. I’m surprised it took you so long to feel that when you touched him.” The youngest spoke gently, easing the leader’s worries. “I am just glad you decided that sex with him was...alright. And that you’ve taken some steps to... make yourselves complete in one another.”

“What you saw tonight...it wasn’t just sex, Min.” Yunho rested his chin on the chair back, tousling Min’s hair with a free hand. He felt a great affection for the youngest one of the group, a baby brother he never had and now, couldn’t imagine living without. “I do love him. More than anyone else that I’ve ever felt love for before. But it’s new...and sometimes, I get lost in it and I don’t think...I don’t care for the other people around me. I’m sorry for that, Changmin.”

“I didn’t take care of you tonight, Minnie.” Yunho admitted slowly. “I should have taken more care of you...not hiding what we did but taken care of your privacies, of your sensibilities. So please, forgive me for this.”

“I’ll forgive you anything, hyung.” Changmin responded. “Except for breaking Jae’s heart. He means so much to you. If you hurt him, I think you’ll shatter who you are and you’ll never forgive yourself. I can see that, even not having been in love before, I can see the love you have for our Joongie.”

“But Yunnies-ah...” The youngest continued. “Please, take care of him. Of his heart and his body. Or else I fear, I will have to help Yoochun and Junsu hide your dismembered body. And Jaejoong will never forgive us if we blunted his kitchen knives.”

Twenty-One

Nothing remained of the day, night pulled tight around the hours left to them. The sun's rays had long been cooled from the walls of the apartment building, a final sting of winter's cold etching iced ferns on the broad windows overlooking the street. A single light burned in the living room, turning the red plush of the large sofa to blood, cradling two young men in its cavernous womb.

Yunho lay sprawled on his back, legs stretched down towards the window, holding a supple Jae curved onto his side, the singer's spine nudged up against the couch's back cushions. With his knees pulled up, Jae's weight rested mostly on Yunho's hip, the leader's hands roaming over the singer's curved muscles, stroking at the lower V of his waist. Jae's breathing was even, his soulful eyes half closed in thought, nibbling at the edge of his thumb as he listened to Yunho's heartbeat. Resting his cheek on the leader's chest gave Jaejoong comfort, the slow thumping of a bass beat driving into the depths of his soul, a music he would never tire of. Below his fingers, Yunho's pulse echoed the rhythm, a brassy counterpoint along the rise of the young man's neck.

They'd lain that way for nearly an hour now, full from a late dinner, just listening to the apartment noises as the others quieted down, settling into a heavy slumber. Both were tired from the heated discussion between the five, Junsu first suggesting that they move rooms so Jaejoong and Yunho could have privacy. A series of objections rounded hot among them, not the least of which was Jae insisting that no one's life be turned upside down by his needs and desires. Yunho had rounded on his lover, demanding to know the reasons for turning down the offer, the sloe-eyed singer pulling him aside to whisper in his ear, a hot suggestive sibilance that rounded Yunho's expression into one of wonder.

He'd changed his mind right then, refusing to switch rooms with the other two, Yunho's word final in the argument. The leader's tone would brook no interference with his decision, Junsu's objections overruled with a single pointed look. Yoochun shot Jaejoong a look of relieved gratitude, following up the mouthed thank you with a long hug, an embrace tight with relief and suppressed affections.

Yunho decided in lying there, that he never had a greater peace than in that moment when Jaejoong padded from the kitchen after putting away the dishes he'd washed. The leader had laid back, his stomach full from rice and hot vegetables, a spicy shrimp stew ladled into the bowl. Junsu just wished them a good night and headed back to the bedrooms, Changmin already asleep, fallen over in exhaustion from the long day. Yoochun wiped down the counter and hugged at his friend's waist, resting his chin on Jaejoong's shoulder to whisper a final quiet thank you, leaving the singer alone in the living room.

A pat on his stomach drew Jaejoong over, Yunho watching the long-limbed singer walk over the rug in deliberate, sensual steps. Yunho reached for Jae's hand, pulling him down on top of him, the singer sliding down around to rest on his side, easing into the space against the sofa back until both of them were comfortable, Jaejoong's long legs slanted across Yunho's thighs, bending back to rest on top of his shins.

With the thinness of Jae's t-shirt, Yunho found he could feel every line of muscle on the singer's body, even thumbing at the bar piercing Jae's nipple, the square ends plumping up the nub as it responded to Yunho's questing fingers. A soft moan breathed out of Jaejoong and into the emptiness in Yunho's soul, filling the void with a silken wet darkness of promise and need.

"I was afraid to break this moment with talking..." Jae whispered, his teeth nipping at Yunho's earlobe. "But speaking now, it feels so warm. Like the inside of you when you...gave me yourself on me...in my mouth. Can we lie here and never move?"

"If I could, I would keep us here like this forever. They would find us here when the sun finally burst from the sky." Yunho sighed, stroking at his lover's lower back, feeling the heaviness in his groin respond with a wakening desire. His sex pushed up into the curving hollow of Jae's hip, fitting into the space between them in a lazy furl, resting there in a comfortable pressing desire sated merely by the presence of the young man's body. "This must be what heaven is like. Just being here with you. And a full stomach. That is just an extra. Dinner was tasty, Boo. You take good care of us."

"I think we all just needed something in our stomachs besides grief and arguments." Jaejoong said, pressing his hand on Yunho's stomach. Nimble fingers moved the fabric of the leader's shirt into a slow slide, revealing the taut cluster of sinew and muscles under Yunho's golden skin. Jae traced the line of faint sienna down from his lover's navel to

the slight dip above his groin, running the pad of his finger back and forth before trailing to trace out the curves of Yunho's stomach muscles.

"It's nice." Yunho's guts clenched at Jae's touch, his sex insistent in the cupped space. Pushing the rising desire back, the young man lay, one hand raised over his head while the other explored the sublime form against him. "I am glad you told me about Yoochun's affections. You and I can... make do with our passions. Chunnie-ah is..."

"Clumsy." Jae supplied the word Yunho was looking for. "I'm not sure if they will ever get around to admitting that they like one another. Or they could just be afraid to venture out in that way. It's not the easiest thing in the world to do."

"No, it's not." Yunho agreed, his thoughts on the world at large. "What are we going to do? Between us, I mean. I know that... you're unsure about showing much between us."

"We can't share what is between us. Not out in the open." Jae placed his fingers on Yunho's mouth, the leader's stubborn nature rising with words of objection. "Please listen to me, Yunnie-ah. Please."

"I've thought about this. And I want you to know that I'm asking you to be something you are not." Jaejoong's eyes wetted under the strain of the truth, a realization of what he would lose should the world's eyes pried deep into his life. "We are living on the edge of everyone's eyes and there are people who would see us as...wicked and evil. You had to struggle with that yourself. You can't deny that."

"I still struggle with it." Yunho wisped a kiss into his lover's hair, pressing his cheek on the young man's crown. "I'm sorry for that but it's a struggle. My body and heart want you and my soul weeps because I worry about its sanity. Everything that I've heard about being with...another man tells me that this is wrong but I can't say that I feel anything but joy when I have you against me. I just feel like... I want everyone to know. I don't want to live a lie."

"A lie is what we have to live outside of these walls." Jaejoong tilted his head up, sitting partially erect to stare down into Yunho's eyes. The leader's gaze moistened, his hard-pressed stubbornness refusing to give. "We can't let *us* destroy what chance the others have to make a successful life. And I can't allow you to lose everything you've worked for just because you think you love me."

"I don't think, Jaejoong, I *know*." Yunho corrected him coldly, fingers biting into Jae's shoulder. His tone softened at the flickering grief in his lover's face. "I don't know what I have to do to make you believe that. This isn't something that's going to go away. Even if I walked away from you right now, I know that you are going to haunt me in my marrow until I go insane. I'm not just with you because it's something that others would see as wrong and I want to try something forbidden. I'm here because I can't be anywhere else. Tell me you don't feel the same way."

"I feel selfish." Jaejoong cut back on a sob, catching it deep into his throat. "That's how I feel."

Yunho lowered his hand from above his head, rubbing his thumb at the creases of Jae's eyes, catching the salt from his tears on the pad. Lifting his hand free from Jae's face, he licked at the wetness, taking Jae's pain into his mouth before bending his head and kissing the remaining drops from the other's face. "Don't cry, Boo. Please. It undoes me."

"I think I believed that if we... if I could just have you with me that the world would somehow change...and it would be fine between us. We could go outside and hold hands or kiss...and the truth is, that we can't. I know it's silly to think that everything would magically change." Jae's body hiccupped, grief caught in the gaps of his joy. "I'm a fool sometimes. I think that if things can just go right, nothing will ever touch me wrong again. That's stupid, I know."

"It's not stupid. It's what I love about you. One of the things that makes you.. someone Changmin admires, I think. There's so much hope inside of you...like a golden crane skimming over blue waters...something unexpected and hauntingly beautiful." Yunho contemplated the personality of the young man he cradled in his heart. "You confuse me still. I sometimes think I have you all figured out and then you do something I can't explain."

"Sometimes I do things that make you mad." The singer snorted a chuckle through the remnants of his tears. "That's probably not going to change."

"Probably not." Yunho admitted. "I don't think I'm ever going to convince you that you are loved...by us or the fans. You seek to fill that hole in your soul, that need for everyone to love you despite that you know there are people who aren't going to like us...aren't going to like you. You want to be loved, Jaejoong, and at the same time, erect walls so no one can see inside of you...where the most lovely parts are."

"If people knew me... knew the inside of me." Jaejoong shook his head, tucking himself back into Yunho's shoulder. "They wouldn't love me. They would think that I was something terrible and sinful that drew you into an evil that is going to eat your soul. There are more of my father out there than there are of Changmin or the others. You can't tell me otherwise."

"It doesn't have to be that way." Yunho knotted his hand into Jae's hair, wishing he could ease into the other's spirit and remove the inky cancerous tangle the world placed there. "The people that we're around..."

"The people that we are around are different from the world that is looking in, Yunho." Jaejoong refused to give in, a subtle stubbornness that matched his lover's. "I've seen what happens to men who end up outside of their world, thinking that they are safe because they've forgotten how much... they...men like Scarlet and me... are hated."

"It's different now." Yunho replied, his thoughts on how he felt a few months ago. His animosity seemed so foreign, placed in a central pit of unwelcome thought and curdled sour by a need for the young man under his hands. "Korea...is changing. I've seen it. You have too."

"It's not changing quick enough for us to love one another where others can see, Yunnie-ah." The singer's face became distant, a faint old pain rising from the fractured bits of his psyche. "When I lived in Itaewon... before...everything here, I was more than grateful for Scarlet's protection. She gave me someplace safe to live and the men who court her are always... powerful...so powerful that they don't care who thinks of them as being Iban-in. For them, they have risen high enough that they can openly be with someone like Scarlet."

"But for someone who...doesn't know where he is yet, like I was..." Jaejoong's features closed, a cracked carapace barely open enough for Yunho to see the young man he loved in its depths. "It was dangerous to walk alone not just because there are men there who want to...take their pleasures on someone smaller but because of the rage they have inside of them for wanting other men."

"I spent a lot of time at Trance. I either worked or came home, hoping that the walk between the two would be short. I never went out without having others around me because I've...seen what happens if someone who is considered... gay is out by himself and the wrong people meet up with him on the street." Yunho shuddered at the pain in Jae's voice, holding his lover tight against him, hoping to purge the anguish

festering in long-unhealed lesions. "I was working one night when one of the singers was brought in. He'd been coming to work, walking along the sidewalk. It wasn't even dark yet, the sun was just at the horizon and he... a few men were there, wanting more than just a teasing talk they can get at the club."

"There was nothing left of his face, I don't think." Jae broke, his tears hot and burning. "He wasn't nice to me. Always pushing me around and taunting me, saying hurtful things just to dig under my skin. I didn't care for him but when one of the bouncers brought him inside, I couldn't help but cry."

"There was so much blood, from everywhere. It was like he was a toy that they could play with until he broke. And then they just tossed him aside and walked away, laughing for their own pleasure. I sat there trying hold his head together, listening to him try to breathe through a nose I couldn't even find any more." The singer rubbed his hands together, remembering the hot of the dancer's blood and the creeping ichors of his skull leaking through Jae's fingers. "Scarlet... he was there to help me, be safe from something like that happening to me. So I would never end up on that floor, bleeding my life out."

"I will never let something like that happen to you, Jaejoong." The leader's ire peaked, a cresting tsunami of rage at the fear his lover felt inside of him. Jae's terror was as real to Yunho as the beat of his blood under his skin. "I would kill anyone who came near you. We all would. No one is ever going to touch you like that. We are safer here. I promise you. You will never ever go back to that."

"I know it's better because we are safe from that kind of anger...that kind of disgust that those men have inside of themselves because they really long for the touch of a man. I believe that. And I know we live safer in our own little world where so few people can touch us but if someone wanted to harm one of us, it would be easy to do." Jae said, wrapping his arm around Yunho's waist, tucking himself deeper into a warm embrace. "That is very much a truth, Yunnies-ah. You're just too trusting to want to believe that."

"You are a bit like Changmin yourself. You live in a world where everyone is like you. Demanding but honourable. You would change your mind and then that is how it should be for everyone. Tonight was like that. You wanted to switch rooms until I told you about Yoochun...and Junsu, then because wanting something for yourself would hurt another, you changed your mind. And there was not going to be any argument

about it.” Jaejoong’s words drove a nail into Yunho’s heart, a piercing length of cold iron in his coppery blood.

“You would give everything of yourself so others will be comfortable and happy but at the same time, you demand perfection in what we have to give back. It’s what makes you a good leader.” Jaejoong kissed at the skin under his face, a soft wet laving of love. “It’s why we follow you...it’s why I fell in love with you. You make me want to live in your world, even as imperfect as I am, you make me want to be a better person so you would love me more.”

“I can’t love you more.” Yunho cupped Jae’s chin, lifting the other up so he could see down into the pretty face that captured most of his thoughts. “You drive me insane. Nothing you do makes any sense until you give me a small little key to open up a box of your thoughts and then everything is clear. You are like a celebration, hidden presents that I have to find before the wholeness of the gift is complete. I don’t think it’s going to be easy loving you, Kim Jaejoong. I have to be prepared for that.”

“I am asking you to lie...to the world, Yunho.” Jaejoong whispered, turning over until his body pressed tight on his lover’s. They lay there, chest to chest, Jae’s legs straddling Yunho’s hips in a loving embrace. “You have to promise me that what we have...remains between us because I couldn’t bear it if someone hurt you because you love me. Or one of the others. I don’t mind having you only inside of these walls. It means I can have you forever then.”

“I can’t promise that I won’t touch you.” Yunho’s hands cupped at Jaejoong’s legs, running up to cradle the ripeness of his rear. “I can’t keep from touching you. Don’t ask me to.”

“I know.” Jaejoong licked at Yunho’s mouth, savouring the almost kiss when their breaths mingled in the air. “You make me shy. More than normal. And I want you to touch me. I just don’t want to lose you because of it.”

“There’s something that I have to...” Yunho pulled his head back slightly, meeting Jae’s eyes. “I have to talk to my parents...about us.”

The reality of the Jung family knowing of the intimacy between them frightened Jaejoong, a terror clearly visible on his pretty face. Shaking his head in refusal, Jae objected loudly. “No, you cannot. Your parents...they... Yunho, you can’t do this to them.”

"I won't lie to the people I love, my Joongie." The young man stroked at his lover's neck, running sensitive fingers down the startled singer's body. Everything was now in place, just at the precipice of having the world at his fingertips, Yunho knew in his heart that in order to plummet into the happiness just inside of his reach, he would have to solidify who he was, opening himself up to a pain that Jaejoong knew only too well. "If my parents can't ...accept me for loving you...then I will be fine with that. I will have you to keep my heart warm."

"You are their only son, Yunnies-ah." Jaejoong entreated. "And their eldest. It would...break them apart. You would give them that much pain?"

"No, I would give them that much joy." Yunho captured Jaejoong's mouth with his own, suckling at the sorrow the other held in his heart. The kiss lasted but a mere moment of forever, slashing through the other's words to silence Jae's uncertainties. "They will love the you that is inside of the distant Jaejoong you show them. I know they will. It will be a shock, I know this. I've never... wanted another man. I've never wanted anyone like I want you."

"There is nothing that will keep me from being besides you, Kim Jaejoong." Yunho insisted, taking another taste of the young man into his mouth. "There are razors in my heart that grow sharp when I think of my life without you. I ache when I see how beautiful you are with tears on your face, and then I all I can think of is how you taste then, the salt on your skin so much like the seed that you spilled into my hand tonight."

"I'll never find someone else that I could love as much as I love you." Yunho whispered against his lover's mouth, hoping the words traveled down into Jae's body and lodged into the broken pieces of the singer's battered heart. "If you knew how much I loved you, you would run so far from the fear of my obsession. And I would have to hunt you down and drag you back. My parents... everyone who says they love me should know how I feel about you. Know of that power you have over me and how much it weakens me...how much it strengthens me."

"I don't want to be the reason for your parents to turn away from you." Jaejoong wept, his tears falling silently into Yunho's cupped hand.

"You are going to be the reason that I live. That I love. My parents will find the happiness in that and if not, then I will do it for them." Yunho replied, licking at the other's face, wiping the trails of silver pain from Jae's smooth skin. "I would have you laugh as much as you cry. I want to

taste that joy on my tongue. There's nothing more I want than to swallow your words into me... I want to be there pressed into you when you tell me that you love me, your body clenching under mine. I want to be able to see you when you are asleep, your dreams filled with me instead of the blood of your pain. That's going to be our life, Joongie-ah. That is what I promise to give you."

Twenty-Two

“He wants to tell his parents.” Jaejoong’s shattered words brought Yoochun to a stop, his hands dripping with soap suds over the sink.

Breakfast had been a hasty meal, gulped down in seconds and with a glut of dishes left over, a soaking in the sink all the time the five singers could devote to cleaning up before the long day broke over them. A round of dance practice followed by vocal lessons soon turned into a hurried dash to a radio station, lunch eaten nearly late enough to be an early dinner. Changmin carted his schoolbooks along, working on problems during breaks in the interview, diligently working out a calculus solution on scraps of paper borrowed from the DJ’s notebook. Coming home, none of them were hungry enough for a full dinner, Junsu and Yunho more interested in the soccer match on television than filling their bellies. Min retreated to the quiet of the music room, his mind on cracking the bundle of math he struggled with.

Yoochun and Jaejoong offered to clean the kitchen, more of a formality of a suggestion since the others left the eating area in a rush to do other things. Yunho came back, a swift retreat from the living room, a visit long enough to kiss Jaejoong on the side of the mouth and thank him for washing up. Yoochun stood there, shaking his head at being left with the chores.

“He...is insane.” Yoochun began, cutting his words off with a snap of his lips. “Let’s take a walk when we’re done. It will be better if we... talked in private.”

“I don’t think it would matter much.” Jae winced at the screams of exultation coming from the living room. “They aren’t paying attention to anything outside of that television screen. But it would be nice to get out of the house. We can pretend we’re real people for a little while. And if we’re lucky, we can freeze our legs off and not have to do dance practice tomorrow”

The bitter cold outside rose from the sidewalks, Jaejoong tugging Yunho’s parka over his arms. The scent of the other man clung to the down weave, cradling Jae in a green tea cloud of comfort. Yoochun had looked inside of the closet, staring at the collections of coats there before

finally grabbing his own, a battered soft blue fleece his mother sent him a while back. Spring retreated from under winter's final push, the crackling ice floes on the nearby river now firm and solid once again.

"Do you want some tea?" Yoochun shivered, wishing he'd grabbed a scarf when they stepped outside of the building, the brace of wind cutting into his skin. "It's freezing out here"

"We could go back and just talk in your room. It's warmer in there. Hell would be warmer than out here, really." Jaejoong suggested, rubbing at his arms.

"No, one of them would just get curious and try to drag us out to watch the game." Micky shook his head, an emphatic negative. "I'd rather just go get some tea and sit in the shop. It'll be quiet in there."

The tea shop staff was long used to the group members wandering in, often taking the back part of the room to sit and talk, a quiet spot in their turbulent days. The deep shelves lining the small shop's walls were filled with teapots and short tumblers, a variety of loose-leaf teas stacked tight in enormous glass jars by the counter. A symphony of smells filled the singers' senses as they walked in, the heat of the shop a welcome warmth to contrast the icy bite from outside.

Tiny silk paintings hung on the spare wall space throughout the shop, delicate brush art done by the shop owner's wife. The stout man behind the counter hailed Jaejoong and Yoochun with a robust greeting, nodding his head towards the back niche, a secluded corner of the shop that afforded a greater privacy to prying eyes and ears. Micky nodded a polite hello, thankful for the space. Jaejoong continued on, shy against the attention of the owner and the girls behind the counter.

"Can I get a pot of sangangcha, please?" Yoochun peered at the selection of leaves, pointing out the blend he preferred. "Hyung prefers hongcha, if you have a good dark blend."

"Something sweet to eat?" A pear-shaped girl asked, her face beatific at the sight of Yoochun's wide grin. "Sugar or honey for the tea?"

"Honey for me, thank you." The singer nodded a thank you. "For the hongcha, nothing. Joongie-ah doesn't like things too sweet. If you have a moon cake or two, that would be nice. Anything chocolate will do for me."

Yoochun waited until the tea came, carrying the tray back to the table himself. The pungent aroma of the teas tickled his stomach, a fat piece of

chocolate cake sharing a place next to a pair of soft-crust red bean filled moon cakes. Stepping into the single niche, Micky slid the tray carefully onto a low table, sliding onto the battered second hand couch against the wall. Its over-soft pillows made up for its height, both singers having to stretch their legs out if they wanted room. Jaejoong pulled his up, sitting cross-legged on the cushions, thanking Yoochun as the young man handed him a mug, poured nearly to the brim with the strong black tea.

Sipping at his own blend, Yoochun watched the busy interior of the shop a few feet away, the seclusion made more intimate by the lack of tables and chairs nearby. This close to after dinner, most of the patrons were stopping only for a cup to take with them, a bracing heat to cuddle in their hands on the walk home. A couple of college students sat near the front of the shop, one eye on the road to watch for a bus coming down the street. For the most part, they would have the interior to themselves this evening, a welcome respite from being surrounded by hordes of people.

“Thank you for... convincing Yunho the other day. I’ve been wanting to say that... to tell you that.” Micky bowed his head in deep gratitude, a blush forming over his features. The wet dapple of tears threatened his eyes, a pang of regret for causing his friend pain. “But it... this isn’t fair to you and Yunnies-ah. You should have privacy.”

“We will be fine.” Jaejoong looked up from his contemplation of the floating tea leaves in his cup, their swirling patterns a divination of sorts. “Yunnies and I are... working on things. We will move slowly into our relationship. Changmin does allow us to... be more careful.”

“Still...” Yoochun argued. “I feel bad. We should have offered to switch.”

“Can we pretend that we’ve argued about this and I’ve won?” Jaejoong’s stomach growled at the presence of the moon cakes, one of the few treats he enjoyed. “I am more stubborn than you are and we both know that I will get my way. It’s useless to even try to beat me on this. If you like, we can say that I harangued you until you cried and then you capitulated because my sheer logic overwhelmed you.”

“Your stubbornness could have overwhelmed me.” Yoochun laughed at the prospect, his heart lightening. “Your logic would just have me confused.”

“There, it’s settled.” Jae grinned, an irrepressible joy at the smile on his friend’s face. “Besides, we will have to see if there is a Yunho and I after he talks with his parents.”

"Aish. I can't believe he is going to...talk with them. It could ruin things between them. But I feel he will stand by you and they will have to come around to it." The other singer leaned back on the couch, pulling his legs up to wrap them around his friend's. They sat there companionably, Micky's feet resting on either side of Jaejoong's hips, both men sipping carefully at the hot teas. "He is too honest with his feelings. I know you didn't want him to say anything to them."

"I feel like a criminal asking him to lie." Jaejoong admitted, picking up a moon cake. Breaking off an end, he held the pastry carefully, guiding it into his open mouth. Sucking at the red bean paste on his fingers, Jae spoke around his hand, his sensual lips nearly obscene with a taint of sex. Chewing, he wiped his hand on a napkin, not hearing the forlorn sigh of the sales girl at the far counter. "Yunho just wants to tell them that he is...with me. He says he needs to. As much as he needs me, he needs to have things clear between him and his parents."

"Will it cause trouble?" Micky asked. He'd wanted the chocolate cake but the overly sweet treat now sat heavily on his plate, a troublesome mass of sugar that threatened to curdle his belly if he swallowed anything around the drama in his thoughts. "I don't know the Jungs that well."

"Neither do I." Jae rested his head back, looking over at his friend. "And how will he explain that he went from being furious with me to... bedding me?"

"You've already..." Yoochun looked over to the rest of the shop, finding no one near enough to hear. "When?"

"Not everything. Not.. that." The other singer pressed at the redness in his face, a duck of his head hiding the shyness there. "I...it worries me but my friend Scarlet told me... how to...do certain things. We are moving towards that slowly. I don't want him to be impatient but Yunnie-ah tells me that he prefers to...wait. He wants to make sure that I'm ready for him."

"Ah..." The taller singer whistled under his breath, a low melodic wonder. "Was it nice being with him, so far? What did you do?"

"I can't tell you about... Yunho." Jae's head jerked up, the black fringe around his face curving down over his high cheekbones. "That would be... wrong. How could you look at him then?"

"True." Yoochun agreed. He wouldn't do anything to jeopardize his respect for the leader of their group but his curiosity about what

happened was coloured by the immense need he had for the young man he shared his room with. Jaejoong cocked his head, staring at his friend before finally smiling widely.

“I have an idea though.” Jae leaned forward, whispering hot in the space between them. The sensual flirtatiousness hidden behind the bashful mask Jaejoong wore peeked out, a tantalizing imp that often few the others to him. “I can tell you everything that Scarlet told me. And unlike Changmin, you should probably take notes...just in case.”

“Min is a dictator. A bossy, pig-headed dictator.” Junsu grunted, sweat pouring down the small of his back, his shirt soaked nearly wet from the efforts of moving a dresser. Yunho wasn’t in much better shape, a bruise forming on his shin from where a chair seat bashed into the flesh below his knee. Muttering darkly, just enough so the youngest member of the group couldn’t hear him, Su wrestled with the keyboard stand, long trails of wiring snaking out behind him in a medusa coil.

Changmin ignored their complaints, caustically jibing at his elders until they moved things around to his satisfaction. Yunho stopped in the doorway, his arms piled high with a final load of bedding. A hamster shaped pillow teetered at the top, its smiling face bobbing and creased from one of Yunho’s fingers across its cheek. The leader tossed the linens down on the bed, looking about in a worried satisfaction at nearly being done with Changmin’s stern orders.

“This room has no window.” Yunho finally complained. “How are you going to sleep in a room that has no window?”

“That means that I won’t freeze to death when one of you opens the window in the dead of winter.” Changmin replied calmly, placing more books on the shelves he’d brought in from the other bedroom. “Even better, the door closes and I can study in peace without having someone come in and wanting to sleep. I should have thought about this months ago. No, I had to wait until you finally saw the love in Jaejoong’s heart and then, my brain starts to make sense. You would have thought it was me that was blind.”

The music room had been emptied of most of its contents, a few items remaining where there was space. The sound boards Changmin shared with Junsu stood at the far side, against the shared wall with the bathroom. Su and Min mostly worked on music together, sharing a love for more electronics than actual construction of songs. Their combined

equipment took up one whole wall, the remainder of the room filled with Changmin's belongings...including the full sized bed he slept on.

The smaller things would have to wait to be organized, Changmin nodded to himself, pulling the covers onto the bed. His schoolbooks were already piled high on the desk that remained in the room, his treasured laptop plugged into the wall for recharging. In the other room, the equipment Yoochun shared with the lead singer and Yunho remained to be hooked up, wires and leads pushed back behind tables and a desk.

"It makes more sense for me to sleep here. Besides, there will be less time where the instruments and computers are shared than me living in the bedroom." Min pointed out, wrinkling his nose at the dust on his end table. "This way, I get my own room...and you get privacy."

"You mean you don't run the risk of walking into your own bedroom and learning more about sex than what your mother told you." Junsu teased, leaning against the door frame. He ignored the outraged look on Yunho's face, the tired in his muscles outweighing any fear he might have of the leader's retribution.

"Junsu, please. My mother was very thorough." Changmin reproached the other singer with a beseeching look. "Did you two move the beds together?"

"No, little boss." Yunho sighed, rubbing at his face with weary hands.

"We better do that before Jaejoong and Yoochun get home." Junsu turned on his heel, heading back to the larger of the bedrooms, most of the disarray straightened up under Changmin's discerning eye. "Or Minnie will make us go to bed without any dessert."

Changmin sat down on his bed, thankful the other two had left for a moment. The worry he felt about the elder members had eased, especially now that the room situation had been straightened out. When he'd been in the shower that evening, he pondered how they would solve the tightness of their quarters before he realized that the solution literally had been behind him.

Leaving the bathroom, the soccer game loud through the apartment, Changmin stood at the doorway of the music room and mentally plotted out what could be removed to make himself space to live there. Leaving in the equipment he used with Junsu and moving the rest of it out to the elders' room made the most sense...at least to the youngest member of the group.

Coming into the living room, he'd walked towards the television and switched off the screen, ignoring the shouts of outrage from Junsu and Yunho, both cheering for different teams. There were very few times when Changmin laid down his temper against the others', an event that...when arisen... easily swayed the men to do what the youngest wanted. This was going to be one of those times, Yunho could see it plainly on Min's face. There would be no swaying of Changmin's will. They would have to suffer any displeasure Jaejoong might dish out later. Min had spoken.

It wasn't that the couple shamed him with their love, Changmin knew that Jaejoong's pleasure would be tempered by his concern for the youngest's comfort. What bothered Min was the compromise of their love merely because he had a need to sleep somewhere. That was something easily solved, a puzzle of logistics made more complicated by Jae's insistence that Yoochun and Junsu remained ensconced in their nest facing the main street. That was another conundrum to be worked out, Min surmised. Given some time, the youngest would work it out. Now that the elder members were where they needed to be.

"I can't believe you let him move into that tiny room." Jaejoong gritted his teeth, trying to decide if he was happy or pissed off, a mane of wet hair dripping down onto his bare shoulders. "There's not even a window in there!"

"I know." Yunho watched his lover pace from the dresser to the bed, grabbing at a dry towel. Motioning for the singer to sit down on the floor, the leader took the lush terrycloth from Jae's hands, slowly tamping the water from his black hair. A few expert rubs brought a lengthy purr from the singer's throat, a rumbling moan of pleasure. "You know what it's like to argue with Changmin's temper. I'd sooner try to blow the sun out with my breath."

"Don't put on your shirt." Yunho said when he released Jaejoong from between his legs, the leader's fingers hooking into the singer's waistband. "Leave it off."

Jae looked over his shoulder at his lover, Yunho sliding to lay back against the wall, his head resting beneath the high window overlooking the corner. His changeable face warmed Jae's belly, an assessing look raking over Jaejoong's legs and rear. Jaejoong had become familiar with that look, a hunger growling up from Yunho's primal urges. His knees weakened from the intensity in the other man's eyes, drawing the singer closer with a seductive pull.

Both of the beds had been pushed together, the wide mattresses lined up tight, the wooden platform frames unmovable on the polished floor planking. Jae's nest of pillows rested at the head of the bed, the corner of the wall filled with downy feather squares covered in a riotous mass of fabrics. Yunho's blankets covered the bottom, folded carefully over fresh sheets, a heavy king-sized duvet resurrected from the linen closet serving as a feather top for their expansive bed.

The room seemed larger despite the bundled equipment at the other end, dressers and tables pushed away from the centre of the room, leaving the two a wide walking space. Jae covered that space slowly, his hair nearly dry from Yunho's ministrations. The futon couch from the other room now boasted his t-shirt, a cast off cotton garment Jae tossed behind him. A flick of the dimmer by the door pulled down the lights, a single low burn from a table lamp shining from the night stand.

Music played softly from the stereo speakers, an instrumental blues piece Jaejoong had fallen in love with. The weeping guitars and soulful piano filled Yunho with a fierce longing, hearing the soul of the singer in the haunting notes. The leader parted his thighs, making room for the long-limbed young man crawling over the bed towards him. Yunho's mouth opened to receive Jae's kiss, his tongue lapping at the sweet moistness hidden within. His strong hands gripped the other's lean waist, stroking over the bit of muscled rear rising from Jae's cotton pants.

They kissed again, a slow lingering poignant want driving them furious with need. Jae's fingers roamed, trying to find each crevice of Yunho's body under the confining wrap of his clothes. Needing to feel skin under his palms, the singer pulled on Yunho's t-shirt, working it up over the other's shoulders until Yunho finally leaned forward, letting his lover tug it free from his overheated body.

"I love the feel of you." Jae leaned over, kissing at the curves in Yunho's arms. The long strands of his uncombed hair brushed over the sensitive length of Yunho's naked belly, his stomach clenching at the scent of his lover's shampoo. "It's like steel under velvet. When I move my mouth, I can feel your blood under my tongue."

"You have too many clothes on." Yunho pushed down at the elastic on Jae's pants, the cotton sliding easily down the other's lean body. Jae hooked his toes into the fabric, moving the constriction off and sliding the scrubs onto the floor. Naked, he bent down to lave at Yunho's navel, working the tip of his tongue around the sensitive flesh there.

“So do you.” Dark, luminous eyes stared up from Jae’s lustrous face, kohl rimmed ebony against the pale iciness of his features. Carved from ivory and jet, the singer’s lush beauty tugged at Yunho’s heart, his fingers itching to delve deep past those sinful lips, wanting to wet them on Jae’s exquisiteness.

“Go look in the night stand. The top drawer.” Yunho jerked his chin towards the freestanding cabinet, the lamp casting laced shadows over the white painted surface. Jaejoong reluctantly pulled away, sliding over onto his stomach to yank on the drawer pull. Yunho slid his own pants off, catching his ankle on one leg opening, trying to wrest it free without falling off of the mattress.

Jaejoong removed a small pink paper bag from the drawer, a confused look on his face. Yunho nodded in agreement, reaching forward to yank on the young man’s hips, drawing Jae back onto his lap. The paper crinkled as Jae opened its closed end, drawing out a small tube of lubricant from its scented interior.

“Where did you...get this?” Jae’s words stumbled, the veracity of their relationship suddenly coming to roost in his mind. The tiny container of pleasure oil screamed a myriad of conflicting possibilities, all suddenly made real just by its presence in the bedroom he shared with Yunho.

“One of the back-up dancers.” Yunho took the tube from Jae’s trembling hands, sliding it down onto the blankets before wrapping his arms around his lover’s waist.

“He’ll know about... you and...” The singer was shocked that the young man would take such a risk. “He’ll know you are with...”

“Any girl.” Yunho assured him, stroking at Jae’s face with the back of his hand. “He was telling me that women sometimes have difficulties...well, I overheard him talking to another of the dancers. I thought it would be a good thing to ask about and he told me to try this. As far as he knows, I have a reluctant virgin to coax into loving me.”

“I...” The tube’s chilly length burned still in Jae’s hand, a plastic harbinger he didn’t know that he was ready to heed. “Yunho...”

“I’m not saying that we should... do everything tonight...or even this week.” Yunho’s gentle voice calmed the singer’s nerves, his hands still on Yunho’s chest. “But we should ... take some time to help you adjust. Yes? Isn’t that something Scarlet said we should do?”

Nodding, his teeth buried into his lower lip, Jaejoong's chin rested against his chest, his heart skipping with the sheer want to please his lover. His body ached for something inside of him, a knowing instinct that his mind couldn't begin to grasp.

Yunho's fingers had brushed up on the rim of pleasure, stroking just at the ring when he'd last dragged his tongue down on Yunho's hard flesh. The experience both startled and thrilled Jaejoong, his body automatically pressing back on the digit, both wanting and dreading the intrusion. Yunho had teased around him, whispering that neither one of them was quite ready for delving into the wholeness of sex but that it would be soon...a fullness of spirit that they would share.

The enticement of Yunho beckoned Jaejoong, his mouth seeking the other's throat, nipping his teeth along the length of skin there before moving onward to the jutting bone of Yunho's collarbone. Cradling his lover's head with the cup of his palm, Yunho kissed at Jae's ear, nuzzling the other man's temple before moving down to stroke at his lower back.

"Everything is moving so quickly..." Jaejoong felt a pang of guilt in his heart. He was the one who pushed this on Yunho. What did he expect when their relationship progressed? And his body wanted this, that filling of Yunho in him. His insides wept at the thought of needing the hard length and it being denied to him, however shuttered his mind was at the thought.

"We won't do any of that tonight, Boo." Yunho promised. "I just wanted you to know that if you are ready... when you're ready...I have thought of you. I don't want to be the one to make you cry in pain. I never want that. I love you too much to have you cringe when I touch you. We have to do this slowly because I know that it will hurt. We both know that. But I will make it easier for you. Please believe me."

"I do. I trust you. I believe you." Jaejoong rested his head against Yunho's shoulders, sighing in the warmth of his love welling inside of him. "I know you love me. I love you too. You are my obsession... my temptation... my sin... as much as I am yours."

"Do you think it hurts a lot?" Junsu's voice in the darkness startled Micky, a question he'd never thought would leave the other's mouth.

Suspicious if they were thinking on the same thing, Yoochun asked tentatively. "What hurts?"

“Sex...between them.” Junsu turned over onto his side, the watery blue light from the window washing over his face and shoulders. “I mean... wouldn’t it hurt?”

“I don’t know. I think that... precautions can be taken.” Micky offered up a morsel of information. “Jaejoong told me about what his friend, Scarlet said to him. I think it was sound advice.”

“It’s good that Jae has someone to talk to about things like that.” Junsu flopped back onto the bed, lifting his arms over his head and tucking them under the pillow. He lay like that for a long minute before turning back over to face his roommate. “Did Joongie-ah tell you what his Auntie said?”

“A bit.” Yoochun cleared his throat, wondering how much he should share with the other. “I was... curious.”

“Ah, I should start calling you YooMin then.” The singer teased, his laughter infectious. The crinkle of joy at the edges of his eyes warmed the skin of Yoochun’s body, a delightful blanket of companionship they’d often shared in the darkness of a cold night. “What did he tell you?”

“Aish! Do you really want to know?” Micky knew the heat of his body turned from an affection to embarrassment at the question.

“Just a little bit. What? You can be curious but I can’t?” Junsu reached over with his foot, pushing at Micky with his toes. “I just wonder if it hurts. I mean you really have to love someone a lot if you are willing to have sex with them when it causes a lot of pain.”

“I think it can be avoided...or at least... eased.” Yoochun’s throat closed up around his words. A small part of his brain screamed at him, warning him that he was traversing into areas he shouldn’t discuss with the other. Ignoring the caution, his mouth continued, recklessly unheeding any alarm that his mind set off. “Jaejoong said that anything they do has to be done slowly...carefully. And with oils or something slick. I’m not sure how long that would take to get to that point.”

“Hmmm.” Junsu pondered the situation, turning over the possibilities in his mind. “It sounds like it would work, yes?”

“I’m sure so.” Yoochun floundered, wondering how he could turn the conversation away from this particular train of thought. “I’m certain Jaejoong’s Auntie helped him understand how everything worked. Or at least gave them advice they can follow.”

“Good...I was concerned about that.” Junsu’s foot remained on Micky’s leg, resting comfortably on the young man’s shin. The singer contemplated another question, a curious puzzle of thoughts unfolding behind his expressive face. “Have you ever kissed another man?”

“What?” Yoochun choked on his own spit, nearly blacking out from the shock. Clearing his throat, he stumbled at the jagged curve Junsu spun on their talk. “Junsu!”

“We’ve talked about everything, yes?” The other pointed out. “What is different from this? I’ve kissed other men. My brother... my father. But it would be different I suppose.”

Yoochun sighed, thinking hard. “I’ve kissed some on the cheek. Certainly my younger brother. I don’t think my father though. I’ve kissed Jaejoong on the mouth a few times.”

“But only as a friend, right?” Junsu’s face was serious, an earnest sobriety to his query. “I know the two of you are friends...close friends but it’s like a brother, yes. You don’t feel about him like he does Yunho, right?”

“No.” Yoochun shook his head, his hand finding the bump of Junsu’s ankle. His fingers stroked at the spot, moving to carve a soft line of touch along the other’s arch. “I love Jaejoong because he is like my family. Every time I look into my heart, he’s there.. helping me through hard times and wiping my tears from my face. I don’t think I have cried so much in this year and yet I have so many taking the pain from my skin...you included.”

“Have you ever wondered what kissing another man was like?” The grin Yoochun always saw in Junsu’s eyes was gone, replaced by something more erotically enticing. “Like Yunho kisses Joongie-ah. You can see them drink in their mouths sometimes, when you can catch them kissing. They hide it so much. I would think that it would be different from kissing a girl.”

“Sometimes, I wonder.” Micky admitted softly, a single nod of assent. “I see Jaejoong’s pleasure and wonder at it.”

“I do too.” Junsu leaned forward, spanning the tight space between their beds with his taut body.

A gentle brush of the other’s mouth on Yoochun’s lips startled the singer, the rough warmth of a man’s mouth on his own. The touch lasted a mere

breath, long enough for them to taste one another at the ridge of their tongues, a fused ecstasy burning a sulphurous torture into Yoochun's groin. Pulling back, his breath panting slightly, Junsu's smile once more wreathed over his handsome face. Lifting one hand, he wiped at the corner of Micky's gaping mouth, brushing the kiss further along Yoochun's sensitive lips.

"Good night, Chunnie-ah. And thank you." Junsu lay back, turning over and pulling the covers up over his shoulders. "I've wanted to see what that was like for the longest time now."

Twenty-Three

Cloves numbed the flat of Yunho's tongue, the orange spiced chai latte he'd ordered from the hotel bar chilling under the air vents he sat under. Rain splattered the long windows of the booth, the hotel's view overlooking the park. Twinkling lights in the distance spoke of lives carrying on in the darkness of the night, lives untouched by the drama of his own emotions.

The conversation hadn't gone as well as he'd hoped, his stomach churning with the oils of displeasure cast at his being, set afire by his father's anger. It was nearly too much to bear, the look of disappointment in the man who guided him through his life, a staunch supporter of his son's existence.

He'd known it would be difficult, sharing his love for Jaejoong aloud. Yunho felt as if he could just explain what he felt and they would see the beauty of it...share his affections for the mercurial, feral singer. Jaejoong had warned him of speaking out...of explaining that his heart now belonged to another male.

Jaejoong, in his churning, oddly-canted chaos, had been right. Yunho's world now lay in shards at his feet.

It was easier to meet in the hotel room, a sitting area set aside for an intimate lunch, away from prying eyes and a less formal affair. His mother embraced him, rattling the joints of his shoulder as Yunho returned the hug, her head barely tucking under his chin. A gruff slap on his shoulder was all the greeting Jung gave him, a manly acknowledgement of pride and taciturn approval.

The food lay on the table, as cold as his chai latte, if not icier from the chill settling down on the Jungs arranged around the wooden surface. Seated more traditionally on the floor, Yunho jerked his head aside as bowls clattered under the power of his father's fist striking the table, a sheet brute display of force. Words were a dangerous thing. They ate away at foundations once thought solid and shored up hearts that were broken from years of abuse. In his ignorance...in his denial of reality, Yunho finally saw a glimmer of the dark world that suckled Jaejoong's

soul, a contempt for someone who wanted nothing more than to be held by another who cared.

“You would dig my grave for me before I am dead?!” The shout of his father’s voice rattled in Yunho’s eardrums, a booming bass cacophony seemingly sonic in its reverberation. Standing, the man pushed away from the table, a statue of ire looming above him. Across the table, his mother sat silent, her hands clutched tight around a napkin, her face a still pasty slab unable to break through the shock of her heart.

“If I wanted another daughter, we would have had one!” Yunho fell back, his father’s open handed slap rocking him back, the sting more emotional than physical. His mother gasped, her hands reaching for her only son, sliding around the table and covering his chest with her body, one palm raised to ward off any further blows. “I laid my life out for you and this is how you repay me? Clutching some rent-boy in the middle of the night? We have stood by you for so longgiven you so much and this... this is what you give back as a dutiful son?”

“It’s alright, Momma.” Yunho straightened, curving his arm around his mother’s shoulders. Her tears finally came, the red splotch of his father’s anger growing hot on his cheek. “I’m alright.”

“It must be some mistake, oppa.” His mother’s voice entreated softly to her husband, a whispering prayer that her son had merely turned his head towards the wrong direction, something easily corrected with enough love. “Yunnie...he just is a bit confused. They are all packed in together so tightly. There is no one they see each day but each other. It would be natural for him to confound things in his heart.”

“Confused? Of course he is confused. There’s nothing of a man in that boy, Jaejoong.” Yunho’s father spat. “Is that what you are going to say...besides driving this horror into my heart?”

“Are you going to tell me that my son would not be taken in by some open-faced seduction? By some fey slut that wormed into his perversions, promised sex hot in whispered tones.” His father rounded the table, his face florid with emotion. “Tell me that whore...that catamite has turned your head! Tell me that, Jung Yunho! Tell your father that it was a mistake to have you in there with that filth. That he has dragged you into this and you have come to us to help you break free from the mess you’ve made.”

“Do not speak of Jaejoong like that.” Yunho found himself at his feet, his chest proud and challenging at the man he loved deep in his heart. Bits

of his soul crackled under the pressing weight of disrespect, every ounce of his brain agitate at the violation of his core morals. To speak up against this man made him...unworthy of his father's respect...of his mother's love.

Not to speak up would disallow Jaejoong's love. Yunho knew which side of his heart he would have to nurse in the night and he would not deny Jaejoong his place.

"Kim Jaejoong is not a catamite nor a whore." The leader struggled to keep his voice even, not wanting to fall into his temper. His mother sat sobbing at his feet, a woman ruined by her only son's confession of love. "I had hoped you would find happiness in knowing that I have learned to love someone as fully as I adore Jaejoong. It was my hope that you would see how my life has been enriched for having him in my life."

"In your life? What do you know about living? How long have you lived?" His father spat, a rising temper now grown beyond control. "And how long until he has used you up and tossed you aside? Taken everything you have and then turns his back? What then?"

"I know you think now that this *thing* will last you forever but it won't." Jung paced, circling closer to his son, a sad expression on his face when he glanced down at his fallen wife. "Then what will happen to you? Everyone will know that you...have done that with *him*...will know what you've done to your family. How will we ever face anyone else with that stain on our family?"

"There is no stain." Yunho's anger hardened to a cold lump in his throat.

"No? You don't think so?" His father pressed closer, nearly bumping Yunho in the chest with a pointed finger. "This Kim boy...this *sodomite* has you turned around until you no longer see clearly. You are turning your back on everything that we have taught you."

"Yunho, you can't think that what you are doing is right. Everything in our society tells you that even being with that boy is wrong." His father's anger continued to roll, gravel rubbed down into fresh wounds. "You know it's a sin... you know that it is nothing but filth on your soul and yet you stand there and say that you are in love. That there is no stain on our honour or on your soul."

There was a storm outside of the windows, a breaking sheet of rain pounding on unfeeling glass. The depth of Yunho's pain filled in sympathy for the tempest, torrents washing against the unyielding wall.

His mother's tears puddled down the slack of her face, anguish under her love for her only son. Yunho's hand found her head, a comforting brush of fingers through her coarse, processed hair, so different from the silken tresses he'd found tangled in his hands when he woke that morning.

"The only thing I know for sure is that it's not wrong. Yes, he's a sin but not because how I feel about him but because I can't get enough of him. Because of him, I am a glutton, never full because I am always hungry for him." Yunho grabbed at his father's wrist, stopping the man from striking at his face again. "I won't stand here and be hit because of who I love. Kim Jaejoong would be someone I cherished, no matter what shell he was born into. I won't allow you to strip me of that."

"You won't allow?!" A sputter of anger followed his father's outrage. "You know nothing about what should be allowed or not. You stand there so proud of what you think you've accomplished but in a few years when there is nothing left of your stardom or when your lover searches out someone who can take care of him, where will you stand then? Do you expect me to take you back into the family after you have spat in our face, so proud you are protecting a wastrel?"

"When you are ready to go home, I will be waiting for you." Jung turned coldly, speaking to his wife in slow measured tones, his back stiff towards his son. "We won't be staying any longer here. I will not have this in my house. I will not have a son who would show this much disrespect and hatred to our family...to you."

Yunho left it there, slipping out of the room after giving his mother a final kiss on the temple... a solemn farewell accompanied by her tearful sobs. He could give her nothing now, nothing that would comfort her. A choice had been made...a choice made easier by the intolerance of his father's anger and the silent reproach in his mother's eyes.

The barely touched chai soon became a tumbler of whiskey, a long draught of potent amber poured over clear ice. Yunho played with the cut glass, watching the segmented crystal refract the liquid's clarity, a dapple of gold on the bleached wood table. People milled about, tucked safely away from the cold rain drenching the city streets. He'd sat there only for an hour or so, perhaps longer...Yunho lost the telling of time in the nothingness he had left of his heart.

The sip of whiskey on his throat burned, harsher than over-boiled tea. It seared through the pain left from his father's words...the anguish of seeing the tears on his mother's face. Ashen grief clotted on his tongue,

Yunho's attention drawn to the reflection of himself in the glass. He saw mostly his mother in his face, a woman torn apart by her love for her son and the fierce obligation to her family. His father's gift had been an unwavering stubbornness and a temper that could sear away the most firm of arguments. This clash had been titanic, a final blow to their already turbulent relationship.

"Yunho." His mother's voice reached him through his haze, a gentle reminder of her quiet soul. Touching his arm, she slid into the chair next to him, looking sorrowful at the half-empty tumbler cupped in his hand. "Please, reconsider this."

"There's nothing to reconsider, Momma." Yunho sipped at the whiskey again, more as an act of defiance than wanting the bitter taste of alcohol in him. The warm hush in his stomach accompanied the sourness his father left behind. "Kim Jaejoong is who I want."

"Hear me out." The older woman grabbed at his arm, fingers biting down desperately into the weave of his jacket. "Can you give me that?"

Yunho turned in his chair, more out of respect for his mother than anything else. She pulled in closer, her eyes glancing around, hoping for a small modicum of privacy for this most volatile of conversations.

"You need to think about what this is doing to our family...what it will do to your father." Her beseeching look broke a chink from Yunho's steeled heart. He denied her nothing, would sooner break his own bones than hurt this woman who held him during his sleepless nights or guided him over the pains of his heartbreaks. "You've never loved another..."

Her voice trailed off, as if speaking it aloud would somehow make her son's love of Jaejoong more real... something she wouldn't be able to turn her head from and ignore. The ravages of the day gritted pain into the grooves besides her mouth, a spiritual dirt the woman feared would never come clean from her own flesh.

"How can you say you love... Kim when you've not really loved anyone before?" Yunho closed his eyes, trying not to see his mother's torment. In her mind, her words struck hard, a telling blow to her argument. Continuing, she reached out once again for her son to place reason in his heart. "What happens when this relationship falls apart? What then? Would you turn your back on your family merely for a moment of forbidden pleasure?"

"It's not like that." His eyes stung, unshed tears held back by his pride. "He confuses me not because he lures me in but because I want to spend my time unwrapping who he is, exploring the chaos that he has in him and celebrating the joy he brings to everyone around him. We're not perfect. I drive him insane because I'm exacting. He makes me mad because he is unpredictable...and I can't control what he does. But part of me doesn't want to. That part of me that wishes I were as free as he is."

"When I first met Jaejoong, I thought he was cold and untouched by emotion." Yunho explained carefully, trying to show his mother through words, the man he grew to love. "His life hasn't been easy and yet he struggles to overcome everything that is put in his way. The sheer power of that ambition...the force of his will is so strong and yet inside... there is a broken little boy that is unloved because of who he is."

"Joongie-ah thinks... sideways." The leader searched his mind for what he seemed to be finding out day to day. "What comes easy to us...the talking to people and how to interact is difficult for him because his mind sees the world through a fractured stained glass window. Much more beautiful than anything I can ever imagine and I wonder how he even sees the world through it because of the sheer glut of colours. But he does...and he shows me how beautiful it can be if I just try hard enough...if I just take the time to look up and watch the world though his eyes."

"He is a boy, Yunho." Once more his mother reached out, her soft hand on his face, touching the spot where his father struck him. "You shouldn't love another boy. It's just not right."

"The funny thing is, Jaejoong told me not to tell you. He said that my family wouldn't understand and that I would be cast out, like he was." Yunho spoke softly, recalling the torment he saw in his lover's eyes when he spoke of his family torn from him because of who he was attracted to. "He would rather I live in a lie...he would rather be hidden in the shadows rather than have me lose you and Father."

"I find it ironic, Momma, that the person whom everyone condemns as filth, would rather I hide who I love so I don't hurt the people who taught me never to live a lie. And yet these people who taught me to love... you and Father... attack Jaejoong as below contempt." Yunho stuck his finger in the liquor, swirling the ice around before licking the digit clean. "Everyone seems so intent on me lying. Jaejoong's lie is so I won't hurt you. Your lie is so *you* aren't hurt...regardless of my own pain or my loss. Tell me, Momma...who loves me more then?"

"His love isn't real, Yunho." His mother whispered, the rain a hushed drizzle next to her tears. "You are going to destroy your life for something that isn't real."

"Momma," Yunho cut her off, begging forgiveness for his rudeness with a curt bow of his head. "I need you to understand how I feel."

"Right now we have to hide how we love...Jaejoong and I...but some day when we are older, I have faith that I will be able to take him someplace safe and warm when he can be as open as he wants to be...as I need to be." The singer's eyes grew distant, thinking of stretches of white sand and the promise of sanctuary. "I don't know where that will be but if it's not here...then I am sorry...but I will still love you and I will always love you."

"But please know that we are going to spend our years laughing...and sometimes fighting because he drives me to distraction and he makes me angrier than anyone else I know...even more so than Father." Yunho chuckled at that truth, a stinging retort of how deep he adored the wild-spirited singer. "We are going to see the world and taste things that neither one of us ever dreamed of tasting. Perhaps even hold hands in Paris and just watch the fireworks over the skyline. But we will do that together."

"And then, Momma, there will come a day, when we...Jaejoong and I... are wrinkled and old." Yunho placed his hands over his mother's, holding her warmth against the chill of his soul. "We are going to be yelling at one another and then kissing for apologies until one morning, one of us will wake to find the other sleeping in death, cold and hard besides him. The one that is left...he will have to go on until death kisses his lips."

Yunho's voice cracked, his pain at that far off day vivid in his heart. "I can only pray ... and I pray hard, Momma, that Jaejoong is the one that wakes up on that morning. Because I am more selfish than I ever imagined I could be. Because I am not strong enough to live without him. He can go on...he can wait until that forever but I don't want to face that morning. I will if it means I wake up countless mornings with him warm next to me but I am man enough to say that I hope I slip on first."

Wiping his mother's hot tears from her face, Yunho finally shed some of his own, a trail of silver smelted in the truth of his beliefs. "I love him, Momma. Past death, I will love him."

"If that is how you feel, Yunho.." A press of her mouth left a painful final kiss on his forehead. Standing, she stroked his hair, gathering up her

emotions and tucking them away. "I will love you. You will always be my son but your father... he will not have you in his house. He sent me to tell you that."

"He should have been strong enough to tell me that himself." Yunho stood, offering her courtesy amid the pain. "The man who raised me...the one I thought raised me...would have given me at least that."

"He is a proud man...like you are." Her response was soft, hardened only by the words she spoke. "He wanted me to tell you that you should forsake the Jung name...take the name of the Kim boy you love so much but I know he speaks in anger...because you've hurt him so much. Give him time, Yunho. He will come around to this."

"But you are not welcome in our house." His mother stopped, her face a silhouette he would have to keep in his memories until Yunho saw her again. "What you are doing...who you are loving...is wrong. Kim Jaejoong will do nothing but hurt you. Your father knows that. I know that. But I will be there for you when that day comes. Your father will forgive you then ...if you come to us with a contrite heart."

"My parents would never forsake me." Yunho whispered. "They taught me how to love...they showed me that nothing I wanted was out of my reach. When those parents return, let me know. But I will not come crawling, Momma. I won't and I can't. And when you do come around, you will have to acknowledge Jaejoong beside me...if you want me in your life... you will have to take Jaejoong as well. He is my love. And my heart."

"I will always love you too." The young man pressed the palm of his hand on the table, hoping to feel something inside of him as he tore away the foundation of his life. "But I cannot live for you. I will live and love for Jaejoong. And he for me. I hope you find it in you to see that. If not, then this is goodbye."

Twenty-Four

Yunho stood outside of the apartment, a home created by a company that knitted together five young men into a singing group... and there... in that small space he found someone he could love. The glass building held many secrets, one of which was now his. Jaejoong was all he had left of family. The others were that circle beyond, brothers where he had none. It just hurt too much to even think. His throat ached from trying to swallow all of the tears he'd choked down, a burning fire in his mind.

Faces of his parents, growing distant in his mind, transformed from the supporting, stern teachers to masked horrors of pain and regret. His own heart was so heavy with disappointment. To suddenly discover the people he'd believed would be besides him throughout all of his trials and successes were nothing more than shadows of illusion Yunho had created in a dream. Their betrayal stung deeper than any poison he could have injected into his system. Every drop of blood coursing through his veins held their unfaithfulness. And he mourned finding the ashes of his childhood mottling his heart.

Yunho vowed not to regret spilling his seed on Jae's barren flesh. It would be better if those heartless souls did not live on in his own progeny. And wondered in the dark whispers of his mind, if he had it within him to betray Jae as his parents did their own son.

The apartment seemed so cold... much colder than in the dead of winter. Yunho stumbled through the living room, catching his foot on the hallway wall, his hand sliding down the frame in an attempt to catch himself before tumbling face first into the flooring. He'd not drunken much of the alcohol, it seemed more that what little he had imbibed served only to cut off his brain from his heart, taking away some of the pain bubbling up inside of him.

Burping, Yunho discovered the sourness of his father's anger still nesting in his belly. The apartment spun under his feet, a tumbling skew of walls he couldn't make much sense of. He never thought something could hurt as much as he did right now, the pain on his mother's face churned against the love he held for Jaejoong, its newness not yet worn down into his soul.

“Jaejoong.” He opened the bedroom door, looking for some spark of a star in his universe. An erotic dream looked up from a sprawl on the bed, lean bodied and long legs stretched out over a bolster pillow. Delicate bones stretched hard under supple flesh, pliable and willing for Yunho’s touch. Jet silk floated over Jae’s face, a curtain of black ruffled from his lashes, kohl rimmed eyes watching every step Yunho made into the room.

In the golden wash from the lamps and overhead lights, Yunho stared at the exotic creature he’d fallen for, an exquisite addiction that left him wanting more. Jaejoong’s fragile countenance still bore the hesitant stamp of the street urchin who’d stumbled into their ambitious world, drawn by a longing dream buried under the weight of Jae’s attraction to Yunho.

The few remains of scatter mess had been cleaned up, music equipment neatly organized against the wall, wires tied with plastic cords and tucked beneath the desks. A floor lamp had migrated into the bedroom, a beaded shade dangling amber strands, light waving through minute facets. Jaejoong’s love of music kept the stereo system in a prominent place, stacks of CDs purloined from various member’s collections, the feral singer’s hoarding tendencies in clear view. A soft husky voiced woman filled the room, rolling sounds of a muddy river carved into a land far across the globe, her husband having left her for another woman.

“Oh, Yunnie-ah...” Jaejoong was on his knees, reaching for the young man who captured his soul. Hands raked into the shirt Yunho chose so carefully out of his closet, now rumpled with sweat and rain. The singer felt the pain in his lover’s heart, an echoing sadness that he himself knew so very intimately. Yunho clung to him, his hands digging down into Jae’s waist, dragging him closer until the singer cupped hard against the young man’s primed body.

The room was warm, so very different from the world he’d just left. Yunho cupped at Jae’s chin, his fingers touching the shell of the young man’s ears. A dip of his head claimed Jae’s mouth, forcing the other back, rolling him back into the pillows. The mattresses creaked beneath their weight, Yunho moving one hand under Jae’s shin, pulling his legs straight and sliding down to rest at the cradle of the singer’s groin.

“Yunho...stop.” Jaejoong pulled back from the ravenous kiss, trying to capture a good look at his lover’s face. The ache in Yunho’s eyes was clear. Jae had seen that expression staring back at him in his mirror, his own features ruined by rejection and heartache. He’d prayed in the small

whisperings of a child's voice that his lover would be spared that anguish. It was obvious those pleas went unheard. "Please, tell me...what happened?"

"You know what happened, Joongie." The tears still remained unshed. He would not cry in Jaejoong's presence. He wouldn't show his lover the grief he already felt once, broken apart under his father's fists whereas Yunho only suffered once, a strike of rage across his face and words flung into the emptiness left behind by a family's leaving. "There's no one left but you."

"They'll come around." Yunho's adoration of his mother was well known. To have the young man cut off from the family he admired and depended on cut deep into Jaejoong's heart. Bit by bit, drops of guilt splashed acidic remorse on the singer's reservations, the selfish need for Yunho in his life becoming overwhelmed by the other man's filial obligations. "Both of your parents are so proud of you. Even when you chose something they didn't want for you, you showed them that you were successful... and they spoke so highly of you. You can't let this... thing with me change that."

"We are not a *thing*, Joongie." Yunho pressed down on Jae's body, sliding his hands up over the other man's trim hips, trapping the singer under his own weight. His mouth searched out Jae's, teasing it open once again and swallowing the mumbled protests hovering at the edge of the other's tongue. "I've given up everything for you...everyone that I've loved has turned on me...except for you."

Yunho's teeth savaged the lower plump flesh on Jaejoong's mouth, traveling to nibble hard on the clean jaw line, biting hard at the tender flesh under Jae's chin. His hands made quick work of his lover's shirt, the collar stitching popping under the force of Yunho's pulling. Jaejoong scrambled to gain some footing on the bed, ensnared by Yunho's powerful legs wrapped around his own.

Tenderness had no part in Yunho's knotted urges, his mouth finding a sweet velvet spot along Jae's chest, suckling pink at the groove between his pectorals. Eager fingers located the hard pierce of gold running under Jae's nipple, plucking the nub into a rigid peak. The leader's rough palms curved down to stroke at the other's belly, pushing up to feather across each rib bone he found under his fingers. Jae gasped, his protests to slow down lost in a rush of heat filling his belly, a ravaged bruise swelling the sensitive rise of his lips.

“Yunnie...” Jae came up for air, swaddled in the ardor Yunho wrapped around him, barely able to move or breathe in the intense onslaught. “You...”

“I need you.” Yunho’s teeth bit down on Jaejoong’s earlobe, mouthing at the earring post he found there. A moist sucking drew a hiss from the singer’s throat, arching upward to push Yunho’s mouth harder against his skin. “Let me... have you. I just want to feel you around me. Make everything just go away.”

It was so soon, Jaejoong’s mind whispered. Neither one of them was ready for this. Definitely not him. But the anguish in Yunho’s voice broke Jaejoong, striking his soul as Yunho’s father struck at his son’s face.

The whispers of the other waiters in the club came back to him, shoved aside faded memories of pain and endurance under the grunting bodies of the men who promised them pleasure. He’d come into the dressing room once to find Scarlet and another one of the *women* talking in hushed voices about the breadth of the new bouncer, a voracious plunging motion mimicked by the other dancer’s hands. Sliding behind the dressing screen, Jaejoong listened quietly to the horror stories of blood and torn flesh, wondering how anyone who wanted love could withstand that abuse of their bodies just for the presence of another person in their hearts.

Now, Jae understood it completely.

“Anything.” The sweet-faced young man murmured, his terrors frozen solid against want in his spirit. The pain in Yunho was palatable, a sour bitterness “I’ll give you anything you want...anything you need.”

He was bare to the evening air before he knew it,

Leaning Jaejoong back against the pillows, Yunho raised himself up to stare down at the long line of sinew and muscle lying underneath him. The young man’s full pout drew Yunho in, the scoop of sensual pleasure a promise in the pink moistness the leader knew lay hidden beyond. Caramel dipped almond eyes glanced up shyly through a shock of hair, a coy sexiness as natural to the singer as breathing. The beauty continued downward, rose splashes of nipples, a slash of gold and a wink of diamond pulling Yunho’s gaze downward. His fingers now intimately knew the soft skin below Jaejoong’s belly satin smooth before curving down to a brush of hair, Jae’s sex lengthening from its nest, hardening under Yunho’s frank perusal.

A ripple of Jae's stomach muscles tickled Yunho's palm, the journey downward made easier by a driving, desperate need to feel the man below him. The singer's hands stroked at what he could reach, pinned under the other's body, Yunho holding him fast against the softness of the bed. Jaejoong's sweet gasp echoed in Yunho's ear when the leader cupped at the singer's heavy warmth, playing at the pearl-drop moisture beading over the tip.

Yunho dipped his head down, about to lick at the salty fluid, his hand working at Jae's chest, a fierce roll of pressure against one nipple. Jaejoong's hands in his hair stopped him, a begging gesture for Yunho to allow him to please as well, moaning urges floating through the spasms of his body responding to Yunho's touch.

"I've never tasted you. Not really." Yunho denied Jae his urgings, pressing the opening of his mouth against the enticing slit along Jae's sex. He bit at the side of Jae's thigh, making the singer cease his squirming. "Stop. Let me do this."

The tip of his tongue roiled under the scent of his lover, a sweet musk of cloves and vanilla, the soap they now shared between them. The aroma of Jae's skin ripened Yunho's sex, the thought of the other belonging to him solidified how he felt...the anger he had when his father struck him.

Suckling at the weeping tip, Yunho's desires growled deep in his chest, demanding more. A dip of his finger into Jae's mouth slickened the digit, a demanding push for moisture to ease his way. The singer acquiesced, wanting more to open up his body for the others' pleasure...anything to erase the ache of disownment, willing to take in anything Yunho needed to push into him, just for the strong-willed young man to feel normal again.

"I want you. Now. Please." Husky voiced, Yunho nipped at the tender flesh along Jae's sex, tracing the long vein running under the skin with his teeth. Mewling, the singer pressed his hips up, aching and dripping from desire. The moist touch of Yunho's mouth created a deep craving inside of him, his knees lifting and spreading apart, begging for Yunho's touch.

Fanged butterflies dug down into Jaejoong's stomach, panic rising in a dreadful tide when he felt the brush of Yunho's finger against the rosette rim of his core. Moistened only with his own saliva, Jaejoong knew the intrusion would hurt, stories overheard at the clubs and dance floors weaving a tale of caution when falling in love... strong words of advice thrown aside for one simple, single reason.

Jaejoong wanted to hurt as much as Yunho hurt now. He would take Yunho's pain inside of him, willingly...wantonly. It was what he should to endure for bringing that shattering anguish to his lover's soul. In his heart and his spirit, Jae knew he deserved nothing less.

The push surprised Jae, Yunho's mouth still licking at his length. Yunho's shirt brushed a soft cotton kiss over Jaejoong's naked stomach, the buttons notching into the groove running down his abdomen. A press of a moist finger pad played at the rim of his entrance, coaxing Jae to fully open to the intrusion. Twisting, Jae tried to comply, forcing his mind to hold his body open for Yunho's finger.

A hiss escaped Jaejoong's lungs, the sudden filled sensation of his inner core shocking him with its dryness and the sharp digging pain of Yunho's delicate probing. His breath began to catch into short pants, a scrambling bundle of nerves clutching tight around his entrance. Forcing the sharpness away from his mind, Jaejoong huskily urged Yunho to continue, a single tear leaking from his clenched eyes.

Promising a darker pleasure than the feel of Jaejoong's mouth on him, Yunho was entranced by the clinging texture of his lover, a touch his sex ached to have around him. The pain of his family rode him again, breaking waves of distress fighting with the sheer delight of the desire under him. Yunho dipped his head again, hoping to suckle the sweetness of Jae deep into his being, hoping it would erase all of the torment boiling there.

A simple sound froze Yunho's ministrations, a choking mewl...the shushing breath escaping between Jaejoong's clenched teeth. Yunho heard the pain there, the willingness to fall beneath the incessant, harsh intrusion solely for the pleasure of his lover... a young man trying to withstand the crumbling of his entire world.

Pulling free from Jae's body, Yunho stood quickly, horrified at the need that overrode his concern for the young man who'd given everything of himself. Jaejoong had bared his soul down to the bones of his emotions and was more than willing to sear himself on the fires of Yunho's pain....merely to extinguish the anguish riding through the leader's being.

"I can't do this to you. God, Jaejoong...how can you let me do this to you?" Yunho's weeping finally broke, tears of remorse breaching past his control. His body jerked with the shivers of what he'd asked Jaejoong for... violating the whispered promises of taking care of the singer's

pleasures along with his own. “Why don’t you stop me from hurting you? Haven’t you been hurt enough?”

“Yes.” So silent was Jaejoong’s reply, Yunho nearly didn’t hear him. The sibilant entreaty that followed crushed Yunho’s heart, a driven rusted nail into the raw tenderness of his love for the young singer. “Yunnie-ah, I would hurt all over again for you...just so you would never feel it. I don’t mind the pain...if it heals you.”

Yoochun shook under his covers, a trembling grip on his bared shoulder. A wet drop struck his face, warm despite the winter chilled air sliding from a crack in the window. Another droplet hit the corner of Micky’s mouth, the salty taste reminiscent of the ocean. His dreams turned, sun-drenched beaches and a gamboling form running in silhouette ahead of him, the man’s face lost in an impenetrable shadow cast.

“Chunnie-ah... please.” His ears heard the sobbing in Jaejoong’s voice, heart wrenching crackles loosened from a pretty, tortured mouth. “You need to wake up, please.”

His eyes flew open, trying to adjust to the darkness of the room. A light shone from the hallway, illuminating the barest of details. Junsu lay asleep on the bed next to him, his foot peeking out from under the mound of covers he liked to bury himself in. A reposed hand lay over a floppy lavender ear, the bunny’s body hidden by Junsu’s cheek.

Jaejoong’s tears ran sheets of water over his skin, his eyes red from crying. The back of his hand rubbed at the tip of his nose, a crimson dot formed at the end. Despite the ravages of grief, the young singer remained beautiful, an articulated porcelain doll whose façade bore signs of crazing. Yoochun scrubbed at his face, feeling the wet on his own palm, sodden from Jaejoong’s weeping.

“What happened? Who’s hurt?” Micky was about to slide out of bed when Jaejoong pushed in under the quilt, his arms tight around Yoochun’s waist. Another jag of sobbing began, atypical for the feral singer and his need for composure. This was the private Joongie that Micky saw peeking out from under the bravado. Junsu stirred, his eyes wide at the sight of the slender singer cradled against Yoochun’s chest.

Yoochun met Junsu’s stare, the other singer’s gaze narrowed in Jaejoong’s presence. Over the pitch of Jae’s hair, Micky mouthed an apology to his roommate, holding his hands out in a gesture of helplessness before sliding them over the jutting bones of the singer’s

shoulder blades. His lips tightened into a sharp line, Junsu pulled back the covers, grabbing a blanket and a pillow then snatching up a forlorn button-eyed rabbit, the amicable faced singer stalked out of the room.

Sighing in frustration, Micky turned his attention back to his crying friend, pulling Jae's face away from his chest. "Joongie-ah, please... tell me what's happened."

A hiccup greeted Yoochun's query, followed by another ratchet of sobs. Trying to get his tears under control, Jae brought his hands to his mouth, touching at the tear on his lower lip... a bitten remnant of Yunho's rough kisses.

"Yunho...oh, Chunnie... he told his parents... " Jaejoong felt himself turned over, resting on his back and tucked under Yoochun's arm. The familiar comfort of the position eased the stress in his heart, a woeful ebb of anguish subsiding to a pool of misery. "They denied him. They've cast him out of the family because he wouldn't give me up."

"That's good, isn't it?" Micky struggled with his emotions. Jaejoong shared his pain in the past, a long ago bruise on his heart. Yunho's anguish would be fresh, a gaping wound on the leader's psyche. "He chose you."

"He didn't choose me. He shouldn't have had to choose me." Jae's tears slowed, his body finally leached of any remaining moisture in his sorrow. "There shouldn't have been a choice, Chunnie. They should have loved him enough to let him stay with them. I've taken everything from him."

"No..." Micky shushed his friend, drawing him close in a loose embrace, gently rocking the fragile singer. "Shhh... it's not like that."

"It is." Jaejoong shook his head and pushed back against the mattress, his anger at the Jungs surfacing. "Yunnie-ah told me that I am all he has left. I've done this to him. I've made him... less. That's not what I wanted."

"You wanted to hide behind a curtain and pretend that the world wouldn't notice that he loves you." The taller singer gently kissed his friend's temple, rubbing his cheek on Jae's forehead. "He won't do that. Yunho is too honest for that. He won't live in the shadows like a frightened crab. And he doesn't want you to live that way either. You're the one placing that on him and he is willing to do that for you... but he wouldn't be able to tell that lie to his parents."

“You are not to blame for their reaction, Joongie-ah.” Micky insisted. He wished he could get a hold of Yunho’s parents to shake some sense into them. In refuting their son, they injured a more brittle soul.

“They wouldn’t have told him he wasn’t welcome in their house if I were a girl.” Jaejoong pointed out, his chin set firm. Micky preferred to deal with an angry Jaejoong, the tint of rage in the singer’s voice a foundation to build on. “He’s done so much... look how far he’s come! How can they deny that he’s someone to be proud of?”

“Where is he?” Yoochun asked. “Is he asleep?”

“No.” Jaejoong’s anger fled beneath worry, the singer’s emotions a bramble of chaos. “He left. I called his phone but he’s not answering. I don’t even know if he took it with him. He wanted to... feel better and wanted... more from me...”

“But I thought...” Micky hid his astonishment behind a closed mouth. Swallowing hard, he continued. “I thought the two of you were going to linger on things...enjoy where you were going.”

“He stopped himself.” Biting his tongue, Jaejoong felt the spill of blood in his throat. “Yunho couldn’t.. touch me. He just stopped and said he couldn’t... and then the next thing I knew, he was gone.”

“Do you think...he’s regretted me, Chunnie?” The ache pounded in Jae’s chest, so much pain overwhelming him in the past few months. His spirit soared briefly under Yunho’s attentions, a dream-like fugue he knew would have to end. It was tumbling apart now, under the glare of revealing their love...a situation Jaejoong dreaded since the beginning first whispers of affection between them.

Fears tumbled back into him, Jaejoong’s soul filling with round river stones of doubt. “Do you think that he’s gone to find his parents and tell them that he...doesn’t want me so they’ll take him back? God, Chunnie, what have I done to him? Only because I wanted to love him...because I wanted him to love me?”

“No.” Yoochun replied, emphatic in his denial. His friend shivered in his arms, a sobbing mess of contradictions begging for the touch of a single lover, the one who fled into the dark, cold night. “He does love you, Joongie-ah. How could he not? Yunho will be back. And then everything will be alright.”

Twenty-Five

Sounds coming from the living room crept into Changmin's dreams, the roar of a crowd startling the landscape of his thoughts. For a brief seizing heartbeat in time, Min thought he had fallen asleep backstage and the others left him in the green room, alone and forgotten amid the pull of the bright lights and cheering. He woke with a start, upset that his group would allow him to fall asleep and then, outrageously, go on without him.

In reality, it was the sounds of a soccer match being played some place in South America from what little Changmin could hear of the Spanish-speaking announcer screaming at a muted volume.

Although still retaining the innocence of a young boy's face, Changmin's temper rose to a simmering level, giving his features the barest glimpse of the comeliness he would soon obtain. A glance at the soft green glow of his alarm clock shimmered the time, barely three hours past midnight. Without a window, the room retained a womb-like comfort, a graying darkness so pitch Min was forced to have a small lamp on to see the way clear to the door. He'd yet to hear the end of his need for a nightlight from the others. In time, he figured the teasing would fade. If it didn't, Changmin had threatened to take drastic measures in arranging for unflattering pictures to be taken. So far, none of the others took him seriously.

Not that they ever did. Min muttered.

Swinging out of his bed, he did a quick search for his slippers, the floor too chilly to walk barefoot through the apartment. The leather soles made a squishing noise on the wood surface, dimpled suede for traction inside of blue hamster plush tops bobbing as he walked.

Changmin suspected only two people for the noise, either Yunho or Junsu...both guilty of being addicted to certain teams. At this time of the morning, his suspects narrowed down to one... Junsu. Yunho would never be so inconsiderate as to have the sound up high.

Besides, Changmin reminded himself as he carefully stepped over the book he'd dropped to the floor before he fell asleep. *Yunho should have other things on his mind right now besides soccer.*

A disgruntled Junsu slayed over the wide red sofa, his legs scissoring out into a V, arms wrapped around one of the larger sky blue pillows. The carnival bunny he cherished dangled from his hand, the slight sway of its ears bobbing a hello to the youngest member of the group. Traces of a foul mood hung on the edges of Junsu's upswept mouth, a smile always nearly flirting with the young man's face. He glanced at Changmin, sweeping an assessing look over the youngest, his attention sullenly returning to the television screen.

"Ah, Junsu." Min worked his face into a pleasant smile, fixing the proverb of catching more flies with honey than vinegar in his voice. "Why are you awake? Did you set your alarm to watch this game?"

"No." A nod of Su's head set the cockscomb of his hair bobbling, the fringe around his face sticking straight up in the air, finger pulled from frustration. "It's taped."

"So you know who won..." Min nodded, sucking at his teeth to swallow his irritation. Rubbing his hands together, the youngest grinned, smiling down at his band member. "Then you should go back to bed. It's so infrequent when we have a day off to sleep in. Don't you have plans for tomorrow?"

"Hard to sleep when Jaejoong is in our room cuddling up to Yoochun because Yunho decided to have some sense and leave." Junsu flicked a finger over the remote, toggling the picture to a smaller screen, scrolling through the menu to see if there was something else on that he wanted to watch. "I would go sleep in their room but I'm afraid Yunho would come home and mistake me for Jaejoong in the dark. I don't want Yunho's hands to be the ones I find on me in the middle of my sleep."

A white faced monkey god leered out from the television, a man in a hanbok dancing behind him. Junsu's face curled in contempt, changing the channel with a twist of his hand expertly ghosting over familiar buttons. A drama unfolded on the screen, a wrinkled harbinger of doom soothsaying in the form of an old auntie, her cackling voice a rising annoyance before Junsu flipped the channel again, fluttering through the sports selections on the menu. The singer finally settled on a foreign language dramatic, the opening credits for *Maalaala Mo Kaya* scrolling over the screen, Korean subtitles running along the right side of the picture.

“Why did Yunho leave?” Changmin cocked his head in alarm.

He’d spent so much of his past few weeks maneuvering the eldest members closer, often missing dance steps to take himself out of time with the routine, forcing Jaejoong and Yunho to slam into one another face to face. The cold had been a godsend, a little sickness he nursed and coddled, knowing the others would give him anything he asked. A few whispered, hoarse words into Yunho’s ear and the leader would go off in search of buckwheat soba from Japan, Jaejoong trailing behind for moral support.

“I don’t know.” Junsu shrugged, the nonchalant movement not fooling Min. Even half-awake the youngest saw with keener eyes than the others gave him credit for. Junsu’s mood wasn’t just from lack of sleep. It was due to the presence of Jaejoong in the room he shared with Yoochun...and a particular lavender bunny. “Something about.. Yunho’s parents. I guess the idiot told his parents that he was in love with Jaejoong.”

“Aish.” Changmin flopped down on the couch, dipping Junsu’s head down with his weight. The other singer pushed at the youngest’s legs, finally lying down fully, draping back down over Min’s lap to use the young man as a pillow. “You’re heavy.”

“You’re here.” Junsu muttered, switching the remote to his other hand, tucking the bunny under his chin. “Shut up. You’re making the screen move.”

“What was Yunho thinking? No one in their right mind would think that his parents would just accept this from their only son.” Changmin pondered, dismissing any possible answers other than the truth. “He wants his parents to love Jaejoong. Our leader believes that if his parents accept Joongie-ah, then the pain of his own parents’ rejection would be erased.”

“Well, now no one loves any of them. Especially Jaejoong.” The prone singer snorted, then regretted his harsh words. Turning over to stare up at the youngest member, he sighed, his breath ruffling his dark bangs. “I know. That was wrong to say. Jaejoong doesn’t deserve that kind of pain but neither do any of us. This love affair of theirs has spilled into our lives. It is hard to even breathe around here without inhaling some of their drama. How long does it take to fall in love?”

“I don’t think that’s the question, hyung.” Min snatched the bunny out from under Junsu’s chin, wrapping the ends of his index fingers in its

ears, making its soft body dance. "I would sooner ask, how long will it be before they are happy in love?"

"Junsu is pissed off." Jaejoong's chest shuddered, his hiccups coming under control. The tears left him seasick, parched sorrow leeches from his bones. A coating of disgust covered his throat, the tissue made raw from his crying. "And it's three in the morning. I should let you and Junsu sleep."

"I would say we should go into your room but if Yunho comes home, I don't want him to think that I've moved in while he was gone." Yoochun's attempt at humour fell flat on the other's ears. "That was a joke, Joongie."

"I think I've cried out my sense of humour." Jae wiped at his face, angry at his continued sniffing. "I wanted to... do that...with Yunnies-ah. I would have...even if it hurt because I wasn't ready, I wanted to because he needed it."

"But it was good that he stopped... he didn't want to hurt you." Micky forestalled the conversation heading into a direction he wasn't prepared to face.

Thinking of Yunho's body invading Jaejoong's left a flushed feeling in his stomach, a curious wonderment he felt it was best not to examine in the thin hours of the morning. Junsu's hands were a source of fascination for him since Jae first shared specifics with him in the tea shop. He'd touched at the lubricant Yunho smuggled home, a small slippery dollop between his fingers, shared behind the leader's back when he asked Jaejoong how it felt.

The aromatic fluid squished between his pressed fingers, not the oily feeling he'd been expecting. It felt more like the gel that the stylists used on their hair, pulling it into strange shapes and then drying firm. The lubricant didn't grow tacky under Yoochun's fingers, remaining a sliding gelatinous slick under his touch. Jaejoong had urged his friend to taste it, Micky reluctantly dabbing the tip of his tongue on the gel. His head jerked up, Jae holding back laughter with a press of a hand against his full mouth. An almond flavor spread through Yoochun's nose and throat, the sweetness just a tinge of an aftertaste on his senses.

Yoochun discovered himself pondering how the almond gel would taste on skin, then shook the thought right out of his head.

"I think I'm angry at myself..." Jae huffed, slamming his head back onto Junsu's pillows, nearly banging his head on the hard footboard. "I promised I wouldn't let him hurt me and the first chance I get to tell him no, he's gone too far...what do I do? Tip my hips back and beg."

"But he was hurting, Chunnie." The singer slid off the bed and onto his feet, prowling the room on the balls of his feet. Yoochun fought to keep up with Jae's bouncing thoughts, giving in to the inevitability that no one would sleep until the two eldest members of their group worked out their immediate problem.

"Joongie..." Micky grabbed at Jae's arm, pulling into the soft warmth of his comforter. "Settle down. Please. And listen to me."

The older singer felt himself hauled backward, tumbling into Yoochun's curved lap. Micky's long arms wrapped tight about Jae's waist, curving up to cradle the singer's back. The intimate caress soothed the feral young man, a sigh of regret and frustration seeping from his tired chest. Sleep caked the sand on his lashes, Jae's body wanting to succumb to the comfort of his friend's touch.

"Stay put." Micky ordered, pressing the tip of his index finger down on the end of Jaejoong's nose. "And try to think straight. I know that is hard for you to do."

Taking a deep breath, Yoochun began. "Did Yunho say that he didn't love you?"

"No." Jaejoong thought on the matter, shaking his head. "More that...he couldn't do that to me... make love to me."

"I think what Yunho is saying that he wouldn't fuck you." Micky replied, the coarseness of his word shocking the breath out of his friend's mouth. "There's a difference, Jaejoong, and I know you. I know where you came from and what has happened to you. I know what shapes you. And I can only tell you that I'd hoped by now you would have learned the difference between the two but you haven't."

"Sex is..." Jae sat back into the curve of Yoochun's arm, chewing on his mouth. His fingers tugged at the tail of hair slithering down his pale neck, the milk of his skin nearly luminescent in the ambient light. "I've had sex before. I've spent time pleasuring Yunho. It's not like I haven't felt the difference."

"I'm guessing that Yunho hasn't." Micky pointed out, watching the pout emerge from Jae's mouth. "I'm not saying that he loved anyone in the past like he loves you now. I don't think that's possible. He would need more than one heart to store that much affection in his chest. But I think Yunho doesn't give his body out lightly."

"And I do?" Jae's eyes slitted dangerously, a warning side of an impending quarrel.

"Listen to me, Joongie..." Yoochun kissed his friend gently on the cheek, saddened by the taste of the salty remains of Jae's pain. "You had sex with people because you wanted to feel close to someone. You just wanted to feel anything. Tell me that you didn't spend your life before meeting us stretching the limits of your body and pleasures just because you wanted to bury the heartache in your soul."

"No." Jaejoong's reply was quiet and subdued. "But it's different now. This is Yunho."

"It may be different, Joongie." Micky agreed. "But you've not yet had that moment with him. That one special time when he fills you and you say, this is it... this is where I need to be the rest of my life. For all of your urban wildness, you are a romantic and want nothing more than the arms of your lover around you. Your heart cries out for that and when the two of you finally do... love one another, you won't be satisfied with just sex anymore."

"Yunho stopped not because he doesn't want you. But because he wants you forever." Jae's eyes shimmered again, his hands trembling with the weight of the truth spilling from Micky's mouth. "He didn't continue because if he had pushed into you, Yunho would have only been thinking of himself and his needs...and that, my Joongie, is what *fucking* is."

"I just...wanted to take away his pain." Jae gritted down his teeth, refusing to shed another drop of salted water from his eyes. "I would have done anything to make that go away. Can't you see that, Yoochun. It would have been worth it. It would have been worth my body for that."

"Just because I understand why you wanted him to push you, doesn't mean that it's right, Jaejoong." Micky said, stroking at his friend's hair. "Yunho wants that eternity of pleasure with you...for that one moment and every single moment past that. He wants to make sure that you are the only thing he is thinking of...the only one he is interested in pleasuring. As you think of him being the only one... he knows that you

are worth that and that you deserve that. That's how I know he loves you."

The subway line six pulled into the station, the left hand doors sliding open to let out its meager flow of passengers. People passed by, rushing to board the train with a bump of their shoulder and dip of excuses, words mumbled through dry lips, the wind rushing cold through the tight space.

Yunho clenched his fists in his jacket pockets, the fragrance of Jaejoong's kissed skin clinging to the heavy fleece. His fingers itched for the other's warmth, the burn of a ringed tightness circling over his cuticle. His body felt drained, betrayed by the dizzying, violent emotions he'd taken it through, unyielding in the abuse Yunho heaped upon it. And now, while the sun barely flirted with dawning, he stumbled into a den of chaos he had no business being in.

A pair of pink leather pants swayed in front of Yunho, the heart-shaped face of a beauty startlingly combined with a thick Adam's apple and the dark undershadow of a stubbled beard. The young man's contact-blue eye winked knowingly, a leer spreading over his face as he slid past Yunho, taking full advantage of running his legs over the singer's ass before making it through the doors of the train.

The leader turned, his shocked expression quickly losing the war with his grief. He'd come to this tangle of streets to find some clarity, a purpose he'd only just discovered when he saw the memorial to a burnt nunnery and a statue of copper, succulent pears.

Despite the late...or early hour of the day, the streets were still filled with commerce, a testament to the never ending night life of Seoul's dynamic people. A small seafood restaurant ran scents of broiling crab hot pots into the night, the fresh aroma of seaweed and garlic permeating Yunho's lack of hunger. All he had in his stomach was a cup of tea and several shots of whiskey. And the succulence of the lover he'd left abandoned, naked on the bed.

It was painful to walk away from Jaejoong. Yunho's heart ached at the memory of the young man's face. The anguish of something ominous and threatening lurked in the other's expression, a fear that Yunho knew he couldn't push out of Jae's mind. The leader didn't trust himself not to touch Jaejoong at that moment, his body wanting to breach into the tight promise of velvet heat, regardless of the sobbing mewls Jae choked down.

That sound would be with him forever. He would place it next to his other memories...both better and tragic. There were times when he would relive moments of his life and savour the triumphs, hoping to forget the mistakes. That sound from Jaejoong's throat would haunt him until his ghost whispered out of the ether. It was the crack of stone beneath the icy fingers of a frost so cold it shattered pure hardness, a notch dug out of Jae's love for him. Nothing he could do would cement that piece back into Jae's soul...not without leaving a craze on the other's heart. It would join the other crippling fractures already spiderwebbing insecurities into Jae's consciousness... reminders of the times he'd handed his heart to others only to have it dashed to the floor.

I will not be someone who walks away from you, Jaejoong. Yunho hoped Jae's love could hear him...forgive him for the near violation of his trust and give him the time to repair the damage. Jaejoong had promised that Yunho would only have once more to hurt him. The young man hoped he hadn't used up that chance.

He led himself mostly by sound, drawing away from the popular lengths of street filled with American fast food places and smaller, more intimate restaurants. The streets seemed more alive with garish sound, bright loudness rising as if to mask the loneliness of the people who sat clustered around tiny tables. One café boasted a long bar filled with blocks of ice, patrons sitting around the pedestal to reach for soju splashed over crystal ice shavings.

A woman laughed, near the edge of hysteria, the man she was with glancing about in a panic, wanting no one to see him with someone nearly half his age. Her hands were making a foray into the tented peak of his pants, the top metal prong undone. Yunho could spot the red and white banding of the pants lining, a tickle of white underwear peeking out from the open fly.

Yunho found a trail of promising leads, a slattern of a man standing at a street corner. At first glance, the singer thought the youth neared his age but as he drew closer, hard lines appeared in the man's face, rings of gloomy circles raccooning his eyes. Makeup hid the deep pock marks from a pervasive acne, hollowed cheeks plumped by expertly placed sweeps of tanning rouge. Yunho could see the shards of beauty left in the man's bones, fingers browned and coarse from years of cigarette smoke, fine lines marring the pretty slash of mouth outlined in a coffee pencil.

The man's lean body shivered under the cold wind, winter not yet giving up the season. A thin shirt clung to his slender body, the poke of a turgid nipple clearly evident despite the wide bands of ribbing in the fabric.

Yunho passed quickly, ignoring the long assessing eye of a practiced flirt, the intent to part money with the promise of pleasure written in every drop of the man's body language.

A bramble of streets closed in tight, small alleyways suddenly sprouting arms of passage that opened into minute courtyards, throngs of men gathered about a nearly hidden doorway, plumes of fragrant smoke wreathed about their heads. The singer spotted a few Caucasians among the mixture of Asians, taller sprouts of thick manhood pushing up to tower above slighter frames. A few followed Yunho's meandering walk with interested eyes, the fresh handsome sleekness of Yunho's body a stunning attraction against the jaded offerings of the streets' wares.

Moaning jerked Yunho out of his focused introspection, the sounds of sex and pleasure mingled with a fake crooning of encouragement, a young man's voice barely brushing the underbelly of apathy as he cajoled an unseen lover to a finish. The leader stopped to stare at a doorway niche of an apartment building, the wrought iron security door draped with a boy younger than Changmin, his eyes rolled nearly to his whites in disgust. A languid hand held a long hand-rolled cigarette.

The boy smiled and held up his hand, fingers spread. Pointing down to Yunho's groin, he motioned with a clenched fist, pumping his arm up and down before flashing his five fingers three times, nodding hopefully in the young man's direction. Leaning his body back in a recoil of shock, Yunho shook his head no, finding himself mouthing a thank you and bowing politely before hurrying on. The youth's laughter followed him down the alley, a mocking sound that burned his ears in shame.

Another couple sat huddled on a stoop, their faces close together, words murmured between them. One of the young men glanced up, catching sight of Yunho coming towards them. He canted his body, covering his boyfriend's face from the leader's view, protecting his lover's secret with his own brazen display of his face. Their hands boldly proclaimed a wedding ring, a groove of flesh dug down into their fingers. The men's clothes spoke of families and homes in the upper reaches of the city, gathering pockets of filth from the unwashed cement steps where they met to exchange words of love.

Is this what you think love is like, Joongie? Yunho mentally asked his lover. *Do you think it means sliding into the shadows because someone might see who you are and who you love? That is not what I want for you. You shouldn't be hiding your heart. I shouldn't be hiding mine.*

A flashing neon sign caught Yunho's eye, the pink glittering stars melding into a brilliant yellow sunburst. The wide form of a bodyguard blocked the thin entrance, a doorway barely large enough for a single man to pass through. Three men stood directly to his right, arguing under their breaths and glancing about, older than the two men Yunho had passed but still vibrant with vigor.

The bouncer's dark skin gleamed under the flashing light, his teeth a white slash in his ebony face. Shaven to the skin of his skull, his wide nose bore a deep scar, the keloid a marked raspberry smoothness on his nearly midnight flesh. He seemed oblivious to the cold, a spandex blend shirt running a slick vivid purple over his over-sculpted chest.

Yunho's entrance into the club stalled when the dusky-skinned man shoved his palm out in front of the singer, a grunting demand and jerk of his head towards the tiny hand-lettered sign by the doorway. The young man dug into his pockets, finding a wad of notes. Peeling off the twenty-thousand won the sign asked for admission, Yunho was handed a pair of paper red tickets, vouchers for two small lemonades he could spice up with a shot of soju. The young man wondered if this was where Jaejoong acquired the taste for the mixed drink, an oddity none of the others had encountered before meeting the feral, fearless singer.

A discreet word with the bartender led Yunho into a dimly lit hallway, his pockets now nearly emptied of cash. He'd gladly paid the asked for admission for backstage, ignoring the other man's raised eyebrows when he didn't even make an effort to haggle the price down. The club's bartender motioned for one of the waiters to direct Yunho down the weave of corridors and doorways, the pretty faced young man straightening his black pants after a male customer snagged at his ass with a pinch of fingers.

With a sigh, the youth trod quickly in front of Yunho, glancing back with an interested eye at the singer, wondering where he'd seen the handsome, solemn man before. Coming to a wide door painted white, the waiter knocked hard, a yellow glittered cardboard star strung on twine and dangling from a crooked nail swinging with the force of the blow to the wood.

A sweet voiced woman called out a greeting, urging whomever was outside of the door to come in. Turning the knob, Yunho was about to thank the young man for leading him to her when he discovered that the boy was gone, his footsteps retreating back to the main part of the club. Cracking the door open, the harrowed eyed young man stepped in,

searching for the person he felt he could share the pain he so desperately wanted to shield Jaejoong against.

“Why hello, *maganda*.” The woman purred, running a practiced hand over her sleek up-do. Curls of chestnut hair cascaded into a riotous mass along her overmade face, a well placed dot of eyeliner darkening a spot above her wide mouth. Generous cleavage spilled from a sequined lace dress, the underlining a seductive match to her olive skin, making the dress seem a galaxy of stars painted tight over her lush body. Delicate gold bracelets chimed along her arm, running down in a trickle of sound as she turned, dark wide eyes sparkling with delight at seeing Jaejoong’s love.

“I’m guessing that you’re no longer going to be a secret to me, then.” She whispered, standing and brushing her open hand on Yunho’s chest, his eyes drawn to her fluttering eyelashes. “I take it that my little *musang* is fine.”

Her eyes popped open, all pretense of flirtation gone from their depths. Her voice grew huskier, a rough growl of a lifetime of cigarette smoke and cheap liquor. “He is alright, isn’t he? You didn’t come here to give me bad news!?”

“No, Scarlet.” Yunho reassured the one person who knew Jaejoong when he was in the wallows of his pain. “I’ve come here because I don’t want to hurt him. And I need someone to talk to about... everything. I need someone to tell me how to love him without pulling him apart.”

“I’ve already told the boy everything I should teach him.” The coy flirt was back, her hands holding up a rhinestone choker for Yunho to take. Turning her back, Scarlet lifted the fringe of her wig, allowing Yunho to slide the jeweled collar about her neck and fasten it over the small shaved down bump of cartilage that proclaimed her masculinity. Her lushly made up eyes met Yunho’s in the mirror, the ravages of the night plain on the boy’s face under the glare of her dressing table.

“You’ve told him everything about how to pleasure a man.” Yunho tilted his chin back, ordering himself not to break before this woman...this person who first kissed Jaejoong’s wounded heart and splinted the angelic wings of his spirit. “I need you to tell me how to love him. So he always wakes up smiling and not afraid. I need to know how to make sure that he comes to me when he’s injured, and lean on me when he’s weak. That’s what I need to know. I’m willing to give up ever being deep inside of his body if I can even just penetrate the depth of his soul.”

Twenty-Six

Junsu felt himself being nudged out of his cocoon of warmth, a curious coldness on his feet. Blinking furiously, the young man floundered, his legs flailing for support against the movement. One of his clenched fists struck something meaty, the hard thunk of hitting bone resonating through his arm. The object of his attack grunted under the blow, Yoochun protesting the rough treatment with a low-pitched outcry.

“Junnie!” The rarely heard affectionate term broke Junsu from his sleep, a watery morning dawn touching his face through the gauzy drapery hanging down over the front windows. The sweet faced singer rubbed at his cheek, the bruising mark reddening and swelling along the bone. “Aish! What was that for?”

The red sofa swallowed Junsu in its belly, cushions falling forward to wrap his body in a velvet fold. A tickle of plush rubbed at his nose, sprigs of lavender fur clouding Junsu’s vision. Spitting out the a track of fur on his tongue, the singer tried to sit up, his legs too tangled by the couch pillows to have any effective motion, nearly tumbling back into the slanted back couch. Feet uncovered and bare to the cold air, Junsu wondered if he had toes left at all, frostbitten and chewed on by an icy night.

“What time is it?” Bleary eyed, Junsu tried to focus on the clock ticking on the wall between the hallway and the kitchen, the small corridor to the laundry room nearly pitch in shadow.

“It’s five in the morning.” Yoochun sat down next to his roommate, pulling out bolsters from under Junsu’s hips. “I thought you might want to go back to bed. Jaejoong’s all tucked in and Changmin is dead asleep. We won’t see either of them until late in the morning.”

Junsu yawned, allowing himself to be pulled free from the couch. Yoochun grabbed the bunny before it tumbled to the ground, tucking it under his arm. Junsu leaned his head on Micky’s shoulder, sliding his arm around Yoochun’s waist for support as the other guided him down the hallway to their room. Cradling his pillow against his chest, Su shuffled along, bumping hips with the other as he walked, his blanket tossed over one shoulder and dragging on the ground behind him.

"I closed the window so it would be warm when you came to bed." Micky helped Junsu to his bed, taking the pillow out from the singer's arm and tucking it under his head. "Get into bed. I'll take care of the rest."

A flick of his hands spread the blanket out, settling over the sheets and comforter Junsu burrowed under. In the low spread of the end table lamp's light, Junsu watched Yoochun as he flicked off the hallway light and shut the door, sliding under his own covers. Micky's hand was nearly on the pull of the lamp when he spotted Junsu's face, a curious look in the singer's soulful eyes.

"Is he coming back in here?" Junsu reached out, circling his fingers around Yoochun's wrist. The shock of cold on the singer's arm saddened Micky, the thought of Su shivering in the living room. Lavender peeked out from under the sheet, its left eye button agog at the cold world outside its cosset. "Jaejoong, I mean."

"No, he should be going to sleep." Micky removed his hand from the pull, steeping his warm fingers over Junsu's cold ones. "I think he's moved on from scared crying to sleepy angry at Yunho leaving."

"He comes to you a lot." The singer nearly mumbled into his pillow, the soft cotton case framing his cheek. He allowed his hand to be taken, Micky's thumb stroking along the pulse point at his wrist. The caress felt intimate, the strong vein under Yoochun's touch reacting with a skipping beat at every pass of the other's thumb pad. "You're a good friend to Joongie-ah."

"I try." Micky nodded, leaning over the space between their beds. In the tiny slit between their mattresses, Yoochun was able to cant forward, hips secure on the edge of the bed and touch his forehead to Junsu's, the other singer staring up into his eyes. A flick of Micky's long lashes tickled Junsu's temple, a brushing butterfly of a soul kiss skimming over the skin. "I'm your friend too, Junsu."

"I just need you to remember that, Chunnie-ah." Junsu resisted the urge to lick at the plump mouth in front of him. "Don't forget me in your need to help Jaejoong. Sometimes I am in the one who need Yoochun. I don't mind sharing... but sometimes, I wish I came first."

A quartet of cellos played from the hidden speakers built into the Range Rover's plush interior, the leather insets pulsating against Yunho's thigh as Scarlet's escort drove them to her home. The man had come in during the impersonator's show, seating himself at a table near the stage. A

discreet diamond ring sparkled on his pinky finger, the cut of his suit custom tailored to his barrel chested body. Standing, the older man barely stood to Yunho's eyes but the powerful stride of his short legs and the sharp nod of greeting to the staff spoke volumes of the man's stature.

Scarlet finished her set, motioning with a wave of her hand for Yunho to follow her backstage, casting a seductive smile at the round-faced man, his fingers automatically smoothing out his gel-slick hair, moving the strands back from his high forehead. Yunho entered the backstage corridors and nearly slammed into Scarlet stepping off stage, her skirt raised up while she negotiated the tight stairs. Clearing his throat behind Yunho, the man stepped forward, offering a hand to the impersonator steady. His eyes flicked once over Yunho's presence, filing the young man away as neither a threat nor trouble, his attention only on the passionate faced man encased in sequins and lace.

"Ah, honey. It is so good to have you here tonight." Scarlet's mouth left a deep red lip print on the man's cheek, the bangles around her wrist jangling when she tried to rub the mark off. "I've let a bit of myself on you."

"Leave it." He muttered, a deep voice resonating as he spoke. Lifting Scarlet's hand to his mouth, he left a small kiss on the back of her hand. Nodding his head in Yunho's direction, he smoothed down his tie, tucking the end back into his buttoned jacket, a sleek blue comma against his white shirt. "Is this a new boy here?"

"No, *dulse*. We couldn't afford such a beauty here, even if he wanted to work for us." Scarlet simpered, a press of her fingers along the man's suit lapel. "He is a friend of that very pretty kitten that I found. You remember him, I think. You said he was too succulently faced to be a boy."

The man grunted, either remembering Jaejoong or not wanting to argue with the man wrapping around his chest. Scarlet leaned over to whisper in Yunho's ear, asking him if he could wait half an hour and then they could go back to his apartment, a pleasant ride in a warm car rather than a possibly dangerous stroll through the money-desperate back alleys of Itaewon's Hooker Hill. Yunho nodded, knowing from what little experience he had of the area that the more darker of personalities cruised the streets right before dawn, hoping to take advantage of drunken American service men or prostitutes still trolling for a last bit of won before going home.

Half an hour passed by quickly, Yunho spending the time watching the other men dancing on the wide stage, their gyrations enticing and erotic. The waiters scurried from table to table, leaving the young singer alone once they realized he was lean in money, nursing a glass of lemon soju Scarlet ordered for him before disappearing in the warrens backstage. The man rejoined Yunho first, settling down at the table, adjusting his tie. His hands were devoid of any jewelry, a small etched line where the pinky ring once sat. The man remained silent, only giving a grunt of thanks when one of the serving boys brought him a short snort of whiskey, passing over a large tip with a nonchalant wave of his hand.

Scarlet joined them after a while, the club's dance floor thinned out as patrons began to seek ways home, either alone or in pairs, heads bowed down as they left the narrow exit. The ride was a short one, relatively free of traffic. The man pulled up underneath a curved wrought iron staircase, the punched through steps leading to a second story apartment. The Rover barely squeezed through between the buildings, its doors brushing at the brick walls. Scarlet tiptoed over the moist cobblestones, leaning into the open window and pressing a chaste kiss on the man's cheek, hurrying Yunho up the stairs and following closely behind. The Rover's headlights remained boldly lighting up the tight street until Scarlet turned the key in her lock, swinging the door open and letting Yunho in.

The first thing Yunho saw was the poster of his lover surrounded by the other members of the group. He'd often thought the distant cant of Jaejoong's pretty face captured the singer's inner most heart, now realizing that it merely reflected the sorrow hammered into his soul by uncaring fists. His own face stared back out at him, seemingly cold and uncaring towards the tenderhearted Jae in the middle.

"Let me change my clothes. Be a love and make us some tea." Scarlet stepped over a flat-faced Persian, the orange tabby furred cat meowing loudly behind her. "If you can find it, there's some cat food in the pantry. Oscar would love to have his breakfast before I get changed. It would spoil him so."

The teapot was easy to find as were the flaked tuna cans. Also easy to locate was a seemingly endless stream of cats, various shapes and sizes pouring out of the crevices of the vast apartment. The Persian seemed to step up first to the dish, establishing himself as the alpha cat. The others hovered, a confusing mix of tails and screeches Yunho eventually gave up trying to make sense of.

Yunho looked about the room, wondering how it appeared to Jaejoong when the young singer found shelter in Scarlet's den. He'd thought the space was small at first. Upon inspection, the quarters seemed cramped by the sheer glut of furniture pushing up against the walls. Small knick-knacks ran rampant over nearly every flat surface, fine sashimi platters crowding against porcelain figures. A moving waterfall picture lent a rainbow of sparkles from one corner of the kitchen, its faint light providing the still feasting cats illumination to find the depleted food bowls.

With a whistle, the teapot announced it was done and Yunho returned to the kitchen, pouring hot water over tea bags, sniffing at the black pepper scent. A few teaspoons of sugar made the brew more palatable, the short trip back into the living was made with a one-eyed short hair missing part of its tail.

"I see you have met JJ." Scarlet's transformation was nearly astonishing, the overdone beauty was now a faded pretty faced Filipino man clad in lime green sweats, his hair hidden under a terry cloth white turban. His features were clearer without the pancake MAC foundation and ringed eyeliner, his dark lashes still long despite the lack of mascara. Reaching over, Scarlet patted at the cat's head, its slinky body curled into Yunho's lap, a deep purring pleasure rumbling from its skinny chest.

Picking up the other mug Yunho brought with him from the kitchen, Scarlet slid into the corner of the couch, tucking her legs under her and gracefully cupping the heavy ceramic vessel, a practiced courtesan still layered into his mannerisms. Her mouth pursed to take a deep sip of the hot, fragrant brew, inhaling delicately at the peppery tea's steam. "Ah, this is just the thing after a long night. My body is getting too old for this. My feet are crying for a warm bath and never to wear high heels again. The price we girls pay for wanting to be beautiful."

"You are always beautiful." Yunho bobbed his head in respect, making Scarlet giggle slightly.

"Ah, I can see why my little Joongie cares so much for you." She playfully slapped at Yunho's shoulder, amused at the smooth flirtation.

Scarlet assessed the young man sitting across of her couch, his hands stroking at the thin, bony Abyssinian peering up at him with one good feline eye. The other eye remained permanently closed, a runnel of twisted scar tissue pinking over the old wound, eyelids sutured shut over the gaping hole left in the cat's skull. Yunho's ministrations eased over the cat's body, not shirking from the scarred face, rubbing his thumb

over its nuzzling face as JJ scratched the keloid over Yunho's fingernails. Purring, the cat flopped on its side, turning over onto its back and stretching out its legs, enticing the singer to stroke at its belly.

"What happened to him?" Yunho scritch'd carefully at the purring cat's stomach, his fingers working deep into the thick coat over JJ's chest. "He looks..."

"JJ looks like how most of our souls look like after the world is done with us. I like to think of him as the lost souls of all the little boys who end up in Itaewon, starving for affection and scrambling for anything to make them feel again." Scarlet's mood took a downturn, seeing the winged shadows of pain cross over Yunho's piercing gaze. "I'm sorry. I am maudlin when I'm tired and had too much tequila in one night."

"I found JJ tied by a heavy shoe lace to a piece of cement block. He was lying on the bank of the river bed near the park, soaking wet and rather pissed off at the world. I'm guessing someone had thrown him into the water to drown him. He was battered, already missing that one eye, his back legs were broken and his tail had ruptured a few inches from the root. But there he was, still alive and growling at me when I approached." Scarlet smiled at the memory of another feral, wild-eyed soul of a cat she's found, a cast-off lying in society's debris, his beauty run muddy from pain and damage. "He scratched me when I tried to pick him up. Barely alive and breathing with the water filling his lungs and he was determined to take a piece of me with him in death. You have to admire that in a cat."

"You'd have to admire that in anyone." Yunho said softly, eliciting another purr from the prone feline with a rub of his hand against the cat's legs. "How long have you had him?"

"About the time that my other *musang* left, this one appeared in my life." Scarlet put her mug down, watching Yunho's face with an intent interest. "You might say I collect battered cats that are difficult to pick up when they are injured. And also difficult stubborn young men? How hard to you think a cat has to try to cuddle up against one of those? So many of them...both cats and young men...circle one another in this living room. Both looking for some love but afraid of the hand that will deal it."

Dismissing her mood, Scarlet probed carefully. "And what about you, Yunho? How are you dealing with it?"

"I don't know..." Yunho glanced up, his eyes finding Jaejoong's face in the poster. The flat image hardened him, the intimate knowledge of the hard flesh beneath the clothes heating up the palms of his hands. Suddenly the dregs of tea in his mouth tasted of salty sex and sugary moans, sounds captured in his throat as he covered Jae's lips with his own. "I...needed to talk to someone about...everything. And I couldn't think of anyone else besides you...to trust, I mean."

"Ah, that is the best part about being an Auntie." The other man assured his guest, patting at Yunho's leg with his hand. "All of the pretty boys come to cry on my shoulder and then I send them home, happy and full of wisdom."

"I need that wisdom." The pride he swallowed to come here suddenly choked Yunho's throat, making it difficult to speak. "I...hurt our Jaejoong."

"How so, little one?" Scarlet cocked one eyebrow, pursing her lips in thought. "You didn't strike him did you?"

"No." Yunho's head came up, an angry expression fleeting over his features. "I'd slit my own throat before I strike him."

"Good." Scarlet nodded her approval. "Although I am glad to say the day when someone can strike out at Joongie without retribution has long passed. He has grown teeth since I first met him."

Her intuition worried at the thought of Jaejoong in love, the young singer barely able to take care of his own heart much less love another's. It appeared her worries were unfounded in her opinion. Yunho was strong enough to guide the stray off of his self-destructive path. Scarlet just hoped that the leader had the patience to see the love through the chaos storm that seemed to follow Jaejoong like a cloud.

"Do you need something to drink?" She asked softly, knowing liquor often had a way of loosening tightness in a young man's tongue. "It might make talking easier."

"No...thank you, nuna." The honorific brought a blush to Scarlet's jaded cheeks, the soft endearment so rarely heard without a tint of sarcasm, a tone missing from Yunho's sincere words. The young man continued, his tea forgotten on the cramped space of the coffee table. "I think I want to speak without the numbness. I want to be able to find the...words in my heart without the blur of his brain."

“Talk to me then, little boy.” Scarlet tapped out a slim cigarette, its pink wrapper scented with rose attar. The end flared red when lit, a perfumed plume of smoke drifting above them. The slumbering cat wrinkled its nose, sneezing at the tobacco smoke, burying its face into Yunho’s side.

“It’s not easy...” Yunho admitted slowly, trying to search for what to say. “I don’t know who I’m loving, I guess. I thought Jaejoong was stronger than... than what he is. This afternoon...yesterday afternoon, I told my parents that I was in love with Joongie...”

“I take it that did not go well.” The other man couldn’t help but sneer, his expression unseen by the singer. A heavy sigh rocketed Scarlet’s body. He’d seen so many young boys hoping that they would have that one family who would forgive anything...love them past the most difficult crisis of their souls...and then discovered they were left in the cold of a barren, unfamiliar land.

“Is it always like that?” Yunho sniffed, the back of his hand wiping at the edges of his upswept eyes. “Jaejoong told me...he spent so much time trying to talk me out of telling my father and mother and I told him he was being silly. I honestly believed that they would... they wouldn’t turn on me. But he was right. God, he was so damned right.”

“Sometimes, honey...” Scarlet moved closer to the young man, sliding his arm around Yunho’s waist. The leader stiffened, a private, enclosed soul wanting to push the gesture away...not from revulsion but from a stern formality inbred into his being. “Families have a hard time finding it easy to just accept their sons’ choices. Some of them do change their minds. Your parents might just need some time to adjust.”

“I hear a lot of...some and might.” Yunho sat up, his back straight. Leaning back into the loose curve of Scarlet’s arm, he picked up his mug, careful not to dislodge his lover’s namesake. “The facts are that they turned away from me. They refused to embrace Jaejoong. I won’t take them back into my life without their acknowledgment of him.”

“Ah, so proud.” The impersonator smiled to himself, the stiff-necked singer firm in his beliefs. Jaejoong would need that strength of will, shoring up the young singer’s own insecurities. “You probably made him very happy when you told him.”

“I didn’t really take the time to tell him.” Yunho stumbled over the guilt he still nursed in his chest. “Instead ...I touched him... tried to push him into opening his body for me because I wanted to... just carve everything out of my soul...I wanted to stop the hurting that was so deep inside of

me I was drowning. I wanted to use him...use his body ... to make the pain in me go away.”

Scarlet's intake of breath was lost in the fearful anger in Yunho's words, his head shaking in disgust at his behaviour. “Is that how I repay his love? I try to shove myself into his unprepared body because I hurt? Is that who I am? Not caring if I make him bleed under my lust just so I can slake some hunger inside of me. I can't live with that. I can't love him like that. He deserves someone who can take care of him...all the time.”

“Did you hurt him?” Memories of other boys, bleeding and sobbing, their bodies shorn of dignity while Scarlet or one of the other *women* carefully stitched together the shreds of skin tucked between torn cheeks. His heart ached at the thought of Jaejoong lying sobbing under the press of his lover's shaft, ice shards cutting into Scarlet's chest.

“No, I told him I couldn't do that to him. I won't do that to him.” Yunho wanted to throw up, the tea souring in his belly. “He wanted me to. He begged me to. And I...wanted to die, nuna. I just wanted to throw myself off of the top of the building when I heard him plead with me to hurt him. It's wrong for him to think that of himself...to feel that way about who he is. Like he is nothing but someplace for me to spill my seed and my anger. I want him to feel nothing but joy but when I scrape away his tears, all I see is sorrow in his soul.”

“Thank you. For not hurting him, dear boy.” Scarlet kissed the top of Yunho's head, pressing her hopes and dreams for a happy life into her prayers. The fear in her heart eased. Jaejoong had chosen so wisely in his love. The young man cupped in her arms beat with a fierce heart, filled with caring and protection for her feral little cat. “He does not need any more pain in his life. Our Jaejoong is already battered past tenderness. Others have tried to beat the light out of him. I had hoped that you were there to bring it back into his eyes.”

“I want to, nuna.” The young man drained his mug, playing with the empty vessel with a roll of his palms. With a displeased feline meowed his disapproval at Yunho's movement, sharp claws kneading into the young man's torn jeans. “I still want him so very much. There are emotions in my body that only he can...”

“Sate?” A knowing smile wreathed Scarlet's face, the tug of young love melting her fears. “You love him. I can see that. And he...sets you on fire.”

“Like I have thrown myself into one of Hell’s infernal circles and I am bathing in flames.” Yunho smiled wryly. “I am burning the flesh from my bones and the smell of my scorched skin is the sweetest perfume I’ve ever smelled... because he is an angel that has come to me. Joongie can take that sear and turn me liquid in his mouth. I am fearful of what I would do when I...”

“When you finally consummate what you have between you. Such a delightfully old, odd word...consummate. That joining.” Scarlet took another drag from his cigarette, a long string of ash tapped into an empty abalone shell. “I am glad you...didn’t do that tonight. I am so very glad you decided that your...relationship is worth surviving the anger.”

“I am too.” Yunho agreed, trying to find something to with his hands. “I hurt...my parents hurt me and I wanted to take that pain and shove it into Jaejoong. I shouldn’t love him...”

“I think that by stopping, you’ve proved you are the only one who should love him.” Scarlet pointed out, waving her hand in an elaborate gesture of dismissal. “You’re not the first one who’s drawn Jaejoong’s eye...well his lust I should say. Yunnie-ah, you are his love. The one that makes his heart beat for the first time after it was pressed into a lump of coal by his father’s tight fists.”

“He’s been with...others?” A hitch caught at Yunho’s words. The thought of another man’s mouth on his lover’s body smoldered his jealousy “Joongie never said...”

“Please, the little cat hasn’t been with anyone other than a few women in his attempts to make himself *normal*. Always a mistake.” Scarlet retorted in disgust. “With that face and body, he had females tossing themselves at him and he took a couple up on their offers, hoping to fix what he thought was broken.”

“It didn’t work.” Yunho shook his head. “It shouldn’t work. There’s nothing wrong with him. He’s... Jaejoong knows who he is. He doesn’t fumble around looking for what he believes in or how to act. He’s fierce in his loyalty. There’s no one who loves as generously as Joongie. He’s been... he’s the one who holds us together. And I have spent the past few months trying to break him...like his father did...like that man when he tried to force Jaejoong into...doing what I wanted to do to him. Even trying to love him, I have broken him.”

“No, you haven’t.” The other man replied. “He isn’t broken. Jaejoong knows who he wants. He’s known for a long time. That man who touched

him recognized that in him but instead waiting to love who our Joongie would become, he decided to force himself on the boy. That scared Jaejoong. He already was frightened by being different...all of us... all of us like Jaejoong are different. Most of us sense that when we're young and spend a lot of our time trying to change that."

"It can't be changed." Yunho whispered, the truth hot on the roof of his mouth. His dalliances with girls proved to be plasticine affinity, constructed more to provide him with some place to hide his true emotions behind. Jaejoong had peeled that away, paring off the subjugation of Yunho's emotions with a coy flirtation and fierce spirit. "I've tried. But then..."

"Jaejoong happened." Scarlet replied, sighing while stubbing out the pastel cigarette. "It often happens that way. Someone your soul just can't deny comes into your life and then...all you want is him. Jaejoong is that someone."

"I can't imagine loving anyone else." Yunho broke, pulling free from Scarlet and wrapping his arms tight around his stomach. "I don't want to lose him, nuna. He makes me complete and I want to be the one who makes him...want to be touched. That's what I need help with."

"Then you need to talk to him about how you feel, little one." Moving aside his leg, Scarlet made room for JJ to jump down off of the couch, the cat meowing as it walked into the kitchen, looking for the scraps of food that might be left behind. "He's not going to know how your heart weeps without the feel of him until you tell him. Jaejoong would shatter if he knew you were remorseful over causing him pain. You said it yourself, no one loves as much...as openly as our Jaejoong."

Scarlet leaned in, soft gentle advice ruffling Yunho's hair. "When you fell in love with him, taking care of that heart became your responsibility. You have to also allow him to take care of yours. That is what being in love really means, Yunnie-ah. Letting Jaejoong cradle you in your pain...as you stave off his. He will be your partner...not your burden. And only then, can the two of you love like you were meant to."

Jaejoong turned over onto his stomach, listening to the rain start up to drown the day. A spatter of drops sliced through the light frost on the glass, the warmer air turning the snow to a liquid slush. His hands found the spot beneath his belly button, the burn of Yunho's fingers still lingering on its softness. His lover's mouth had found the sweetness there for the first time a few hours ago, Jaejoong marveled at the

thought, his mind wandering to where Yunho could have gone in the chill of the early morning. A tiny ache throbbed under Jaejoong's spread palm, the minute welt left by Yunho's nipping teeth on his tender skin.

He apologized to Yoochun, profusely so when he finally shook off the tragedy of his own drama, shamed at finding himself curled up against his friend's body looking for reassurance that should come from another member of the group. Shifting his body, Jaejoong stared out of the lower window, the slats opened slightly to allow the street view in, long trails of headlights catching the reflection of snow banks below. Early morning commuters traveled slowly over the icy asphalt, a lumbering bus meandering through a traffic light, flashing yellow caution signals to warn off oncoming drivers.

"It's funny how you're always saying I'm the one running away from you and here I am, lying down in an empty bed." Jaejoong slid over to his side, cradling a pillow to his belly.

When Yunho first told him that he was going to meet the Jungs at the hotel, Jaejoong's heart sank from his chest, splashing into the hot acid of his stomach. His own father's face rose up from his ashen memories, a screaming tirade and shattering blows suddenly revisited with full painful glory in his mind. He'd seen his own family's betrayal mirrored in Yunho's pain when the other came stumbling in, his strong will cementing the tears back from his eyes behind a wall of resolute pride.

That afternoon in the garage still haunted Jaejoong's nightmares, the feel of the wooden shelves biting into his young hands as he backed up to escape the older man's advances. Jae spent weeks picking out splinters from his palms, the tiny specks nearly impossible to dig out. He'd had to wait for them to rise from his callused skin, nearly as long of a wait for his father's fist imprints to fade from his skin. Yunho's hands on his body felt so different from both his father's rage and the neighbour's lust, his lover's touch a blanket of warmth on his cold, beaten soul. The small dot of a bruise under Yunho's eye strung up mottled black pearls of rotted memories, soiled echoes of the discolorations Jaejoong's father left on his back, arms and legs. Lying in the semi-permeable darkness, Jae rubbed at his face, wishing he could kiss away the mar on his lover's cheek.

The room bore the stamp of their mingled lives, shared dressers and stacks of mingled CDs next to the stereo system, the pillows from Jaejoong's bed spread out over onto Yunho's mattress, the leader's green tea scented cologne. Another look at the LED clock on their nightstand clicked off another minute, time spent apart from the young man who

left his kisses along Jaejoong's body. Tugging out Yunho's blanket, Jaejoong wrapped himself in his lover's scent, closing his eyes against the drawing light leeching through the blinds' slats.

"Just come home to me, Yunnies." Jaejoong pled into the pillows nearly smothering his curled up body, a rigid fetal circle of hewn bone and sorrowful heart. "I just want you here. I don't care if you never touch me again...I just need you here. I love you too much to let you go."

Twenty-Seven

Yunho decided there was nothing sweeter than the scent of Jaejoong's nape, that secret sugary musk of youth and sexiness, hidden by a thick ebony curtain. The leader's fingers caught at the strands, moving them away so he could place a single, gentle kiss on the spot, resisting the need to bite down and roll a nip of the singer's skin between his front teeth.

Asleep, the young man looked peacefully innocent, just the barest of hints around his sinful mouth boasting the innate sensuality that marked him. Beneath Jae's parchment thin eyelids, Yunho wondered at the dreams the singer saw, the movement of his blood pulsating softly under his pale skin. A fringe of black lashes ringed the rims of his bruise-tender cheeks, a dearth of sleep running shadows over the high bones of Jae's face.

Jaejoong stirred, the light from a small lamp hitting just the edges of his body, the rest of the room pitch black, the heavy thick curtains drawn tight over the windows. A beam of sunshine ran the length of the wall, bounced from the glass down to the wooden floor, running gold along the highlighted grain. Yunho slid in closer, moving his body carefully on the bed, adjusting his weight to avoid Jaejoong rolling into him. A plump feathertop joined the two beds, its corners stretched over the mattresses, joining into single sleeping platform.

A crust of salt dusted Jaejoong's long eyelashes, the flutter of his dreams creating shadow butterflies on the snowy landscape of his face. The singer's mouth formed a sweet moue, his slumbering thoughts wandering into some pleasant journey unseen by the young man watching him sleep.

Yunho's lover sighed, a heart-wrenching soft moan, velvet pain scraped raw with a sharp blade of regret. Jae's lower lip trembled, vulnerable to Yunho's questing finger. The leader hesitated, not wanting to wake the other but the draw of plump flesh was proving to be too much to resist. Yunho's thumb pad ghosted over Jae's chin, riding up to line out the pout he wanted to bite into every time he saw Jaejoong's face, an erotic lure for his uncontrollable lust. A small dip of a bite dimpled Jae's

mouth, the scalloped fleck from his teeth worrying at the flesh, a nervous habit Yunho had no intention of asking him to break.

Nearly everything about Jaejoong drew Yunho in, the singer's body shifting again, one arm thrown over his sideways turned head, chin down and shoulders in repose. The thin t-shirt Jae put on to fend off the cold did nothing to hide the singer's physical splendor, malleable fabric coursing down over his chest and stomach. Short sleeves rode up Jae's biceps, a length of curves and dips nearly hidden by sheets and a pillow. His right leg was bent at the knee, Yunho's palm barely touching the light fleece of Jae's grey sweatpants, an old worn garment that had seen better days. A tear sliced across one knee, another small triangular rip flaring along the sleek length of Jae's thigh, a peeking wink of pale skin against the dusky slate grey hue.

Chap ran rough over Jae's mouth, the burred edges of dryness catching on the whorls of Yunho's thumb, pulling the flesh up in small divots before springing back down. Jae's chin dropped slightly, an automatic response to the pressure on his lips, the willingness of giving to Yunho's touch already ingrained into his unconscious actions. It was as if his body opened itself without thinking, spreading apart eagerly. Leaning forward, Yunho moved his mouth over Jae's jaw, not touching the velvet skin, just running his breath along the downy surface, a quick intake to inhale the singer's sweet musk into the leader's flared nostrils.

The little sounds Jaejoong made in his sleep thrilled Yunho, mews of want he only rarely heard in the heat of their touching. Asleep, the vulnerable singer was easier to hear, the crying wounds of the world muted in the semi-darkness, the shush of a quiet apartment amplifying each tiny sound. A rough hum threaded through Jae's chest, the voluptuous throbbing vibration setting off a tingling heat along the inside of Yunho's legs.

Yunho, unable to stop the thrum of want running along his nerves, placed his mouth on the V under Jaejoong's chin, just wanting a lick of a taste from the singer's body. It held a cornucopia of flavours, something the leader had never imagined another man could possess. The hard sweetness of Jaejoong's chest contrasted with the soft taffy perfume of his neck, a nibble along the pulsing blood line under his translucent skin making his chin rise, allowing Yunho access to the pleasures of Jae's sensual touch. Yunho had yet to plumb into the salt-sweet pearl of Jae's groin, vast stretches of untouched and untasted flesh he wanted to spend a lifetime knowing.

The mewling purr grew louder, lust darkened pupils wide in Jaejoong's now opened eyes. Sleep still held him captive, a web of lethargy cast over his tired body, sapping the energy from his bones. Weary from lack of sleep, the singer took a long hard minute before recognizing his lover's bent head dipping down to lave at his pierced nipple, the glisten of golden metal a flame to Yunho's hot tongue.

At first Jaejoong felt he was still dreaming, the sounds of a rain driven away by a wan sunlight and the rushing roar of the ocean. The heat uncurled the cold he felt down in his joints, a delicious heat scented with green tea and vanilla. A kiss brushed on his face, a gentle urging for him to shake loose the dragging weight of sleep on his mind. Before consciousness fully sank in, Jaejoong remembered the loss of Yunho in the shadowy bittersweetness of their lovemaking, the rough push of raw flesh into his tender heat. Jae shut his eyes hard against the reality slowly stealing back into his world, wanting to remain there on the sun-washed sands of his fantasy, Yunho laying against him under an open blue sky.

His lover leaned over him on one elbow, Yunho's handsome face fixed with an intensity that both thrilled and scared Jaejoong, so deep an emotion shrouded by both light and dark. A sculptor had a hand in creating Yunho's features, strong and masculine under a veil of prettiness, laced peeks of beauty made hard by his strong bones and rich mouth. Laughter and sorrow came easily to this face, Jaejoong thought, most often hidden by the disciplined control that drove Yunho's ambitions.

"Hello, baby." Yunho breathed into Jaejoong's open mouth, returning the wind of a kiss the singer had placed there what seemed like an eternity ago. The other man closed his eyes for a brief, orgasmic moment, feel the thrill of the brushing current of air in the tingle coursing over his nipples. "I've kept that warm for you."

"Yunnie..." Everything was held in that word...a name that fit into his with an easy slide of a lingual shift.

Every drop of fear etching acid into his heart dissipated under the heavenly sight of Yunho's face. Jaejoong lowered his arm, his fingers finding the corner of Yunho's mouth, the young man's lips pursing to suckle on Jae's inquisitive touch. Marveling at the wetness left there, Jaejoong pulled his hand back, tasting Yunho on his tips, laving the moisture clean and savouring the dark taste of his lover's mouth in the viscous fluid.

"I wondered if ...you'd left...left me. Left everything." Jaejoong's heart skipped a beat, thumping erratically at the thought. "I didn't...want to believe that. I guess my soul didn't believe it either because my heart is calling my mind a liar. You never were going to leave me. You never will...will you?"

"No." Yunho shook his head once, a slow negative cementing the bond he'd formed with the chaotic, mercurial singer that haunted his waking dreams. "I just needed to distance myself from...who I was in that moment when I hurt so badly that I wanted to force that pain inside of you. I didn't want to have that...monster in me. That ugliness is not anything you should ever see."

"We're going to see each others' ugliness, Yunnies-ah." Jaejoong's sweet smile lit upon his face, melting back the darkness shored up against the sides of the bed. It was a crooked thing, a curious, quixotic gesture that held pleasure... a spiraling thrill that touched at the sorrow Yunho placed in his own heart. "Probably before we see any prettiness. I am glad...you came back. I just need to know that ... everything is going to be alright. That we're going to be alright."

"God, you are my angel." Jaejoong snorted with laughter at the poetry spilling from Yunho's mouth, the young man slightly outraged at the mirthful giggle. Tapping at Jaejoong's nose, Yunho sternly ordered him to be quiet, a faux severe look on his handsome. "Listen to me. I'm serious here."

"You and I..." Yunho pressed his hand on Jae's chest, feeling the warmth in the young man's body under his palm. "We are going to be together...forever. Even when I'm an idiot and say hurtful things, I need you to know that I will always come back around and apologize. It might take me a little while and sometimes I am going to walk away from you because I know that if I say anything, I am going to hurt you with my words. I know how my tongue is. It's sharp and I will go for the most hurtful thing I can say because that's my reaction to anger."

"But when I walk away, it's because I *don't* want to hurt you." Yunho reassured Jaejoong, the singer's silent nod of understanding blooming a kernel of empathic compassion in Yunho's words. "It doesn't mean that I don't love you. If anything, it means I love you more. And if at any time I ask you to walk away from me, it's for the same reason...because Jaejoong, you drive me insanely mad sometimes. You can touch off tempers in me that I didn't even know I had and it takes me a while to work to an understanding of what you've done."

"I don't always apologize for ... being...odd. And I don't think out what I say." Jaejoong admitted, his teeth once more finding their nervous target of his lower lip. The nibbling action ceased while the singer regarded his lover with a gauging stare. "I sometimes don't realize... I've gotten you angry. Or any of the others."

"I think I've finally understood that." Yunho leaned forward, suckling at the enticing treat of Jaejoong's mouth. His lover tasted of black tea and fatigue, a weary metallic tang against the sugar of his kiss. Yunho played with the tip of Jae's tongue, feeling the honeycombed texture against the roof of his own mouth, so very different from his own flesh, much more erotic in its foreign pleasantness.

"I went to see Scarlet tonight." The young man confessed, placing a finger over Jaejoong's mouth before the other spoke. "Let me finish. Shush for a moment."

"I had to go to someone that I believed knew you...more so than Yoochun. Even more than perhaps you know yourself." Yunho replied to the biting nip of Jaejoong's teeth against his finger with another tap to his nose, a reproachful playfulness filled with private explorations. "Micky knows... the you that came here after the auditions. The cocky, sexy flirt that covers the shyness inside. Every day I see another layer peel off and I get a glimpse of the young man hidden within. You are like a chrysanthemum unfurling under the glow of the sun, almost opened by the end of the day. Then when night comes, you close back up and we have to wait to see the glorious colours are at the centre, never quite getting a good look because the darkness falls so quickly. Much too quickly."

"I want to take that darkness from you, Joongie. I want you to feel as if I'm the sunshine warming you." Yunho said, cupping at Jae's chin, holding the young man's face so Jaejoong was forced to look at him, the singer's natural bashfulness drawing him to the side, trying to hide from the intimate probing words his lover spoke. "So I went to Scarlet because I knew ... she... was there when you needed someone to stitch you back together."

"Nuna was...is... one of my most treasured people." Jaejoong replied, leaning into the cup of Yunho's hand, resting his cheek against the young man's fingers. "I was so ... broken when she found me."

"That's what made me finally realize something." The leader slid down fully onto the bed, spooning against Jaejoong's side. The heat from their combined bodies drove back the lingering cold in the air, instinctively

intertwining their long legs into each, Jae's smaller form tucking in under Yunho's shoulder. "I spent hours mourning the loss of a family that I never really had. It was an illusion I constructed from paper doll parents I cut out of my heart...not seeing...or not wanting to see the flesh reality they were."

"I mourned the burning of those simulacrum. Burnt by their own actions...not by mine." Yunho traced the rise of bone along Jaejoong's collar, a delicate sweep of fine strength. "I'm not a disappointment to them. If anything, they raised me thinking that they were perfect and I tried...to become the reality of their lies. I was told always to have an open heart and mind ... that the naked hard truth of any situation is better than the ripe lushness of lies."

"A lie rots someone's soul. Once you swallow a lie and try to grow it out as a truth, it slowly eats away at everything you are....everything that you try to achieve. You can't grow anything positive in the barren soil that a lie fallows." The leader kissed at the crease forming between Jaejoong's eyebrows, the singer working at a logic so foreign to his thoughts. "I had to be taught something that just comes to you naturally, Joongie."

"I lie." Jaejoong refuted, tangling his fingers into the hem of Yunho's shirt.

"You...bend the truth at the very most." Yunho laughed. "Sometimes you even flirt with it... like a teasing hummingbird but for when the truth matters, it doesn't dawn on you to cover up your feelings or beliefs. You speak your mind...sometimes in ways that are nonsensical but if we listen very hard...to how you are saying it, we can hear the truth."

"There's no artifice in you, Jaejoong. For all the masks that you wear, what you are showing is still a part of you. From the private quiet cold you wrap around yourself when we are among other people to the open, laughing warm lover that I have in bed with me...all of that is you." Yunho tasted Jaejoong's mouth again, licking at the part in his lips until Jaejoong responded with a flick of his tongue against Yunho's intrusion. Pulling back, the leader stared down at the angelic beauty tucked against him. "But see, I had to learn that. I had to learn how to be... true to myself and the people around me."

"My parents' rejection was merely.. the unmasking of who they were inside." Yunho admitted, the loss of his familial bond stinging. He'd not spoken it aloud, not so clearly nor so finally. It was a fact now. Saying the obvious between the air shared with Jaejoong, the void in his heart

deadened with the impact. "And I cried because in a way, they are dead to me. Until they breathe life into those constructs that they created and become who they should have been all this time. The people they led me to believe they were."

"They are good people, Yunho." Jaejoong pleaded with Yunho, pressing up tight against the young man's body, his waist sliding into the hollow of Yunho's hips, a natural fit of their two forms. "They will come back to you. I know they will."

"That's their choice." Yunho agreed. "But what's more important is that I shouldn't mourn the loss of something I never really had. I should celebrate the gift that you've given me... that sweet heart you have puzzled back together with pieces of twine. Scarlet thinks that eventually, it will heal. And I have to believe that I am going to be the one who will help you with that. With every kiss I give you, a small fracture should seal over. I hope so... because I've discovered I want that more than I want anything else."

"If I have to give up Dong Bang Shin Ki to make that possible....to make you feel loved and whole... I will do so, Joongie." The leader tucked his lover tight up against him, wanting to melt into Jaejoong's bones and blood. "I know that we both have come so far and tried so hard to be here but if it means that it breaks you apart more and more every day because of the lies we have to tell to keep you from being hurt, then I will leave all of this behind. It isn't worth your pain. My success isn't worth your agony. Not to me."

"I don't... want that, Yunho." Jaejoong shook his head, horrified at the thought. "I regret that you've lost...everything because of me. Don't lose anything else."

"I keep telling you, Joongie." Yunho corrected the young singer gently. "You haven't made me lose anything. I never had those things. If anything, I've gained you from all of this pain. That's not something I am willing to give up. Not after struggling so far through the mud of lies to get to you. I lied first to myself and then found my parents lied about loving me without constraints. You are the only truth in this. A complicated mess of a truth...but the truth none the less."

"I am in love with you, Jaejoong." Yunho pressed his mouth against Jae's, taking a kiss from the eternity of kisses that lay on the other's lips. "Can you tell me that you've love me too?"

“I always loved you, Yunnies-ah.” Jaejoong sealed the space between them with a fierce affection, slanting his chin up to capture his lover’s mouth. “Since before we met, the thought of you...of someone like you helped me heal the breaks inside of me. You were there...it was just a matter of time before I knew your face...or your touch. But I knew you were there. You are in my soul.”

Twenty-Eight

“Did Yunnie-ah come home last night?” Changmin glanced at the hallway, spotting the closed door at the end of the hall. His amber-dipped wide eyes felt crusted with sleep, a tired malaise hung onto his bones from the restless night he’d spent wondering about the others scattered about the apartment and the one that lay still outside. Yunho’s absence bothered him, more so than the jagged tears on Jaejoong’s soul. Jae would always survive...broken and torn apart but still, strong enough to continue plodding forward until he finally dropped from exhaustion, giving up on himself before he betrayed the commitment he’d taken for the five of them.

Yunho was different. Fierce in his loyalty, Yunho’s foundation was based on the life he led and the beliefs he held. It would be different now that his world had been rocked apart by his declaration of love. All of his attention would have to be focused on loving Jaejoong, a curiously odd chaotic creature that none of them ever really understood...but adored none the less.

It would be Jaejoong that would set things to right...the silent little offerings of maternal care that seemed to emanate from his actions. Jae was the one who absorbed much of their teasing, ignored the biting sarcasm of their words, often hiding behind hurt eyes until someone noticed his pain. Yunho would bowl over anyone standing in his way. In his mind, his word was law. There was no discussion about what was right or wrong. Yunho’s law ruled the group. In some ways, the leader was much like the father he both loved and now hated.

“I heard him come in a little while ago. He’s been out for a while.” Yoochun poured water into a teapot, one of the many that seemed to litter through the house.

Yunho was the only one of them that drank coffee on occasion, the automatic coffee drip set up against a corner of the tiny kitchen but the teapots in their home were legion. He debated over the range of teas they’d gathered from various stores, sniffing at the black pepper tea bags that appeared sometime overnight. Shrugging at the spicy blend, Yoochun put the box back and found an oolong he knew Junsu liked,

hoping to surprise the other in bed with a bracing cup of tea and some food.

The quiet footsteps woke Micky up, the light from outside barely creeping past the curtains. His hand was cold, still outstretched from touching Junsu right before they both fell asleep, the other singer's hand brushing on his fingers. In the brief space between them, Yoochun watched the morning draw its kiss over Junsu's peaceful features, a soulful mirth at his mouth's corners.

Hard wood flooring carried the sound of the other bedroom door opening and then closing with a click, the footsteps fading behind the stout wood. Jaejoong's lover had come home to him, hopefully to wipe away the stain of tears from the lead singer's soul. Yoochun's heart ached in the hopes of his friend's love. One of them deserved to be happy. More importantly, it would be the world's greatest gift if Jaejoong had someone's heart to fall into... the tragic sorrow ripening in the depths of his shattered psyche would die off, leaving nothing but pleasure and smiles behind.

"Do you think they are alright?" Min asked softly, glancing under his lashes at the older man. "Maybe I should go check on them."

Last night, being close to Junsu hurt Changmin, the other singer concentrating only on his anger against the oblivious Yoochun. He'd garnered a mild affection for the smiling Junsu, always a teasing jab or hearty joke shared in the back of the studio or just before they went on stage and Changmin wondered to himself if the nearly always happy singer could become more than a close friend but the fates had other things in store for Junsu's heart. Micky's presence usually changed that loose affection towards Changmin, drawing Junsu away from his attentions to Min and onto the often goofy, emotional Yoochun. Junsu wandered off, his thoughts on another dream, a drifting circle away until he hovered just outside of Yoochun's arms, their heads sometimes bent over in a private joke.

"I don't think checking on Yunnies and Jae would be a good idea." Yoochun warned the youngest off, remembering the shock of seeing the two eldest singers tangled against one another, loose sheets hardly covering anything of their naked bodies. "Yunho probably had a lot to talk about...especially about how he feels now. If there was something wrong, we would have heard about it. Jaejoong can be loud when he's angry."

"You think Joongie-ah is angry at Yunho for leaving?" The thought never occurred to Changmin, his mind altering the vision of the lead singer

weeping with relief at having his boyfriend home. An irate Jaejoong was difficult to achieve but given the right words...or the wrong ones... the inferno of rage rose quickly, a hot fierceness that battered nearly everything it focused on. "Aish, why would he be mad?"

"Because sometimes, Jaejoong doesn't think like the rest of us mortals. He is a thunderstorm that we merely have to withstand," Yoochun smiled, a wide open gesture on his handsome face. "I'm sure Yunho has soothed him down. They'll work it out. They love each other. And, luckily, want to see an eternity fighting and loving the other. That's always a good thing."

"Is love always enough?" Changmin's plaintive query stopped Yoochun's pouring of hot water over the tea bags, something poignant in the younger man's voice. "Can it be enough?"

"It has to be, Min." Steam coursed out of the mugs, the fragrance of steeping leaves fresh in Yoochun's senses. He thought of Junsu and the press of the other's mouth on his, the awakening of long suppressed desires edging into his dreams. "I hope so...for Yunnies and our Jaejoong."

Leaving the kitchen, his hands full of hot tea mugs, Yoochun didn't hear Changmin speak softly behind him, the youngest's head dragged down with the weight of his thoughts. "Suppose, Chunnies-ah, it's not enough to love but not to be loved. Then what? What do I do then?"

The sun dropped its assault on the day, the rain clouds assuming control over the hours with a washing torrent of grey light. Under the curtains, the streams of light dimmed on the wooden floor, dousing the brilliance of gold from the whorls of grain beneath the polish. Yunho watched the light run out of the room, leaving the stain of the day on Jaejoong's pretty face.

"You are so beautiful." Yunho claimed another kiss, his hand moving up under Jaejoong's shirt. The singer shivered under the touch, lifting himself up as Yunho guided the fabric up over Jae's head, tossing the shirt aside. Yunho stopped Jaejoong from tugging off his shirt, pushing the other's hands aside. "Let me look at you."

The fine vermilion sheets were a vibrant backdrop to Jaejoong's exquisite body, nearly snow pale from the winter sun. His skin would glow golden during the summer months but for now, the kiss of a burnished frost shimmered a translucent light over Jae's body. Dipping

his head down, Yunho tasted the dip of Jaejoong's navel, biting at the ring piercing the delicate flesh on his belly.

A hiss of Jae's passion escaped between his clenched lips, his body arching up to meet the laving, silently begging Yunho to continue the caress. Jaejoong's lover smiled against the breadth of skin he was pressed against, biting softly into the nubbed flesh of the singer's nipple. His hands roamed over the young man he now could claim as his own, wanting to leave behind a mark on tender flesh, something hidden under the singer's clothes...a spot that he could touch and share the intimate feeling of Jae's passion when they exchanged a secret glance.

"I...need you." Jae whispered into the shell of Yunho's ear, husky desire rasping his dulcet voice. "I need to taste you in my mouth."

"We take this slow between us, remember?" The leader reached under Jae's chin with a nip of his teeth. "I want you to trust me. Let me guide how this goes. Okay?"

Jaejoong's mute nod once more flirted with his shyness, his eyes dropping from Yunho's face. The openness the leader demanded from his lover made him bashful, his soul never so openly displayed for another before. It was as if Yunho's flesh was thrust as deeply into his very core, merely through the intent glances the leader raked over his semi-naked form. Gathering his boldness up, Jaejoong pressed to remove Yunho's shirt, the young man lifting his arms to allow the singer to pull off the garment.

Yunho's thicker body bore a greater strength in its form than Jaejoong's, a symphony of power contained in developed muscles, a sleek commanding potency that took Jae's breath away. He'd always been drawn to men, he'd found the desire to examine another man's body hovered at the edge of his thoughts but Yunho was the first man Jaejoong felt he wanted to lay next to in the morning to listen to the rain outside, a shared murmur of bodies lying naked in pleasure.

Jae's lover undressed him, urging a slow reveal with a shift of his hands moving Jaejoong's hips up, curving underneath the other's rear, cupping the lush richness there. The grey sweatpants slid off easily, joining the shirts already cast onto the rug in the middle of the room. Jaejoong tilted his head back, moaning loudly at the feel of Yunho's hand and mouth curl down the column of his throat. His sex responded hard to the touch, the scent of Yunho's arousal echoing in his memories.

The leader's jeans shucked off of his legs, sliding down over his feet. Yunho reached forward, covering Jaejoong's body with his own, using his arms to support his weight, elbows locked as he stared down at Jae's bashful blush.

"I love how you are shy with me." Yunho dipped down, sliding between Jae's legs and resting his greater weight carefully on the young man's body. "It's like I have to coax everything out and when I do, it's like nectar on my tongue."

The leader's hands found Jae's nipples, first rolling one between his fingers and then the other, watching Jae's face turn passionate under the pressure. The piercing ached to be touched, a roll of metal through Jaejoong's tender flesh, Yunho's manipulations running through nerves inside of Jae's chest. The singer's hips twitched up, the feel of Jaejoong's hard sex cup into Yunho's made the leader's mouth dry from the sensations flooding through him. Jae searched for some relief from the weeping desire...anything to rub against to erase the crawling nerves of his tight skin. He found the heat of Yunho's thigh and curled into it, the roughness of the other's nipple perfect for the too-sensitive skin along his shaft.

"God, you just undo me." Yunho's own body was already primed for Jaejoong's touch, a skittering of finger tips along his hard length, Jae's hands moving with a slow want, his thumb and palm encircling the root of his sex. Yunho breathed out, a hard rattling sound mingled with a groaning burn, burying his face into the crook of Jae's throat. He bit down, taking a mouthful of Jae's flesh, sucking hard and leaving a purpled welt. The mark thrilled some primal thread in Yunho's soul, knowing that anyone who saw the bruising skin would know someone's hands had been on Jaejoong's delicious body.

"I want you in my mouth. Please, Yunho." Jaejoong whispered, hot breath skimming over Yunho's chest, trying to slide out under the other's body. Yunho lifted up slowly, watching Jaejoong's lithe form move gracefully, his waist twisting about, the supple movements erotically enticing. Yunho pressed on Jaejoong's hips, hoping to turn the singer fully around, reaching for the other's sex with a caressing hand.

Jae licked carefully, watching Yunho's heavy shaft twitch with the touch. The sensitive tip cried its desire, a single milky drop welling from the slit, the faint pink pout of the swollen head opening up as Jaejoong's tongue moved along the tender skin. Jae's teeth brushing on the ridge of the glans jerked Yunho's shaft against the singer's face, his mouth a full open pout as it slid down around to encircle the other's sex. He sucked

harder, pulling at the inner skin, feeling Yunho lengthen against the roof of his mouth.

The heft of Yunho's sac rolled in Jae's palm, the sensual musk of hidden flesh a treacle on Jaejoong's tongue when he lapped around the base, sucking at the malleable flesh, pulling at the spongy texture with a delicate touch of his lips. Yunho groaned, his body tightening itself up as the seed in him reacted to Jae's moistness. Oval orbs curled up into the hollow of his groin, rolling back against Jae's hand as the young man returned his attentions to the soft skin below Yunho's belly button, sprinkled with a coarse silky skein of sparse hair.

Yunho focused on the form writhing against his, trying to reach some part of Jaejoong with his mouth. A spider web delicately patterned on the singer's tender sex, begging for some kind of relief from the tantalizing whisper of want roiling through Jae's body. Having tasted Jae once, Yunho longed for another sip of the sweetness caught inside of his lover's body. Jae jumped at the touch of the tip of Yunho's tongue on the sensitive skin under his turgid length, his lover's licking rough and arousing.

Growling in response, Jaejoong pulled on his lover's shaft with a long draw of his mouth, holding his lips tight against the burl of flesh. Sucking harder, he pulled back, running his tongue back along the tip's edge, Yunho's glans bobbing down against the flat of his tongue. The leader sighed, reaching for the plastic tube he'd tucked against his side, warming the gel inside.

Jaejoong didn't hear the flick of the cap opening, nor the squishing noise of Yunho's palm pressing the tube's contents into the cup of his fingers. A pleasant almond scent filled the air, reminiscent of sweets. Slickened, Yunho's fingers flirted at the edge of Jaejoong's muscle ring, just teasing the pucker. Jae gasped with Yunho deep in his throat, wanting the taste of his lover before he pushed any further.

"Please, Yunnies." Jae wasn't sure if his pleas could be heard around Yunho's flesh in his throat, his mouth convulsing around the heat building up along Yunho's body. His body felt on fire, Yunho's other hand on the small of his back, guiding him along as Jae rubbed his sex between Yunho's arm and his chest. The friction felt erotically forbidden, a seemingly innocent spot on his lover's body giving him a pleasure he'd not experienced before.

Sex had been something he'd done, a futile effort to hold something akin to emotion against his barren, love-leeching soul. When he stumbled out

of the warmth of his family, Jaejoong discovered how empty a void his heart could have been, too young to find his world had devolved into a sodden cardboard box staving off the torrential rains that battered at South Korea. Despite surviving winter outside in the elements, Jaejoong knew that the bitter cold of a harsh snow held more warmth than the corners of his broken heart. Only now, with Yunho's mouth on him and the echoing words of love he held in his heart, did Jaejoong feel the banks of ice begin to melt around the curves of his soul.

The initial entrance was warm, a pulling apart of his flesh, muscle clenching to push out the intrusion. Jaejoong concentrated on relaxing his body, Yunho's gentle shushing encouragements and a press of the other's hand on the small of his spine urging him to take in more than the tip of Yunho's finger. Slick with lubricant, the first joint worked in slowly, Yunho rubbing at the spot above Jaejoong's rear, sometimes gliding down over the mounds of quivering muscle, rubbing at the nervousness of his lover's taut body.

Jaejoong held his breath, the teasing flirt of bone and flesh dipping slightly into him, just a brush against the pout of his rim. The touch burned, the skin ripened with anticipation while something throbbed deep just on the other side of the barrier, begging for Yunho's touch. His lover's hand reached under Jae, cupping at the hardness between his legs, gel moistened hand slick on the aching shaft. Yunho moved his fingers slowly over Jaejoong's sex, coaxing a raspy moan from the other's breathless mouth.

"Don't stop... licking at me." Yunho whispered, running his hand up around to the span of skin between Jae's shoulder blades, urging him down with a slight push. Jaejoong dipped his head back down, continuing his laving at Yunho's length. His teeth nipped slightly along the tender skin at Yunho's root, a suggestion to return the hand that had been caressing him. Yunho complied, running his fingers along the sensitive ridges of Jaejoong's ribcage before returning to stroking at his lover's sex.

The sensations running through Jae's body made him gasp deep in his throat, convulsing the tight space around Yunho's shaft, the soft-velvety head captured against the roof of Jae's mouth. Yunho continued to press at the resistance of Jaejoong's body, lubing the entrance with the excess on his hand. He waited until the other had pulled back a bit, not wanting the shock of intrusion to startle Jaejoong then pressed in further, breaching the tight ring with the first joint of his finger.

“Ah...Yunnie..” Jae panted, exhaling hard. The intrusion hurt, his muscles tightening around the end of Yunho’s finger. Schooling himself against the burn, Jae tilted his head back, letting the feel of Yunho’s hand against his sex rub him into an arousal, telling himself to relax his body’s tenseness. The throbbing just beyond the ring wall lay screaming for the other’s touch, a sense of urgency that fought with the need to pull away. A part of Jaejoong wanted to slide back down onto Yunho’s hand, forcing his finger in deep, drawing every part of his lover as far into him as possible while another part yelped at the invasion, the too private place tucked inside of his core.

“Ssshhh...it’s okay, Boo. Let me in. Just relax.” Yunho continued to stroke at Jae’s entrance, his other hand lifted from Jae’s groin long enough to apply more gel to the delicate area his fingers stroked into compliance. A hissing need shuddered through Jae’s body, the young singer instinctively pushing back against his lover’s welcome intrusion, sliding Yunho further in.

He felt full, a warm pressing from the inside of his body. Jaejoong swallowed around the tip of Yunho’s cock, panting with the effort of remaining still long enough for the feeling of being penetrated to subside into a comfortable state. Yunho was harder still, his own body thrumming with the pleasure of Jaejoong’s mouth on him, the feel of his lover’s weeping sex in his hand and then finally, to be inside of the moist, hot warm silk of Jaejoong’s body.

“Too much...not enough.” Jaejoong rested his head against Yunho’s thigh, panting hard. Yunho leaned forward, kissing at the small of Jae’s back, biting the area between his teeth and moved inside of his lover again, circling the ring slowly. A creaking sound of pleasure hitched along Jae’s throat, senseless words spilling from his pout, the intake of his hot breath soothing the milky seeded slit of Yunho’s sex.

Then, Jaejoong felt the brush of Yunho against the tidbit of throbbing in his body, a bundle of nerves that sent waves of indescribable flux of emotions through him. It tasted just on the edge of fear, the bright metallic hovering of his senses thrust into electricity, a sparkling lightning wave riding over him. It burst along the back of his throat, into his brain and numbed his mind. An explosion of stars crested in the recessed darkness of his soul, reaching parts of him Jae had long thought dead. Yunho’s love made him weep, wanting to wring out the last drops of sorrow his soul seemed determined to hold onto. A kiss from Yunho’s mouth eased that shadow, pushing back the demons eating at Jaejoong’s heart, filling the bites with a warmth of healing.

The response in Jae's twisting body drove the last bit of control from Yunho's mind, his seed gathering under the touch of his lover's mouth and hands, convulsing with the release of his desire into the warmth of Jae's parted lips. Heat from Jae's tongue guided Yunho's gush into his throat, sealing the glans against his teeth and swallowing at the milky, salt-sweet musk his lover offered into him. Another push against the small nodule deep inside of Jaejoong left a shuddering response along the singer's spine, his body curling along his ribcage, his stomach clenching tight as his shaft throbbed and released, Yunho's hand holding him steady until the other could lick at the seed.

Keeping the pressure slowly circling inside of Jaejoong's body, Yunho watched his lover let loose the emotional control of his system, tears welling along the singer's eyes at the sheer pleasure of his release. Satisfied, Yunho kissed Jaejoong clean, dragging the edges of his lips along the singer's thighs and easing out of Jae, drawing Jaejoong's still convulsing body up to cuddle against him.

"You've taken everything from me. And given me everything back. I can't move." Jaejoong whispered, lethargy stealing through his bones. No one had...touched him like that before nor had he ever wanted to give more of himself than in that moment with Yunho...in every moment he had with Yunho. The tenderness left an empty ache deep in him, the want for every bit of his lover to be inside of him...resting in him until they slept...waking up with Yunho tucked into his body and slowly moving them awake. "I don't want to move. Do you think we can just hide here from the world?"

"Yes." Yunho nodded, stealing a final kiss from Jaejoong before the sleepy young man drifted off. It would cost nothing to agree with his lover, the one who rested against his chest and inside of his heart. "We can stay here forever. Even if our bodies leave, here is where we'll stay. Just like this. Always."

Twenty-Nine

It wasn't all wine and roses, Jaejoong saw that in the week after he and Yunho started their first steps together. For all of their promises to each other that they both understood it wasn't going to be easy, the reality of that unease was clear now...so much more clearer. In the time since Yunho's revelatory talk with Scarlet, the group had been driven to near exhaustion, their schedule filled to nearly every waking moment, running from interview to practice to vocal lessons, each encounter more demanding than the rest. That afternoon, in the dance studio, one of them finally broke... a temper rising and spilling out onto the others in a wave of frustration.

"You know better than that, Junsu. You are better than that." Yunho turned after the other broke out of the step for the third time. "We do it again until you get it right."

Rings of tired hung under Junsu's eyes, dark bruises made stark against the pallor of his skin. Leaning over, his hands on his knees, Junsu panted from the effort of the fast-paced dancing, his ribs aching from trying to catch his breath. He'd stumbled more times than he cared to count, Yunho's sharp eyes catching every missed movement, marking them off until his tolerance ran dry.

The leader demanded perfection of himself. He demanded no less from the others. Around them, the other three circled, walking off the cramping muscles and the weariness the whole group felt...with the possible exception of Yunho whose body was taut with impatience.

"Go to hell." Junsu finally tilted his head up, staring at Yunho's shocked face. Jaejoong stilled, his hand nearly reaching out to touch his lover's back, a small gesture of reassurance not lost on the foul tempered singer. "Jaejoong has made much worse mistakes than me missing a step and you don't say anything to him. Is that what I have to do to get you to leave me alone? Let you fuck me?"

Yoochun's arm caught at Yunho's body before the leader could reach Junsu, the other's lesser weight giving little resistance against the irate Yunho's strength. Changmin reached forward, stopped by Jaejoong stepping in tight against his lover, trying to calm Yunho down. Stronger

than Micky, Yunho pushed at Yoochun's shoulders, working nearly free as Jaejoong slid around to hold him from the other side, a delicate fey reproach for patience in his soft voice.

"Yunnie-ah." Jae whispered. "We're all tired. He's tired. Please."

That soft voice could always stop him, broken stained glass soldered together by sheer will. Yunho's rage spilled out, washing free from his heart. He'd never been... focused so much on another human being...never had the keys to his soul held by someone ...someone so delicately feral and strong it shattered his control. Yunho inhaled deeply, trying to keep from doing damage to Junsu's weary body.

"You deal with him, Joongie." Yunho's face boiled with anger, a deep rage set into his bones. "I'm going to go walk this off. When I come back, I want an apology and for him to get the steps right."

Changmin stood very still as the leader stalked off, the door to the studio slamming behind him. The mirrors rattled in their fixtures along the far wall, a terrifying creaking noise subsiding after a brief moment. Yoochun rubbed at his arm, crouching next to the bent over Junsu, his breath still panting from exertion. A few words from the taller singer made Junsu's chest hitch, a sob stifled by his apology.

"I'm sorry, Joongie." Junsu said, remorse tinting his words. "I didn't mean to hurt...you..."

"Did the others go home?" Yunho glanced towards the shoes next to him on the stairs. More than an hour passed since his anger leached off his mind, a slow burn simmering still under his words. The leader's fists ached to punch through a wall or better yet, the face of the young man standing next to him.

The day had turned warm, despite the spattering of snow on the ground. With the tall glass walls surrounding the lower floor of the building, the side stairwell lay open to the view of the street outside, a welcome distraction for Yunho's stoic simmering. He'd debating hunting out Jaejoong but knew that in his angered state, it would be turmoil visited upon the fragile feral singer he didn't deserve.

"Yes." Junsu sat down, keeping his body tensed in the case the much faster Yunho struck out at him. "I wanted to see how you were. And to apologize."

"I'm not the one you should say sorry to." Yunho's ire peaked again, a thrum of jabs to the base of his skull. He'd never come more close to pulling off someone's face before, more astonishing so that it was Junsu. "I would have killed you in there for what you said about...Joongie. I was that angry."

"I spoke to Jaejoong. I told him I was very sorry." Junsu sighed, wanting his words back, the stinging darts that seemed to fire off his tongue without a thought to them. "I shouldn't have said that. I shouldn't have...and I'm very sorry."

"I'm just as hard on him as I am you." Yunho found himself biting his lower lip, a smile at the assumption of his lover's nervous habit. "More so, because I can't let my love for him get in the way of the group. Joongie was very clear on that. Our...being lovers... being together... can't get in the way of the five of us."

"When you said that ... those words... you said that we weren't committed to you as much as we are to each other... Jaejoong and I. Is that what you think? Do you think that I'm not sharing how I love Jaejoong with the world because I am ashamed of him?" Yunho pressed in, turning his head slightly to stare down the younger man.

In the quiet dark of their bedroom, Yunho listened sullenly to Jaejoong's pleas to protect the group from prying eyes...from harsh words, never expecting those words would be flung out from the inside. The leader still struggled with Jae's want for privacy, knowing the tender singer wanted nothing more than his love and did not need any other's approval to bless their union.

Yunho spoke finally, trying to find some common ground to stand on with the other singer. "We're hiding ourselves for you...and the others. Is this how you repay Jaejoong's sacrifice for you? Because I want to tell the world... I don't care who knows that I love him. I hate that everyone thinks he's single when he's mine and no one else's. So very much mine. Jaejoong is thinking of you three...caring for you in his silence."

"I know..." The singer rubbed at his face, his fingers trembling as he attempted to wipe the weariness from his body, a futile effort. "I was wrong. It's just been..."

"Hard." Yunho finished for the other, resting his chin on his arms. Knees drawn up, heels balanced on the step below, Yunho sighed not wanting to give up so easily on his anger. "You're not just tired from the schedule, are you? Are you angry at Jaejoong for something?"

“No. Jaejoong has been... nothing that I’m angry at is his fault. It’s all my anger.” The other slanted a glance at Yunho, wondering how much of his heart he should share. The leader of their troupe was often silently paternal, a stern figurehead that sometimes broke into a laughter that reminded them of his youth. Now, with his face recently set with the anger Yunho tried to stave off, Junsu was afraid to share anything, wondering if censure would follow. “I am asking you to forgive me, Yunnies. I can’t believe I even thought those words, much less said them.”

“As long as Jaejoong... never mind, I know Joongie forgave you. If he wasn’t angry enough to kill you right then, then he was never mad. He’s like a river flood, our Jaejoong. A flash of unforgiving water and then serene.” Yunho bit back his temper. Their lives became so complicated so quickly. One moment he was struggling to find his way and then the next, he was struggling to find his love amid the rise to a success he’d only dreamed of. In some ways, Junsu had it harder... much harder than he did. Jaejoong was a comfort now, a safe haven from the world that battered at them. There would be no such respite for the others. “Apology accepted.”

“Thank you.” Junsu sighed in relief. “I *am* sorry, Yunnies.”

He’d sat on the studio floor listening to the others tiptoe around Yunho’s anger, Jaejoong wanting to go out and find his lover, only stalled when Junsu asked him not to. The mess he created would have to be solved by his own words...not by Jaejoong’s soothing or Yoochun’s teasing. It had been difficult to firm up the tremors in his stomach when he’d spotted Yunho sitting on the side stairwell, the open aired spiral hidden behind plants and small walls. Junsu wanted Yunho’s approval and acceptance, something he’d nearly damaged beyond repair because of his own internal demons.

“I’ve been watching...in the middle of... this thing with you and Jaejoong. It’s been, rough on me sometimes. I’m not used to...” Junsu struggled to find the cause for his worry, all of his thoughts returning to the sight of Yoochun cuddling Jaejoong against his body, the bed heavy with the weight of their shared love.

“During all of it, I’ve hoped that you would... finally love Jaejoong...” Junsu let out a heavy breath, hot with words he’d left unspoken. “I was afraid that if you... didn’t want him, Yoochun would.”

“Chunnie? Why would Yoochun want him?” Yunho’s head jerked up in surprise, his face red with the embarrassment he’d felt...the jealousy in his gut when he’d seen his Jaejoong leaning towards Yoochun, intimate

and whispering. "They're friends...or better just be friends. Nothing more. Just like you are with Yoochun. He doesn't love Joongie more than he loves you. You're as much of his brother as Jae is."

"It's hard being there...watching their friendship..." The other singer admitted, leaning his head back and staring at the ceiling, finding the sparkles in the tiles...constellations unnamed above him. "I sometimes just want...I want more than a brother in Yoochun, Yunnie."

A realization dawned on Yunho, the last few clocks of what Junsu was feeling in his heart, so much like his own before Jaejoong finally surrendered his body and soul. "You're where I was... well, really...where Joongie was a few months ago? Wanting something...wanting someone...but not saying anything? I've seen you with Yoochun. Am I watching you struggle with wanting him and not knowing what to do. Or am I wrong? Is that what's affecting you?"

"Yoochun is clueless." Junsu sighed, resting his head against his own arms, mimicking his leader's pose. "I let my frustrations with...that... affect what I saw with you and Jaejoong. I know. I can't be more sorry."

"Aish..." Yunho borrowed one of Yoochun's favourite expressions, hissing the newly found frustration between his clenched teeth.. "I wish you luck then. At least between us, Jaejoong knew what he wanted and I was the one who had to come around. But I'm..."

"Passionate." Junsu finished. "You are a man driven by your... feelings and acts upon them. Yoochun, he's not as focused. And I'm not as...bold in my heart as Jaejoong. I don't think we're going to have a torrid love affair that will last in forever."

"I will be the first one to tell you, Junsu." Yunho stood, holding his hand out to the younger man. Taking it, Junsu allowed himself to be pulled up to his feet, finding forgiveness in Yunho's gesture. "Never assume that you know what Fate has in store for you. She often proves you wrong."

The apartment burst with noise when Junsu and Yunho opened the door, leaving their damp coats to hang in the foyer. Slipping his feet free of his shoes, Yunho went searching for the sloe-eyed singer his hands itched to touch. He found Jaejoong in the kitchen, leaning against the granite counter, one knee up as the flat of his bare foot rested against the cabinet door. He'd changed from the worn clothing he used during practice, a pair of low hipped jeans slung down below his waist. A borrowed t-shirt, one of Yunho's favourites draped down over the singer's

body, a familiar hoodie over the light sage shirt, its sleeves pushed up nearly up to his elbows.

Yunho wrapped his arms around his lover, straddling Jae's lean body with his long legs, pulling the singer in. Sucking on Jae's lower lip, Yunho moved into a fuller kiss, forcing his tongue into Jae's moistness, trying not to think of the whispers they'd shared in the cocoon of their bed. Yoochun clapped his hand on Junsu's shoulders, looking for any bruises on the singer's face where Yunho's fist might have hit. Finding none, Micky grinned widely, offering Junsu a taste of the salmon they'd been left for dinner.

Changmin looked away, carrying the sight of Junsu's smile as he turned around to get a bowl for their rice. A silver foil pan held steamed vegetables, still slightly holding their warmth despite the trip from the restaurant to the apartment in the delivery van. Small plastic tubs held a variety of pickled favourites, dark cucumbers nearly red with chili peppers splashing against the clear sides as Yoochun moved the container to the table.

"Do you want to eat that?" Yunho rested his chin on Jaejoong's shoulder, listening to his lover's breath hit the crook of his neck. The salmon looked appetizing, a rare treat of something delicious cooked by someone other than Jaejoong. "It looks good...not as good as you do...but nice."

"We don't have much else in the house." Jaejoong whispered, his teeth brushing on Yunho's cheekbone. His stomach growled, lunch being nothing more than a handful of almonds and breakfast eaten quickly left a solid block of rice in his stomach, chased down by a bitter cup of tea. "We stopped by and ordered this before we came home, asking them to bring it in. They just delivered it while I was in the shower."

"You smell nice. I like sharing our soaps. I like knowing that my scent is on you." Yunho turned his attention back to his lover's face, resting his forehead against Jaejoong's. "I want to eat you for dinner."

"I wouldn't make a very good meal." Jaejoong laughed, his hands on Yunho's hips. Their closeness felt right in his heart, even hidden behind walls, it filled him to satisfaction. Life would be complete as long as Yunho was with him. "You're going to have to be satisfied with the salmon."

"Boo, I was thinking that...if you weren't too tired..." Yunho started to say.

Yoochun held up his hands, a sound of protest coming from the other two. "Aish! None of that. Not in front of the kids! We are traumatized by such talk!"

"Aish yourself." Yunho rolled his eyes. Jaejoong covered his mouth, laughing and nearly breaking free of Yunho's grip. "Ignore them, Joongie. I was thinking that if you were up to it, we could go get some dinner. Maybe go to a club. We don't have to wake up early tomorrow."

"What club?" Changmin perked up, teasing Yunho innocently. "It has to be something I can get into. I hate being too young."

"Oh no." Yunho pushed at Min with one hand, reluctantly letting Jaejoong spin away from him. Blushing, Jae tried to get some distance from the conversation, the singer's bashful nature made him shy amid the others, the idea of the others knowing their intimacy shocking to his private soul. "You three are staying home. This is officially a date."

Yoochun crowed, his head tilted back in a raucous of laughter. Junsu bent over, clapping and trying to keep his mirth beyond a level of hysteria. Changmin allowed himself to be pulled into the merriment, Su's bump of shoulders sending him into Yoochun. Yunho shook his head in mock disgust, the sound of Jaejoong's embarrassed laughter a delight to his ears.

"What do you say, Joongie-ah?" Yunho grabbed at the singer, pulling him back into a tight embrace. They rocked there for a moment, enjoying the feel of one another on their skin. He wanted to drag the singer into the back of the apartment, shutting the door behind them until the sun burned from the sky. "Will you go out with me?"

"Yes, Yunnie-ah." Jaejoong schooled his face, licking at Yunho's parted lips with a delicate slide of his tongue. "I will be glad to go out on a date with you. Right after you shower."

Thirty

It began here... some of the sweet madness that wormed its way into his sanity, Yunho reflected, his elbows firm against the steel railing overlooking the catwalks. Club NB thrived in the late hours of the night, a miasma of pretty bodies and beautiful faces, moving in a tribal concert to the rhythms pumping from the sound system. Spills of flashing lights, crimson and gold, wove over dancers, their bodies slicing through the beams, a schism of movement caught in the split second of a blink before moving into the shadows. A familiar X song played, nictitating a pulse of movement through the young man that caught Yunho's eye.

Worn denim clung to the young man's hips, a flash of skin pale against the blue material. His t-shirt, the brushing tint of a new leaf, turned brilliant yellow in a flash of light, a strobe catching on the silk-screened peony blossoms across his ribcage. The bright white strobe hit on the mottled stains of his once-white hoodie, the elbows marbled with remnants of time spent through troubles and joy.

Eyes closed, razor-cut black hair sculpted down over his high cheekbones, he became sensuality poured into bone and flesh, feline movements amid the less graceful forms fading into nothingness around him. Oblivious to any attentions on him, the young man danced, a full throttle abandon of any constraints on his body.

Jaejoong looked up, and opened his eyes to the young man intently drinking in his every movement, He then smiled broadly, his face holding all the light of the universe in it...and the club darkened in comparison. Yunho's heart stopped, a thundering silence in his ears. The club faded around his lover, becoming nothing more than a shadowy veil against Jaejoong's vibrancy.

Holding his arms above his head, Jaejoong lost his body back into the rhythm of the music, keeping his gaze transfixed on Yunho's face. A thrill worked into him, Yunho's eyes leaving a trail of heat over his skin. Jae danced solely for his lover, hips moving erotically to the beat, shoulders sliding serpentine around the music. The sole male amid the females allowed on the catwalk surrounding the lower floor of the club, Jaejoong drew interest, his attention solely on the young man he held in his heart. He turned, moving his head to the side, his lashes drawn down

over his burnt caramel eyes. The music caught him again, a spiraling descant pulling at his hips, pearling his motion with a slow seductive roll.

Yunho spotted other men watching his lover, sidelong glances made obvious by becoming stares, enraptured by the beautiful singer's abandon of any shyness, wrapped in a feral unawareness. His primal temperament rode his body, titillating motions intrinsic to his sexual nature. Jaejoong's soul was open to the evening, drinking in the lights and sounds, naive to the rippling enticement pouring from him. The innocence of Jaejoong's essence lent to his feral, primordial sensuality, Yunho caught on the sight of his lover's tongue dipping against his lower lip, moistening at the dryness in the body-heated club.

Women Yunho dismissed. Jaejoong had shown no interest in the simpering females around him. Only an overly aggressive man would be a worry, the pretty faced singer appearing deceptively frail and submissive to anyone who saw him. Yunho knew of the fierce strength that beat in his lover's heart...jealousy would be something that Yunho would have to contend with on his own. Jaejoong would give him no cause to doubt having given himself over to his lover. There would be no one else, Yunho was sure of it.

Still, the thought of someone else's eyes on Jaejoong riled a kernel of possessiveness in Yunho's gut and he bent over the railing, crooking his finger at his lover, motioning for Jaejoong to join him. His response was a pout, full sensually and wanton. Out of the corner of his eye, Yunho spotted one of the interested usurpers' lick his lips, swallowing the image of Jaejoong's desire. The leader cocked his head, a stern expression followed by another crooking motion, silent and demanding.

For a long moment, Jaejoong debated defying Yunho's summons, a languid shift in the music pouring a molasses tempo into his dancing. Pursing his mouth in contemplation, Jaejoong slid around several of the women, making his way to the velvet rope marking off the entrance to the catwalks. The bouncer unhooked the chained cloth, allowing the singer to work free of the steel ramps, a glisten of sweat on Jaejoong's face. Yunho spotted one of Jaejoong's admirers moving towards the singer, cutting through the crowd to intercept Jae before he reached the end of the platform. Moving towards the open staircase leading to the lower floor, Yunho's foot poised on the top step, ready to intervene.

"No." Jaejoong's curt dismissal of the man brooked no argument, the succinct refusal clear amid the downbeat of the music.

The playful fluidity of the singer was lost, replaced by an intense thunderous will. Jae continued up the stairs, the man already forgotten as he reached his lover's side, cupping one hand over Yunho's ribs before sliding around him to get to their table. More interested in the iced bottle water than the broad-shouldered admirer, Jaejoong gratefully slid into his empty chair, splashing some of the cool liquid onto a napkin to dab off his face.

Yunho knew it was petty to gloat. He'd often heard that. Even knew that oftentimes, it was far better to retire with a gracious win but in this instance, he couldn't help but turn around and smile at the man who'd pinned his hopes on the mercurial singer. Yunho allowed a small apologetic smile, a quirk of courtesy and a duck of his head. Graciousness towards the forgotten admirer came easy, even easier once he turned around and joined Jaejoong at the table, nudging the singer on the shoulder with his hip.

"You should come down there with me." Jae leaned into Yunho's side, slithering his tongue along his lover's ear, masking the wet caress in a whisper. Yunho laughed, a barking hot sound, his pleasure at the moistness clear on his face. "We can dance together."

"Probably not here, Boo." Yunho reminded him, turning his attention back out to the floor. "We'll attract attention. The wrong kind of attention. And I think I get near you like that, I don't think I'll be able to stop from just having you in the middle of the dance floor."

The floor was dominated by couples, a few women dancing together in clusters of feminine solidarity, a night out sans boyfriends or husbands. He could only guess at the number of men that lurked in the shadows of the club, wandering around the fringes of society to steal surreptitious glances at the seductive beauty of other men. If they were going to hide themselves in the open, it would be years before Yunho could openly share a tight spaced dance with his lover.

"Are you hungry?" Yunho shouted over the raucous yelling, a group of drunken women caterwauling next to them. "You didn't eat much."

Yunho's handsome face turned at the sound of the women's laughter, a stray stroke of light pulling his features into focus. Bent over the deadly prettiness of the young man next to him, Yunho's sidelong glance drew their interest, a pair of beauties framed by the club's light.

Jaejoong heard whisperings, a tingle of recognition winding out from the conversation. Sliding a pair of red-tinted glasses over his eyes, the

rectangular wings covering his cheekbones and dark eyes, he glimpsed towards the table slightly behind them. A woman pointed and spoke into her friend's ear, the other woman's mouth rounding into an O before turning to stare at the two men. Pulling his hood up, Jaejoong slipped back behind the pure porcelain mask he wore in public, extinguishing the wild creature with the dousing cold of reality.

Yunho's heart ached, a stabbing pang at the subterfuge of their evening, the careless joy gone from his lover's face. Holding his hand out to Jaejoong, the leader stood, hooking fingers around Jae's wrist and pulling him free of the railside table. Dinner had been hours past, a hasty inhalation of noodles and a shot of soju heated by a burner at a kiosk, the brisk night air priming their appetite. With all of the activity, Yunho wanted to get food into his lover's system, Jaejoong often skipping much needed meals from forgetting to eat.

The front door to the club lay too far away for Yunho's tastes, the leader not wanting to forge through seas of people just to get to freedom. Ducking past the catwalk, Yunho searched out the back exit, dragging a closed down Jaejoong behind him. The beauty was still there, an unearthly angel detached from the world around him, a ghost butterfly pinned through with a steel pin.

Regret followed Jae, his night left behind him. Yunho's smile grew grim, joy flattened into a greyness at the sadness in his heart, wishing he could give his lover just one more minute of anonymity, a slice of inattention to throw himself into the sheer gluttony of his body moving against the beat of music.

Jae jerked to a stop, moving his head in the direction of the restrooms. Careful to keep hydrated, he'd consumed entire bottles of water and now needed a little time. Grinning, Yunho stopped short, sliding to a posed guard on the door, a single stall lockable from the inside. Jae slipped in and Yunho leaned his head back, exhaling hard. A flip of his phone would give them some time, a small little thing he could do to soothe the troubles on his lover's soul.

The bathroom's walls glimmered with pen marks, flyers and bits of photos sliced to show only grinning faces, teeth blaring white under the flickering black light seeping from under the crack of the door sill. Jaejoong gripped at the edges of the urinal, working himself free and releasing the torrent of the night he held inside of him. His stomach growled, reminding him the majority of the noodles had been eaten by his lover, his appetite now keening from the night of dancing and lusting after Yunho's touch.

A span of wall left untouched, relatively. The ink scribbled down to the wood, faded from hands touching, fingers running over the markers' leavenings. He wanted to leave something of the night, needing to leave something of them behind. Jaejoong wasn't sure if he could even believe that he hadn't fallen into a dream, a fugue state filled with Yunho's scent...his taste... the delicate skimming of his fingers along Jaejoong's chin. There had to be something of him and his lover that he could have forever, something left in the folds of the world that they had to hide from.

Jaejoong found a crimped binder clip, a cast off piece of hard metal he'd tucked in there after a radio show. The metal fastener on the top popped off, springing loose between his pinched fingers. A few minutes, long minutes of digging into the soft particle board left the imprint of that moment, safe inside of closed walls with Yunho guarding him outside. It would be his forever, no one able to touch him, the sound of techno thumping into his veins and the rush of knowing that outside of the door, a kiss waited for him... a taste of heaven only his.

His hands slightly moist from a washing in the ice cold water from the sink, Jaejoong opened the door, spotting Yunho. A smile coyly eased over his pretty face, bashfully opening for the lover he cherished. Around them, strobes flickered overhead, filling the nooks of shadows with blinding flashes. In the span of the door opening, a fresh carving on the wood bore Jae's efforts.

JY-n-KJ: A shard of Jaejoong's healing soul leaving a wishing kiss behind. It would be lost under plastered stickers and declarations of love left with ink and spit, but it would remain, however hidden, Jaejoong knew that it would be there.

Yunho claimed Jaejoong as soon as he exited the bathroom, cornering the singer against a niche, covering the other's mouth with a savage kiss. Giggling against Yunho's mouth, Jaejoong nipped at the other's chin, tasting the lemon soju they'd shared when he moved on to suckle at his lover's mouth. A hand, fingers cold from the water, skittered along Yunho's spine, Jaejoong touching on the warm spot of his lover's back, the span between his shoulder blades arching in response to the cold.

"Ah, that's freezing." Yunho pulled back, lightly shaking at the singer's shoulders. "What did you do? Wipe your hands on ice?"

"The water is cold in there." Jaejoong laughed, tucked into Yunho's chest. The feeling of calm once more filled him, a delightful aria of happiness bubbling along his soul. "Shall we go home?"

"We're not going home." Yunho replied, tugging on Jaejoong's upper arm. Perplexed, Jae fell into step behind his lover, keeping hidden by the other's broader shoulders.

"Where then? Food?" Jaejoong patted his empty stomach, the few noodles long since gone through his system. The buzz of the lemon soju hummed along his nerves, diluted by the water he'd consumed. Still, the skin on his cheeks were a bit numb, the edges of his mouth dry from the potent liquor's bite. "I'm hungry. And we left Changmin with all of the food. The foil will be licked clean. If we go there, we'll have to beg for scraps of bones from the cats behind the building."

"I told you, we're not going home." Yunho replied, nodding an acknowledgement at the bouncer guarding the back exit. The large man pushed open the heavy steel door, letting the pair into the open air alley they'd fought in a few months past. The singer dug in his heels, standing on the cement stoop where he first broke his heart on Yunho's hardened soul. That soul had since softened, unfurling to embrace the feral young man into its warmth.

"Where then?" At the end of an alleyway, a taxi waited, its lights flashing for its customers.

A short, squat driver stood by the back passenger door, a black cap fending off the worst of the wind from driving frostbite into the man's tender skin. Yunho helped Jaejoong into the back, his hand firm along the singer's hip, a soft word to the driver's ear. The leather seat squeaked as Yunho slid in, a sharp sound in the tight confined space. Jaejoong glanced at the back of the driver's head, the smoked glass between them clouding their view. Taking advantage of the distortion, Jaejoong tucked himself under Yunho's offered arm, bashful once again at the boldness of their affection.

"Do you think we can have him drive around forever?" Jaejoong whispered into Yunho's shirt. He pulled together a shuddering breath, tension leaving his body. He felt Yunho's hands on his back, stroking at a spot above his waist. His body rose to meet the familiar touch, the span of skin recalling the past few days of Yunho's hands pressed there, a slick penetration slowly opening him apart in preparation for the night they would spend fully joined.

"I think he would run out of gas." Yunho whispered into his lover's hair, making the same wish, hoping the night would spin on until eternity. "But we can always pay for more."

Seoul wove a sea of lights around them, in the distance, the skyline of Lotte broke through the lit canopy, beckoning in the late evening hours. A trail of sky cars bobbed along in the sky, floodlights illuminating the airborne cabs filled with couples looking for romance. Jaejoong leaned back, his head resting on Yunho's shoulder, watching the street pass by. They sat quietly, sharing the moments stolen out of their busy lives, lost just in the feeling of being with one another, no one else around as the world spinning around them.

The cab drove towards a steep incline, formal lamps lining the wide driveway. Glass walls seemingly rose from granite cliffs, the sheen of fine polished wood encasing the structure, a series of waterfalls splashing curtains of misting water, connecting the intersecting levels. A wide overhang protected any guests from a chance rain, a possibility in Seoul's unpredictable weather. The luxurious hotel spread out over the hillside, crystal chandeliers evident in the spacious lobby.

"Yunho!" Jaejoong's astonished voice trembled, trepidation in his tone. He knew this hotel. The events that unfurled in its walls fractured his lover's foundation. The last thing he wanted was to inflict more anguish in Yunho's heart. They'd suffered so much as it was. Jaejoong wanted to wipe it all away like forgotten tears. "We shouldn't be here. Yunho... why here? This is too much to ask of you."

"I'm thinking that tonight, we should visit every place that left a stain on us... on being together and wipe it clean." Yunho stared up at the hotel where his parents chose to cleave him from their lives, a heartbreaking shattered memory he longed to erase. "Tonight, this is where we start our lives. On the ashes of everything that we thought we once had... to build on everything that we'll become. This is why I brought you here. I want this to be ...ours. Not anyone else's life.. our life. Our life together"

"Right here. This isn't a tragic place. It shouldn't be. This is some place that we should celebrate our being together." Yunho pressed his mouth on Jaejoong's, stealing a kiss from his lover's sweetness "This is where I ended. This is where we began."

Thirty-One

Seoul spun out under the night clouds, the city's lit landscape touching the frothy low canopy, hints of silver veins dipping down to brush along avenues of skyscrapers. A glass elevator took Yunho and Jaejoong to the top floor of the hotel, the ride a slow ascent past the rise of the building's walls. Twenty stories up, the city suddenly came into view from the edge of the hill, a sparkling blanket of gold dapples running in a grid work sprawl out from Namsan park. The tower blinked, a red beacon winking through the dense fog rolling through the hills. In a few hours, the city would be swaddled in mists, its shine dimmed under the greying kiss of moisture but for now, it coyly flirted with the young men, a veil dance designed to romance even the hardest of hearts.

The front desk clerk didn't blink at the sight of the two young Koreans as they approached, the singers' easy mannerism and Yunho's charismatic smile spoke of belonging in the lush environs of the secluded resort, Jaejoong's casual sensuality lending an blasé elegance to the worn jeans, faded t-shirt and stained white hoodie he affected.

Yunho grinned to himself, catching the desk clerks' covert study of his lover, the older man's eyes watching the lithe singer patrol the lobby, Jaejoong's inquisitive mind drawn to the sculptures interspersed throughout the wide corridors. A tall twist of metal made the singer stop, pulling his rose sunglasses halfway down, his head canted up in a fluid silhouette to stare at the impressionistic coupling of a man and a woman around what looked like frilled seaweed to the group's leader.

A keycard slid slowly from the clerk's hand, a professional smile and a similar raking glance over Yunho's face, reminiscent of the lingering stare he'd given Jaejoong then the room was theirs. Hooking his fingers into the singer's back pocket, Yunho pulled Jaejoong along, whispering into his ear that they could study the art in the morning, provided they could still walk. Jaejoong's bashful laughter resonated against Yunho's collarbone, the singer's blushing face tucked against his lover's chest, hiding behind the sunglasses that dominated his face.

Warm air kept the elevator comfortable, the glass a stinging iced sheet from the blustery winds buffeting the hill rise the currents rode up from the valley below. Yunho slid his the back of his hand along Jaejoong's

waist, a patch of skin showing between the gap between his jeans and shirt. The singer allowed a smile to ghost over his lush mouth, keeping his face half hidden behind a curtain of ebony hair. A ding signaled their floor, the few seconds up to the room leaving jagged edged butterflies in Jaejoong's stomach.

They'd come so far between them, a bitter start to the warm-scented future they could have. Jae felt the tremors in his heart, doubts of what time would hold for them. Shaking off the whispering insecurities echoing at the base of his skull, Jaejoong stood at the elevator's threshold, his legs trembling when he reached out to take Yunho's proffered hand. A wavering dimness greeted them, the foyer on the top floor lightly illuminated, enough to provide guidance to the few room doors along the hall.

The elevator door closed behind them, shutting the night sky out. Turning around, Yunho pushed Jaejoong against the wall, a burled walnut planking set firm between marbled sheets. A triangular scone offered a faint swath of light, Jaejoong's beauty highlighted in copper and gold. Yunho's hands gripped into the singer's shoulders, holding him still, his face solemn as Yunho regarded the man he now called his.

'Say you're mine.' Yunho leaned into the singer's mouth, pulling a kiss from Jae's willing heat. "I want to spend tonight hearing you whisper that...scream that. I want that to be the only thing I hear from your mouth when we're in bed, maybe my name.. until you're too hoarse to whisper it any longer."

Jae curled his fingers down Yunho's waistband, sliding his hands around the small of this lover's back. Their kiss, torrid and passionate, ended too quickly for the singer's liking, a deep growl of protest in his throat when Yunho pulled back to break them apart.

"You're teasing me with that." Jaejoong, emboldened by the seclusion in the foyer, suckled at Yunho's mouth, pulling on the other man's lower lip.

"I want to hear you see it." Yunho pressed in, trapping Jaejoong against the hard wall. "Just once. Now. Out here."

"Yours." Jaejoong whispered, his tongue finding a dry spot on Yunho's lips. With a dab, he moistened the dryness, claiming the final untouched part of his lover's kiss.

“Good.” Satisfied, Yunho nodded curtly, tapping the keycard against the tip of Jaejoong’s nose. “Let’s go find our room.”

A string of green lights on the door access, a discreet flash of light set down inside of a pine inset, the locking mechanism clicking open. Yunho turned the door, pushing it open to let Jaejoong in first. The singer took a step forward, holding his breath as he crossed the threshold. The series of phone calls Yunho made from inside of Club NB laid out a haven the leader had hoped the hotel could provide them for a night stolen from the chaos of their lives. He got his response in the awed gasp from his lover’s gaping mouth.

The room was lit by dim lamps, unobtrusive glimmers intended to highlight the sweeping cityscape framed by the glass wall that wrapped around nearly half of the room, its placement in the building lending the luxurious suite a deep privacy and a tantalizing promise of open skies. A wide bed dominated a solid wall paneled in deep rich cherry wood, the soft Egyptian cotton sheets pulled back to a crisp corner. Blush red peonies spilled from thin-walled porcelain vases, the ceramics nearly translucent in the light shining through.

Silver platters were arranged on a low table set in the middle of a sitting area, the overstuffed plump sofas canted to take advantage of the stunning view. Fragrant aromas steamed up from the edges of one of the domed dishes, Jae’s stomach rumbling its complaints. Yunho grinned, his own belly thin and weak from lack of food, the night’s activities running him lean in energy. Jaejoong slipped off his shoes, working his socks off and rolled them into a ball, tucking them into one of the discarded sneakers. Padding on bare feet, he crouched by the table, cautiously lifting up one of the domes and inhaled deeply.

Yunho followed, moving more slowly so as to watch Jaejoong’s pleasure dawn on his pretty face. They’d rarely had time for a lengthy meal, usually foraging from food ordered in and quickly consumed while standing or hunched over work, gulps of water taken between bites. Yunho couldn’t remember the last time he had a sit down dinner, surrounded by the others. He would have to see if they could carve that time out of their schedule, perhaps a single night when they could gather and sit, a leisurely meal among the closest of friends.

Jaejoong squealed, a rarely heard sound. Yunho smirked at the sight of the massive, swollen red berry his lover held aloft, Jaejoong standing to place a hearty kiss on the corner of Yunho’s laughing mouth. Strawberries were a rare favourite, a meaty sweet Jaejoong coveted even

during peak seasons of the fruit. Yunho took the berry, the delight in Jae's face a treat to see.

"The first one should be yours." Turning, the ebony haired singer stopped as Yunho's arm captured him from behind, the other's crook tight up against his chest and over his shoulder. "I was going to get another one."

"This one...first." Yunho sucked on the strawberry, moistening its deep red meat, not cutting into the berry with his teeth. Sucking hard on its tip, he slid the fruit over Jaejoong's slightly parted lips, bending his head down to nibble along Jae's jaw. "Bite."

Jaejoong bit into the fruit carefully, its semi-sweet juices spurting out of the delectable meat. He could taste his lover's mouth on the berry, a tantalizing, erotic accent that buried into his heart. Sucking on the strawberry meat, Jae let his eyes hood, drawing his gaze to the side. Yunho's cheek brushed his nape as the other turned Jaejoong around, slowly leading him until Yunho's mouth teased at the droplets of juices trembling along the ridge of his full upper lip. Jaejoong leaned into the caress, letting Yunho lave off the last remnants of the strawberry from his mouth, his breathing shallow with desire.

"There's dinner in there, I hope." Yunho encircled Jaejoong's waist, cupping the singer to his body. He could stay like that forever, the warmth of his lover on him and the scent of Jaejoong in his lungs. Yunho reluctantly nodded towards the food trays, one of the domes steamed with hot condensation. "You have to eat. Come along."

Later, Jaejoong couldn't have said what they'd eaten, the food flavoured by small bites of Yunho's mouth on his. He remembered another taste of hearty strawberries, shared nibbles passed from his lips onto Yunho's tongue. Behind them, soft R&B music played, a rolling river of sound coursing over his senses. The skyline dimmed as the night passed, lights doused as Seoul slowly sank into slumber, homes tucking into sleep below the two lovers' watchful gaze.

The music shifted, deepening into a soulful crooning of love. Belly full, Jae leaned back on the sofa's arm, a lean sated cat stretching out and working the kinks from his legs and shoulder. Standing, Yunho took Jae's hands into his, pulling his lover up onto his feet. Curious, Jaejoong was silent as Yunho led him around the table and in front of the glass wall, the city still glittering behind them.

Fog rolled in tight, massive streams of mist rising from the cooling night's breath, filling in the edges of the valley below. In an hour, Seoul would be lost to the low-spilling clouds but for now, it reached out to their private haven on the hill, an ambient illumination reflected on the fog's lower mists. Yunho's fingers steepled through Jaejoong's, a slow weave of bone and flesh working a symphony of sensations on the sensitive flat of Jae's palm. Shivering, the singer felt a wave of goose bumps ripple on his shoulders, the thin shirt and hoodie offering little warmth for the chilled erotic tingle stringing along his bones.

"Take this off." Yunho tugged at the shoulders of the hoodie, sliding the garment down his lover's arms, Jae's biceps bunching from the effort. "I want to be the one holding you, not the memory of me held in this."

Jaejoong leaned into Yunho's chest, working his shoulders against the other's while the sweat jacket was pulled from his torso. It pooled down to the floor, kicked aside by Yunho's foot, freeing the space around them for what Yunho had in mind.

"Ah..." Jaejoong's hands opened, accepting Yunho's fingers as the leader wove his arms down into Jae's, pressed together belly to belly, their grasp on one another's hands tight. Their clenched fists hung down at their waists, tied solely by the tangle of fingers and shared breath, their cheeks touching, mouths misting unspoken words into their souls. Standing there, silent against one another, the lovers let the night fill them, stretching out their consciousnesses until only the other existed.

A rough, whiskey of a voice echoed a low lying bass into the room, immediately familiar to the singer's heart.. Yunho began a sway of their lightly joined bodies, stepping into a slow dance, the barest of movements of their feet through the thick pile of carpet. Yunho's lead left whorls in the plush, filled by Jae's bare feet behind him. Sliding his face down, Jae rested his cheekbone against the rise of Yunho's chest, finding the beat of the music in his lover's heartbeat.

Louis Armstrong began singing of bright blessed days and dark sacred nights, Jae finally succumbing to the American's liquid voice, hearing his world in the man's soulful crooning. The dark, whiskey tones of the song were unknown to the leader, but the sensual flow of music touched something deep inside of him. Stepping forward, keeping his hands in Jae's, Yunho turned his lover around the carpeted floor, rocking him gently through the room, their bodies entwined in a languid fluid movement. Jaejoong's long shuddering sigh released the last of the tension in his soul, finally surrendering to the other man's firm embrace. Yunho rested his jaw against the crown of his lover's head, the soft black

silk of Jae's hair a delectable blend of Djarum cigarette smoke, winter air and vanilla.

"There's no one else I want in my life, you know." Jaejoong's words were nearly lost under the music, a whispered confession of love choked around pent-up emotion. "I've been... seduced by others... wanted a few but when the time came, there was something inside of me that said to wait...because none of those men were you."

"You don't need to tell me this, Boo." Yunho tasted the night on his lover's skin, grazing a fawning kiss on Jae's forehead. "From now on, I know there won't be anyone in your heart but me."

"I need to... tell you...share me." Jaejoong tilted his face up, staring into his lover's eyes. "When I lived in Itaewon, I spent a lot of time wondering what it would be like to be in love... but there were a lot of times when I just wanted to feel someone against me. I wanted someone to hold me when things got so rough I wanted to give up."

"I spent nights trying not to cry because I was so cold inside." Jae continued, hoping to finish what his heart burgeoned to reveal. "I thought I wasn't going to survive it and I just wanted to find some sort of warmth. I was so driven to become a singer that I forgot the dreams I had to have someone love me... because I thought it wouldn't happen...not to someone like me."

"I felt every time one of those men touched me, I was selling a piece of me off, breaking off parts of my heart and giving it away so it could be sucked dry." Jae's voice broke, Yunho's grip tightening on his lover's hands, the other wanting to wipe away the pain in Jaejoong's soul. "Then you came into my life and I swear, every shard of heart glass I'd thrown away came rushing back to pierce me, bleeding me out when I thought I couldn't even feel anymore."

"I just need you...and want you to know how much you mean to me. How much I love you for ... filling in the empty spaces I carved out so I wouldn't feel hurt anymore." Breathless, Jae's lashes stung with unshed tears, pain he thought he'd shed long ago. "But you've made me feel again, Yunnies. My dear Yunnies-ah."

"I've been to Trance." Yunho admitted, his heart breaking at the desolation in his beloved's voice. "I saw the... I saw what those other boys were doing to make a living. I don't want to think of that kind of life for you. It kills me."

“I never... let any of the men there get more than a touch.” Jae dropped his eyes, wanting his lover to believe him. Yunho sighed, knowing the singer merely wanted absolution for any imagined sin of being desirable in a smoky room filled with lustful men. Jae would have appeared to be an easy mark, the feral innocence of the singer’s graceful body and exotic face nearly feminine in their beauty. “Just so you know... you really are the first. The first one...”

“I know that, BooJae.” Yunho reassured his lover, unhooking his hands from Jae’s, sliding his arms about the other man’s waist. The dance stilled, their movements lost in confessionals and desire. “I know your body. I’ve felt it open for me. I know that no one’s ever touched you like I have and that does things to me... to my gut... that I can’t even explain.”

“You touch parts of me... my soul...Yunnie-ah.” Jaejoong kissed his lover, wanting Yunho deep into the back of his throat. “I want you to touch all of me. I want you to be inside of me, tonight...forever...always.”

Thirty-Two

Yunho tipped Jae's chin up, the barest touch of his finger along the other's delicate jaw bone. In the soft light, the singer's skin glowed, a gloaming stretched over something precious Yunho would treasure past this moment and into the rest of his life. Standing against one another, neither breathed, afraid to break the spider web silk of trust they'd begun to weave. Time ticked past, the minute hand clicking down past one number and then a second, the lovers staving off the world with the sheer will of their beating hearts.

The feral lean singer moved first, a lethargic movement driven more by need than anything else. A tumbling heat unspooled past the point of pain in his soul, his hands aching to touch the hard body hugged against him. Jaejoong whispered a kiss over Yunho's bared neck, nudging back a shank of silky hair by Yunho's earlobe, an attempt to get to the soft skin beneath. His palms rubbed on Yunho's chest, reveling in the responsive pebbling under his hands. Jaejoong sighed, biting at the lobe, a tiny groan of pleasure rippling up Yunho's throat.

The slightly younger man continued to rock his lover's body, encircling Jaejoong with his arms. The world continued on without them, time passing in slow ticks of a sand struck with gravity. Listening to Jae breath, Yunho closed his eyes, just wanting to hold onto the moment when he felt peace deep inside of the noise in his heart. He'd never been satisfied before, always a hunger driving up from inside of him. Yunho spent much of his life searching, pushing past barriers he thought stood in the way of what he wanted...only to discover the greatest barrier he had was himself... an unwillingness to see the face of the man he loved amid the chaos of his anger.

"What are you thinking about?" Jaejoong finally spoke, whispering a kiss along the ridge of his lover's collarbone. Nudging Yunho's shirt aside with his teeth, pulling the fabric loose, Jaejoong ran his tongue beneath the ribbing, leaving a wet trail of hints on his lover's skin.

"I'm thinking you might have too much clothes on." Yunho buried away his anger, residual stains of a life he'd led before that night when he found Jaejoong's tears on his hands. He would only share what his soul wanted now, not the child hidden inside of the man he now was. So much

had changed in a few months, his world turned upside down and then straightened back up, everything vibrant and sharp, nearly too bright for his society-shaded eyes. "How about if we work some of them off?"

"You plan a lot." Jaejoong stepped free from Yunho's embrace, a slithering shadow of grace. "All you do is plan. Sometimes, I wish you'd just....do."

His t-shirt joined the hoodie on the floor, easily shed with a nonchalant shrug of his body. Casting a sidelong glance over his shoulder, Jae sauntered over to the wide bed, his fingers unhooking the top button of his jeans. A peek of pale skin winked from the gaping fly, just the barest hint of naked under worn blue denim. Yunho moved to follow, his hands wrapped into the hem of his shirt, a small seductive noise from Jaejoong stopping him from disrobing.

"I want to do that. I want to watch your face as I kiss you naked." Jae turned, his jeans still partially undone. The lean bodied singer stood, knee canted, a feral hot look in his smoldering eyes. Crooking his finger at the other...much like Yunho's demand on his own presence in the club, Jae felt a thrill of power creep over his spine as his lover stalked closer, a primal possessiveness clear on Yunho's face.

"You think I'm going to last long enough with your hands on me?" Yunho growled, wrapping his fingers tight in the hair at the back of Jaejoong's head. "Why would I just settle for your hands and mouth when I can have everything else too."

The black silk felt so right there, enrobed around his flesh and bone until Jae's mewls of arousal broke Yunho's contemplation of his lover's body. The singer's toned muscles were moon-kissed, a winter blanch stark with the shadowed valleys between Jae's abdomen. Yunho's own gut clenched in response, his sex tight against the constraints of his jeans, the denim rubbing raw through the cotton of his briefs.

Jaejoong curled his fingers along Yunho's waistband, running dull fingernails along the sensitive skin along his lover's belly, ruffling the fine velvet down curving down past the dip of Yunho's navel. The strength there fascinated Jaejoong, a powerful breadth of muscle toned tight under a golden layer of skin. Yunho retained much of his natural tan during the winter, a honey gold against Jaejoong's paler ivory. Jaejoong felt the bed behind him, stepping backwards, pulling his lover with him. He kneeled on the soft mattress without looking, his eyes rapt on Yunho's face.

“Let me.” Jaejoong stopped Yunho’s push against his shoulders, the leader’s hands firm on Jae’s naked shoulders. The singer slid Yunho’s hands from his own body, letting dangle at his waist. The leader allowed himself to be maneuvered into place, his thighs straddling the space in front of Jaejoong’s body. “Please, Yunho. I want to do this.”

“Just don’t take too long.” Yunho’s dark husky voice rasped, emotion clouding his clear tones. “I’ve been thinking about you... like this... all evening.”

“I’ve been thinking mostly about you.” Jaejoong teased, his gaze hooded as he regarded his lover through his lashes. Yunho’s fingers found the back of Jae’s head again, tugging playfully at the razor-cropped hair.

“Mostly?” Curt, Yunho left the teasing tone in his voice despite the rise of jealousy that seemed to flare up at the thought of the singer’s mind being on something other than their own pleasure. “Just mostly? Who else were you thinking about?”

“Mostly. Yes.” Jaejoong agreed, kissing at the other’s stomach as he lifted Yunho’s shirt, his mouth suckling on the rim of Yunho’s belly button. “There was a strawberry that I fell in love with briefly but it left me...unsatisfied.”

“You’re a tease, you know that?” Yunho’s mind lost all thought when Jaejoong’s hot mouth traveled down to lick at the growing bulge under his jeans, the fabric barrier doing little to soften the sensations of Jae’s teeth scraping along the turgid length of his body. Grasping at the other man’s shoulders, Yunho’s hands found purchase, holding the singer still for a moment before sliding down the length of Jae’s back. “You... this is going to be trouble if you continue this. I don’t have spare clothes.”

“Then take off your jeans.” Jaejoong unclipped the fastener at Yunho’s waistband, slowly sliding down the zipper pull, its metal teeth clicking loudly in Yunho’s ears.

Yunho felt each span give way underneath the push of his sex, the shaft growing tighter with each stroke of Jaejoong’s hand. The denim slid off of Yunho’s hips, kicked free when the young man stepped out of their confining length. He moved to hook his fingers into the waistband of his briefs but the touch of Jae’s tongue along the elastic’s edge froze Yunho in place, his head tilted back, savouring the cat-rough feel against him.

“I can’t... not much longer, Boo.” Yunho tried to ignore the mewl in his throat, a sound he found so erotic in Jae’s voice but with more than a

taint of surrender in his own. The singer had the audacity to chuckle through the laving, a spot of laughter left behind inside of a kiss imprint. “You like doing this to me. Driving me insane.”

“Yes.” Jae admitted, his giggle turning into a full-bellied laugh as Yunho pushed him back onto the bed, covering the singer’s body with his own. Jaejoong’s jeans were yanked from his legs, a pair of low slung briefs tangled in the fabric, Yelping with surprise, the singer turned over, trying to wiggle free from Yunho’s demanding grip, scrambling up onto the bank of pillows at the headboard.

The room suddenly became still, Yunho resting one knee on the foot end of the mattress, his chest bared as he slid his shirt up the rest of the way, untangling his head from the stretched out collar. A quick dip of his hand into his jeans’ pockets and Yunho turned his intense attention back at his lover, all playfulness fled under the storm of wanton need on his handsome face. With the sight of Yunho clad only in a pair of black briefs stalking over the mattress on all fours towards him, Jaejoong struggled for his breath before laying back onto the feather pillows supporting him.

Yunho’s wider shoulders made his mouth both water and dry, a delectable construct of muscle and bone stretching over Jaejoong’s body. The headboard trembled with the shock of Yunho’s weight against it, his hands supporting his torso, legs sliding over Jae’s slender waist and holding the singer still. The cotton briefs rubbed against Jae’s plump head, the velvet head weeping from the friction. Jaejoong’s breath came in pants, his hips twitching uncontrollably.

“Am I making you as crazy as you made me?” Yunho bent down, savouring Jae’s mouth before biting a hard path down to the other’s pierced nipple.

He played with the bar, rolling the metal between his teeth and gnawing at the nub until his teeth nearly met under the thin pierce, Jae’s gasp of painful pleasure hardening the length of him to a near burst. The leader moved over to the other side, teasing at the nipple and batting away at Jae’s questing grasp, the singer trying to stretch his hand down between his lover’s legs to wrap his slender fingers around Yunho’s girth.

Reaching down, Yunho stroked at the ridge along Jae’s shaft, tracing the moist pout with a practiced swirl. He’d spent only a few hours exploring his lover’s body, purloined moments between exhausting days and too short nights, their bodies drained of all energy save a few brief minutes of nearly torrential pleasure. Yunho wanted to spend hours licking every inch of his lover’s body, returning the favour Jaejoong often woke him up

with, the singer's hot mouth enclosed over his sensitive tip before the strokes of his tongue murmured against Yunho's spilled seed.

Yunho knew he would have to go slow. There were gashes on Jaejoong's soul that he could only touch lightly, a mere whisper of affection given as a salve until the wound healed. Now, so many of them lay angry and raw, red beneath the newly scarred over soul-skin, every kiss Yunho laid on the singer's mouth washing away just a little bit of the rot laid into his lover's essence by the harsh whip of others' hatred.

"Lay back. Don't move." Yunho ordered Jae, firmly placing one hand on the singer's shoulders and pushing him back into the fluff of pillows. "My turn."

It was one of the sweetest things Yunho had ever tasted, the mingling of Jaejoong and strawberries against the roof of his mouth. His lover tasted of musky sweat and candy, the spicy smoke from a clove cigarette and the familiar shiver of zest that seemed to be solely Jaejoong...tart and a burst of tang on Yunho's tongue. He took his time, first licking down the other's length, burying his face into the froth of curls scattered at the shaft's root, a bare silken wave Yunho bit at, nipping carefully over the hypersensitive skin.

"Ah, Yunnie..." Jae's hands pushed at Yunho's shoulders, his shattered nerves unable to take the feel of teeth along his lower belly. His lover mewled, a darker, richer sound than Yunho had ever heard before, his hips convulsing with movement.

Jaejoong's body thrumming into an arch while Yunho slowly circled back down the inside of his hip, finding the hidden tender swath of his thigh, leaving a rising welt behind from a sucking kiss. Yunho ignored Jae's pleas for mercy, half-hearted begging as the leader pushed at Jaejoong's knees, spreading apart his lover's thighs.

Palming the lubricant from the sheets, Yunho expertly popped open the lid, keeping his mouth firm around Jaejoong's shaft, pulling his mouth up and down until the other writhed, pushing up to reach Yunho with every down stroke. Hoping to warm the gel more, Yunho wrapped his fingers down around Jae's length, slowing the licks of his tongue and hoping that he would have time before losing all control.

Yunho glanced up, proud of the young man trying to remain still amid the sheer amount of pleasure rocking his body. Jae's hands were now clenched in the sheets, cottoned fists kneading open and close, a kitten milking the mattress for more. Yunho's own pearling shaft would wait

for the promise of Jae's body around it, his hardness aching as its head merely brushed against Jae's shin. The leader could have sworn he felt every little inch of Jae's skin as he rubbed, his tongue swirling one last time around the tip of Jae's length.

The rosette was waiting for him, a pouting ring tucked inside of Jae's warm body. Yunho kissed around the spot gently, working his fingers into the gel on his palm. Over the past few nights, he'd been able to slide more than one into his lover, often at Jae's insistence on being filled by some part of Yunho's body. The singer panted, anticipating the intrusion and forcing himself to relax, reminding himself that the starting burn would last only as long as he let it. Falling into the faith he had in his lover, Jaejoong parted his legs, bringing his knees up carefully to let Yunho in.

A single thrust of a finger brought a gasp of shock through Jae's body, shuddering pleasure spilling from the milky slit along Jae's shaft head. The expulsion was a precursor, a reaction to the idea of Yunho finally plunging deep into him, spreading him apart and consuming him. Yunho pressed in, feeling Jae's body straddle the web of his hand. Placing a kiss along Jaejoong's leg, Yunho looked up at his lover's flushed face, waiting for him to relax.

It was a tingling full feeling, the spreading of muscle around Yunho's first entrance into him. It never ceased to shock Jaejoong, his lithe body fighting the want until a final gasp of surrender and then, an awareness of the bliss as Yunho stroked inside of his body. No one had ever made him full before, and his body knew it needed that piece of his lover...a hard pulsating throb against the nerves inside of him. Yunho spoke of a warmth, the tightened noose of silken moisture he felt with the callused surface of his fingers, trying to imagine how the sensations of Jaejoong's passage wrapped around the too-sensitive breadth of his sex.

Another finger followed, slower this time, longer and more intrusive. Jaejoong fought the sensation of pushing, breathing between clenched teeth as his lover reassured him with soft words, telling him it would be alright. It was always alright, Jaejoong reminded himself. Yunho had never pushed in farther than Jae could stand, often taking long minutes to stretch him until Jae hardened again, sometimes even pulling away so the singer could suckle on Yunho's length. The taste of his lover in his throat gave Jaejoong the comfort he needed to forge on with their love, the feel of Yunho's seed in his belly a gratification no one else could match.

“Yunnie.” Jae tried to reach at his lover, bending his torso slightly. Yunho leaned forward, suckling on Jae’s fingers, wetting them with his tongue.

“Do you want me to stop?” Yunho pressed into a slow circle, his own body nearly spilled with desire. “I’ll stop if it’s too much.”

“No...” Jaejoong wasn’t ashamed to say that he begged. He would always beg for anything Yunho would give him. Even if they never touched again, Jae would beg for a glance...anything to fill the emptiness inside of him...a void cut from his heart in the shape of his lover. “I...need...this. I need you. Now. Please.”

A single kiss on Jaejoong’s hip bone was all Yunho gave the singer as he pulled carefully free from Jae’s warm ring. The chill of the gel on his hand shivered up and down Yunho’s hard shaft, only slightly dousing the lingering weeping head’s cry to bury itself deep into Jae’s body. They’d spoken a bit about the how of it, what they wanted the first time and where they would be...and now, amid the realness of it, Yunho realized he wanted more than anything to make Jaejoong come, regardless of anything his own body might do, he wanted the pleasure for Jae to break into the sadness lingering around his lover’s heart.

Yunho pressed one hand on Jae’s hip, slowly turning him over. Laying on his stomach, Jaejoong shivered as another kiss stroked down his back, finding the spot on his lower spine that always made him shiver and then a bite along the rise of one cheek, the underbelly of a delectable peach in Yunho’s mouth.

Jaejoong parted his legs slightly, raising his hips while Yunho slid one of the pillows under him, affording him some comfort and access. Pressing his fingers back along the rosed-ring of Jae’s body, sliding the remaining gel around his own shaft head, Yunho found the entrance to his lover and slowly, lovingly, rocked into the ridged muscle.

The stinging burn was more than what Jaejoong could imagine, his breath sucked clean from his lungs. He didn’t have enough air to protest, a screaming rejection of the intrusion into his body before his mind numbed itself around the love in the other man’s hands as they stroked at his lower back. Just the edge of Yunho’s shaft pressed in, the knob still firmly at the entrance, holding steady until Jae’s body released enough tension to move forward.

“I will stop, love. I won’t hurt you.” Yunho’s heart broke at the thought of giving Jaejoong pain, nearly pulling free from Jae’s promised warmth.

In response, the singer merely slid backward, easing himself slowly back, forcing himself around his lover's shaft, trying to guide Yunho in deeper. The leader bit softly between Jae's shoulder blades, easing his aggression with a gentle warning nudge, telling Jaejoong to slow down and let him finish, a sedate breach into the silken warmth.

Nearly fully in, Yunho stilled, hoping not to lose all sense of control his body ached to maintain. His hips moved on their own, barely able to contain the want his mind screamed soundlessly in his skull. Everything in Yunho's being desired to push in, to test the moisture gripping around him, a burred sensation that nothing else in the world could come close to.

Yunho was able to hold onto himself back, allowing Jae time to adjust to the girth piercing him. A panting heave of quivering sighs rocked Jae's body and the singer moaned again, darker...more urgent than before. It held nothing of pain, or perhaps just enough to touch off the basest of instincts in Yunho's system that told him the singer was now all his.

"Mine." The young man leaned into his lover's body, touching at Jae's core. "Say you're mine."

The cry came on the wings of a surrender so sweet, it settled into a cotton candy drift on Yunho's soul. Jae pushed back, sliding Yunho fully in and gripping at his lover's hands, wrapping his fingers along the back of Yunho's palms, his short fingernails digging into the leader's skin.

"Yours." Jae gasped, biting at the pillow and crying with need. "Please...yours. Only yours."

Jaejoong's world shattered under the light of Yunho's movements, rasping apart the stitched in edges of his soul. A crackling sunburst spread into him, skeins of inky shadows unspooling from around his body...their talons sinking deep into him as they fought to regain some purchase on his writhing body. Yunho's tortured pants echoed in Jaejoong's ears, a resonance he matched with passionate moans.

Yunho's shaft filled him, rubbing against the nub of nerves hidden inside of his depths. Each sliding caress drove the bundled tension cresting in Jaejoong's groin closer to the edge, parting the adumbration clouding every one of Jaejoong's breaths until he choked on its thickness.

Moving quicker, he rocked Jaejoong's body, holding the singer's hips still with clenched hands as he gave as much pleasure as he took. Gritting his teeth, Yunho waited until Jaejoong's hardened cock, stroked hard

under their pressed bodies, spent...the spasmed seed coating Jae's belly. Biting his own lip with the effort of milking the last of Jaejoong's groaning release from his body, Yunho tilted his head back and let go, filling his lover with proof of his bliss. Moving slowly, Yunho leaned forward, massaging Jaejoong's long legs as he continued to lave the singer's insides, softening with each stroke.

They lay there, Yunho sliding out to cradle Jaejoong's lean body against his own. The leader saw the clinging shadows in Jaejoong's eyes retreat, stealing back into the cracks of his shattered soul. Eyelashes fluttering, Jaejoong fought the sleep that threatened to take him, his quiet protests silenced by Yunho's hand stroking the small of his back.

Turning, face nestled into the crook of his lover's arm, Jaejoong fell easily into the warm nest of satisfaction that Yunho tugged around his body. Spangles of light flashed behind his eyes, warning off the shades lurking around the corridors of his mind. Placing a final gentle kiss on the young man's cheekbone, the sliver of scar rough against Yunho's lip, the young man settled in for a sated numbness beside the singer...their love a tight barrier against the darkness.

"Yunnie?" The whisper was nearly enough to shake the sleep from Yunho's eyes, Jaejoong's soft entreaty hot against his chest.

"What is it, Boo? Are you okay?" Yunho stroked at his lover's hair, feeling the looseness in Jae's limber body. "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"No." Jae shook his head, his eyes reflecting the waning light of the city outside. "I just wanted to tell you that I love you."

Yunho found Jae's mouth, a kiss that warmed his belly and tasted of all of heaven's stars. "I love you too, my Jaejoong."

"And.." Jae licked under Yunho's chin, a sensual taste of his lover's sweat and his own seed mingling on his tongue. "I want more."

Thirty-Three

Jaejoong woke to the sound of water, surrounded by a grey skyscape curling around glass walls. Winter fought with the onrush of spring, refusing to give up her grip on the clouds, pulling moisture down to douse the growing warmth on the ground. Lightning crackled across the far hills' horizon, a flash of white spider webs spraying the tree tops with a silvery glow.

Stretching, Jae winced, the spot between his shoulder blades raw from Yunho's ravaging teeth. He felt an ache along his back, churning down to a slow burn inside of his guts, his core spread hot from Yunho's length. Small pangs ranged bright over his nerves, muscles throbbing from being bent in ways he'd not even imagined before last night. Sighing, the singer pulled one of the Yunho-scented pillows free from underneath him, cradling the feather down to his belly. A throbbing twinge poked at Jaejoong's neck, his fingers finding the rise of a bruising welt, more evidence of Yunho's biting during the intensity they shared.

Turning his head, Jae was disappointed to discover the bed was empty, save a discarded pair of briefs and a disarray of pillows. The sound of the pounding rain masked the quiet shush of the shower heads in the bathroom, a small bank of steam creeping out of the open bathroom door. Resting his cheek on the mattress, Jae wondered how long his lover had been in the shower, Yunho's lengthy stays under the hot water legendary in their apartment. Digging around through the sheets, his body burrowed under their musky cotton, Jaejoong lay quiet, stretching his arms out over the bed and letting the last of the tension in his nerves leak free.

Something hard dug into his thigh, a curious edged cold on his warm skin. Mostly unwilling to see what it was, Jae moved over an inch, creeping his hips up and sliding over, settling back down onto the flat mattress. His eyes closed, Jae listened to the symphony of rain hit the nearby glass, the sounds of the sky's torment filtering in through small protected windows set above their bed. He reveled in the feel of his naked body against the sheets, wondering if the hotel would notice a missing sheet or pillow.

A deep bass note rumbled in Jae's belly, Yunho's nearly inaudible singing prodding Jaejoong back to wakefulness. The leader ran through the melody of a nearly forgotten love song, a romantic tale of love lost and then found anew. Smiling against the softness of the cotton sheets, Jaejoong slid from the mattress, intent on padding to the bathroom to listen to his lover croon. His body did ache, in places tucked deep but the shimmer of discomfort paled in comparison to the hugs Yunho wove onto his heart.

Familiar trilling caught Jaejoong in mid-step, his cell phone's chirruping ring tone calling out to him as he passed. Finding his jeans proved to be problematic, lost under the coverlets they'd tossed off the bed during their lovemaking. The phone gave one lasting gasp for attention then went silent, nearly as soon as Jaejoong's fingers slid into his pocket, the blinking voice mail light winking a green baleful glare. Flipping the phone open, Jae stared down at the call back number, the blood draining from his face.

Turning the phone over, Jae double checked to see if he'd grabbed the right pair of jeans, or somehow mistakenly found Yunho's phone instead but the black cross vinyl sticker on the back told him otherwise. His stomach dropped, guts churned into a tight knot at the number scrolling over the screen.

A hot drip of water struck Jae on the shoulder, startling him. His phone flew from his hand, striking the side of the bed, bouncing down to the carpet. Yunho leaned against his lover, crouching behind him, knees tucked up into the back of Jaejoong's lean thighs. Sucking on a spot, Yunho was sure he missed, he failed to see the astonished shock in his lover's face. Somewhere on the carpet, Jae's cell phone beeped, a forlorn reminder of a lost opportunity to speak to someone who'd brought Yunho into the world.

"Who called?" Yunho grinned, resisting the urge to add more reddened welts along the curve of Jaejoong's spine. Several small dots were darkening to a plum stain on the singer's ribs, a memory of a rough nibbling from Yunho's voracious mouth. "One of the members?"

"No. It wasn't anyone." Jae stumbled over the lie, his eyes expressive and worried. The deception didn't sit easily in his soul, concern making him look away from Yunho's piercing stare. "I think it was a wrong number."

Yunho tilted his face back, cupping his lover's chin and stared down into the startled beauty he found there. The leader found something he didn't

like lurking in those amber-shard depths, subterfuge lying on top of a layer of guilt and longing. Yunho pursed his lips, rubbing at the shiver of gooseflesh crawling over Jae's bare legs. Spotting the discarded phone, the leader grabbed at it, checking the number in a slow crawl over the LED screen.

He stood, pacing away from Jaejoong in a few strides, a hotel towel firm around his lean hips. The resort's golden crest dimpled one corner, a flash of bright incongruously dangling near the leader's thigh. Anger rode him, as quickly as pleasure had a few moments before, a sour bile he couldn't clear from his throat. Fingers clenched tight on the phone, Yunho turned around, his eyes narrowed.

"When were you going to tell me that my mother called you?"

Yunho's accusatory tone hit Jaejoong full in the face, the singer flinching as if his lover's hand struck him to the bone. Jae promised himself he wouldn't doubt this... the precious little time that they were able to hide away from the world and be together. The singer set his jaw, refusing to take the anger frothing from Yunho's tight, tensed body. Fists clenched at his waist, Yunho advanced, trying to find the words amid the storm in his mind.

His mother. Or at least someone calling from her phone. More than likely her. And trying to reach Jaejoong while Yunho's own phone, fully charged and silent, no telltale beeping of a voice message. Silence was more damning than the retorting denial he'd expected from the mercurial singer, Yunho stopping after a few steps.

The rage in his heart fled at the arrogant tilt of his lover's chin, Jaejoong daring to be castigated. Fragile and delicately-boned, the singer was made of firmer grit than Yunho often gave him credit for, the cold, shy brittleness masking a wild and free depth. Sighing, he shrugged to loosen his pent-up nerves, joints screamed, reminding Yunho of the night spent barely sleeping and tasting every inch of the man now sitting on the edge of the bed.

He didn't know what to do...what to say to the defiant Jaejoong, the beautiful pout firmed into an uncompromising line. The willing, malleable lover from last night had been replaced by another mask, headstrong and stubborn, easily prodded into a vicious fit of words if handled wrong. Yunho knew Jae well, and sometimes holding his own with this particular side of Jaejoong didn't always turn out well for him. Yunho wasn't ready to risk the fragile bonds they'd forged through the night, each precious link hammered strong with every kiss they shared. Still,

Yunho's emotions ran hot at his parents trying to reach him through Jaejoong...or worse yet, harm Jae into pulling away from him. That thought left him dead cold, a frigid glacier freezing his heart.

"There can't be any secrets between us, Boo." Jae leaned into the cup of Yunho's hand when the other man lifted his palm to the singer's cheek, Yunho drawn closer to crouch between his lover's splayed knees. Forgiveness was in the gesture, an acceptance of Yunho's unspoken contriteness. "No secrets, alright? If this is going to work between us, we can't hide anything from each other. No tucking away the bad things because I *know* that they are going to be there."

Jaejoong leaned back onto his hands, head dropped and to one side, pulling away from Yunho's familiar caress. "You're probably going to get tired of dealing with all the bad that happens to me."

"Sometimes, yeah... I probably will." Yunho gripped at the phone, trying to keep his temper down. It chewed at him, a gnawing flare of wind begging to whip around Jae with sharp teeth. "Boojae, we have to trust every part of our lives with the other or we might as well not go any further. Do you want that?"

"No." Anguish tore through the singer, his throat raw from his stomach flipping over. "I can't... live without you...in my life. In me."

"I can't live without you either. You have to tell me... about these things. Especially when my mother calls you." And I have to be as honest with you. We only have each other in this." Yunho stared down at the cell phone, an electronic snake with fangs prepared to bite him. "Did you listen to the message? Did you hear what she wanted from you?"

"No, you came out before I..." Jae trailed off, his words mumbling as he contemplated his lover's hands, Yunho's fingers making a series of quick taps on the dial pad. Purchasing the pair had been a secret thrill, a decision Jae was beginning to regret as Yunho erased the waiting message. "Yunho, that might have been important!"

"She should call me if it was important." Yunho pointed out, lightly tapping the phone against the singer's chest. "I don't hear my phone beeping and it's right by your feet, under the blankets somewhere."

"Maybe she's afraid to talk to you." Jaejoong's fingers were tangled in Yunho's left hand, the leader standing to tug the singer to his feet. "She could have been calling me..."

“She’s calling you to get to me...either for the good or for the bad.” Yunho shook his head, sliding behind the other man, nudging him towards the bathroom where the water still ran hot in the enormous tiled shower. “If she wants to apologize to me, she can call me. I told my parents what I expected from them...to take them back into my life.”

“My mother calling you...that’s unacceptable. I won’t let you become a pawn in their game to manipulate me. I would rather it just be the two of us alone at the end of our lives than surrounded by caustic bitterness because of who I love.” Behind him, Yunho slid his arms around Jae’s waist, an intimate gesture calming the singer’s ruffled nerves. “They have to accept you...as my boyfriend... as my lover... as the man I am going to wake up to for the rest of my life. I don’t expect them to beg. I can forgive them anything that they’ve said to me...but not to you. Never to you.”

“Okay?” The leader shuffled forward, pushing Jae in front of him with little hopping steps. Reluctantly, the singer moved, his naked body responding at the feel of Yunho along his back and thighs. The towel’s rough plush sang over his sensitive skin, Jae’s bobbing shaft hardening slowly.

“I can walk.” The pout was back, sensual and hot. Grinning at the coyness, Yunho hooked his hand into Jaejoong’s, tugging at the singer’s reluctance.

“Come take a shower with me.” Yunho urged softly, his long body aroused just by the scent of his own musk on his lover’s skin.

Yunho’s touch shivered a chill under Jaejoong’s bare feet. A fog of hot want floated onto the singer’s bare body, Yunho kissing the nape of the singer’s neck just as he felt the singer reaching towards his waist, undoing the towel around his waist. Allowing the cloth to slither to the floor, the young man turned to find Jaejoong pressed up next to him, a kiss waiting on the singer’s mouth. Falling back onto the bed, Jaejoong reached for his lover when Yunho covered him, canting his hips to fit the other man into the hollows of his body. The mattress gave slightly under their weight, the feather top absorbing most of the shock. The phones were forgotten, lost in the push of desire in their hearts and souls.

“I want *this*.” Jaejoong gasped, finding Yunho’s mouth again and suckling the breath from it. “I want the taste of you to erase anything outside of us. I want the feel of you... the thickness of you inside of me until I can’t feel him any more. I want to take every bit of my body and

rub it against you so all that is left is you...the taste of you. The feel of you. Everything about you.”

Another kiss, deeper and hitting something primal inside of Jaejoong he didn't even realize lay beneath the churning surface of his thoughts. He wanted his lover in ways that made him ache and Yunho's answering rake of teeth over Jaejoong's nipple enflamed the uncontrollable inferno scorching its way through his bones.

“Say you want this too, Yunnies-ah.” Working his hands into his lover's silken mane, Jaejoong tugged lightly under Yunho's desire-darkened eyes peered up at him from under thick sooty lashes, head bowed and intent on the hammering pulse working under Jaejoong's skin. “I want to hear you say...something. Do I make you as crazy as you make me?”

“I want you. I love you.” Yunho's husky smoke of a whisper flared. Swallowing at his desire, Yunho looked deep into his lover's face, seeing the want reflected there, an ache to leave Jaejoong panting on the bed growling up from his soul. The desire threatened to choke him, he murmured. “I want this. I...love...making you tremble. Every time you touch me, I die inside because I know that if I touch you, because I think that I could have missed having you because I was an idiot... and you could have felt someone else's hands instead of mine. And that would kill me.”

Tears hovered at the edge of Yunho's lashes, his face contorted with the effort of staving their fall. Canting his head back, the leader brushed a tender kiss on his lover's cheek, savouring the dappled light across the rise of his bone. His words were knotted inside of themselves, language lost under the rush of want pounding in him. “I feel you, Boojae, in my marrow. I want to take whatever stained you and erase it. And I can't. I've never felt so helpless in my life. Even when I've been at my worst, I never felt as helpless as I do now when thinking about the evil your father did to you...looking at the rents in your soul and I can't stitch you together to heal your wounds.”

“You're wrong.” Jaejoong matched Yunho's whisper, nearly lost under the crackle of thunder overhead. The muted sun peeking out from under the clouds, nearly lost in the downpour, leaving only the flickering lightning to chase the dampness away. “You've healed me. You hold me together sometimes when I feel like my body has cracked open and my guts are pouring from every crevice and cavity.”

“There are times, Yunho, when I wish I could feel your hands inside of me just so I know that I'm not alone...that there's something else in this

world besides me trying to hold myself in and then I remember that you do...that you are and that everything will be alright.” Yunho murmured a reply, lost in the slither of his mouth on Jae’s shoulder, kissing the delicate dip of bone. “You keep the monsters in my soul away, driving them back into the darkness that they live in. Yunnies-ah, you remind me every day that I’m not alone.”

“Every waking moment that you’re with me...and some times when you’re not, I know I’m not alone.” Jaejoong’s heart clenched at the feel of Yunho’s eyes on his face. “I can’t look at a box of crayons without thinking of you because you’ve made me see rainbows. Or smell green tea and hear you in my mind. And that makes me smile. Like nothing else before has made me smile.”

“My father...might have made me...carved me out of my body using his blood as the chisel but you... Yunnies-ah... you’ve refined me. He left nothing but a block of quivering nothingness. It was you that took me out of that slab and molded me.” Jaejoong cupped his lover’s face, their mouths a scant distance apart. Yunho’s tongue ran along the very tip of his upper lip, searing its moistness into the rise of Jaejoong’s mouth. “I love you. And I know you love me. I’ve never doubted that. From the moment you called me lover, I *knew* that you were mine.”

“I am.” Yunho brought his head forward, their foreheads touching. “I will always be yours. No matter where you are...no matter what you are doing and what you have, you will always have me.”

“We are... ours.” Jaejoong stumbled over the word, bringing a smile to Yunho’s full mouth. “You and I. We’re our family. Our bloodline. Ours alone.”

The swaddling sheets melted from their bodies, torn free off the bed by Jaejoong’s impatient hands. Yunho laughed, a full throaty roar of a sound when a piece of cotton refused to give way under the singer’s tugging, finally lifting his hips to help Jaejoong work the covers free of his leg. Sitting back on his haunches, the younger singer drank in the sight of his lover, running a gentle finger over the small semi-circular scar on his hipbone, a remnant of a life spent with people who nursed a young boy into a man. Yunho returned the attention with his own, using his tongue to find the depths of Jaejoong’s body. Each curve along the singer’s abdomen moistened beneath his travels, a gentle nip on the side turning rougher when Jaejoong’s body grew rampant at the bite.

“Turn around.” Jaejoong pushed on his lover’s unmoving shoulders. “There’s something I’ve always wanted to do.”

Another cock of his head and Yunho acquiesced, shifting so Jaejoong had access to his back. Curving Yunho's hair around his fingers and sliding it around under his palm, the singer studied the spread of skin winging over Yunho's shoulder blades, the lower muscles curling down to shelter the dip of his spine. Coming up onto his knees, Jaejoong bent down, bringing his mouth down on the slender juncture between the other's shoulder blades.

Jae took his time, finding the delicate lines enrapturing. Tasting, swallowing every millimeter of pain and dreams under Yunho's skin, Jaejoong finally bit down to suckle in his lover's strength. His cock grew heavy when Yunho's hands reached behind his back, clenching down on Jaejoong's upper thigh muscles until the need between them burst apart.

Swinging around, the leader pulled his older lover down onto the pillows, capturing his mouth in a ravenous kiss, bruising Jaejoong's lips with a ferocity the singer hadn't imagined Yunho possessed. Tugging Yunho's face down, hands wrapped in his silky mane, Jaejoong arched his back when Yunho's fingers ran down between his legs. Panting, the young singer paused, trying to catch his breath and thoughts before they ran away from him.

"I do not want to rush..." Yunho's teeth once again found Jaejoong's throat, raking and biting, finding purchase after purchase until the singer wanted to scream. "You might be too...tender from last night. It would dig into my soul if I... caused you pain."

"If you don't do something soon, there won't be much left of me to rush." Growling, Jaejoong swore under his breath. "We need... more gel...oil, whatever that stuff is called. Yoochun calls it..."

"Now's not the time to bring up Chunnie-ah. As much as I love him, now... not the time, Boo." Yunho's eyes bled out all vestige of control from them. Raising his hand, the leader sucked down on his fingertips, spit welling and filling the ridges of his prints. The plastic hardness on Jae's hip earlier turned out to be the lubricant Yunho brought with him, a final push of gel slaked free from the tube. Teeth bared, Yunho dipped his hand down, pressing on the rosette of Jaejoong's body until the singer spread his legs, instinct kicking in under his lover's touch.

The spit and gel, warmed from Yunho's body, slid around the crest of Jaejoong's inner crevice, cheeks clenched at the slight intrusion of finger tips before a gentle push slid Yunho just beyond the ridge. Gasping, Jae gripped his lover's shoulders, raising his legs up and apart and panted harder. He could hear someone begging... his own distant voice lost in

the rushing roar of his own blood filling his ears and after another insistent sliding forward, Yunho's fingers parted him. Waiting, the leader pressed further in when Jaejoong slide down further, working down upon Yunho's hand until the singer could feel the webbing against the rise of his body.

"You're not going to hurt me. I promise." Jaejoong rasped, his hips twitching. Yunho's mouth slid down over his chest, finding the nub of flesh and working it between clenched teeth. "Please, I can't... just please."

Turgid, Yunho's flesh brushed hard up against the inside of Jaejoong's thigh. Reaching down, Jaejoong brushed the tip of it, finding the head moistened with a drop of pearl. After rubbing the liquid into Yunho's skin with his thumb, Jaejoong lifted the moistness to his mouth, drawing the salty sweetness of his lover over his tongue. Yunho's fingers fell away, and a pressing hot push filled Jaejoong's awareness. Yunho's hands slid under his lover's legs, pulling them carefully up over his shoulders. Leaning over, the leader laid a gentle kiss on Jaejoong's mouth and guided himself in, stroking at the other's silky nest until the rosette below sighed and opened.

The head slid in, heated by the slick gel and spit left by Yunho's ministrations. Jaejoong gasped and shut his eyes, waiting for his body to adjust to the opening of his flesh. Stilled by his lover's murmured distress, Yunho waiting, pillared with need for the young man laying beneath him. Jaejoong's exhorts to go forward emboldened Yunho, his shoulder muscles working to support the leader's weight. Jae felt Yunho sliding deep inside of him, each thrust bringing his lover that much closer to filling him.

"Lover..." A single word, carried everything inside of it, Jae's husky mawl weaving a seductive ribbon around Yunho's heart. "How many times can I say please?"

Crawling up from the depths of Yunho's heart, it filled Jaejoong nearly as much as the length of Yunho's body. Tingles built on each wave of sensation, the sounds of Yunho's breathing mingled with his own and then the day stretched out before them, minutes bleeding away beneath them. Their bodies melded, sweat binding them as their souls reached out and wrapped around one another.

It took them both by surprise, the losing of their control. For the longest time, neither of them wanted to give in to that sensation...the building and cresting of their bodies' seed spilling loose. Gritting his teeth, Yunho

watched Jaejoong's face, his hands roaming over the singer's hips and gripping tightly, raising him up to meet each thrust.

Unable to take the overwhelming tide of emotions, Jaejoong's fists clenched, working at the sheets under his fingers and cried out, taking his lover over the edge of reason. Dropping down, Yunho's mouth found Jaejoong's, drawing out one final kiss as he released, cradling his lover close to his body as they shuddered inside each other's arms.

Panting, hair beaded with sweat, Jaejoong pressed his face into the crook of Yunho's neck, licking the salt away from his lover's skin with a gentle press of his lips. Jae's body convulsed as Yunho slid free, leaving behind an emptiness that filled immediately with the tender love from Yunho's kiss on his nose. The flat of Jaejoong's hand rested on Yunho's stomach, lifting with each breath the leader took. Outside, the storm continued to rage, the pounding rain splattering on the window glass but its sounds were still lost to the spent passion the lovers shared. The thick wooden awning outside the slanted open windows protected their dry solitude, tall trees creaking with a gust of wind.

"Thank you." Propped up on one elbow, Jaejoong raked his own razor-cut black hair out of his face, sliding his hand in a languid caress over Yunho's chest. "For everything... for making everything right. Inside of me. Outside of me. Every where."

"You've done it for me too." Yunho's index finger outlined the purpling bruise he left behind when he bit down on Jaejoong's jugular, the mark scored when his body finally gave into the demands of Jaejoong's writhing. "Do you think we should check the closet for your monsters...before we fall asleep? Isn't that where they're supposed to hide?"

"Maybe later." Sliding back down to rest against his lover's sweaty body, Jaejoong sighed, letting sleep tug at his consciousness. "The rain can't get in. And the monsters can't get out. Life is good. Let them think they've got a chance for a few hours. We can kick their asses later. I'm just glad you're here for me."

"Always here for you." Yunho's long arm reached down, one arm tucked under his lover's now sleeping body. Taking one last lingering look at the closet, a soft smile on his face, Yunho turned his back to it, wrapping his other arm about Jaejoong's chest and pulling him into a tighter embrace, finally giving himself over to a sleep rising deep from his calmed soul. "Sleep, baby. I'm here."

Thirty-Four

Yoochun grinned broadly when he opened the front door, intending to take a short walk to get the morning paper and custard from the sweet shop downstairs. Pulling his stocking cap on, Micky didn't see the couple standing up against the door frame, their bodies intertwined in an embrace. Yunho's mouth found the corner of Jaejoong's parted lips, sliding the tip of his tongue into the moist juncture, the soft and rough feel of the singer's winter burred skin. The leader's hip slid as the door he'd supported his weight against gave way beneath him, his feet stumbling to retain his balance, arms wrapped tight around Jaejoong to prevent the other from being injured.

The younger member placed his hand between Yunho's shoulders, holding him still before the pair fell backward, grunting at their combined weight. Jaejoong jerked back, his hands tight around his lover's waist, hoping to stay his lover's fall. Hissing in annoyance at the interruption, Yunho glared at the silly smirk on Yoochun's face. Their feet were nearly tangled together, one of Jaejoong's long legs hooked around Yunho's knees, the space between them redolent with a musky heat.

"Ah, good morrow Friends," Yoochun placed one hand on his chest, a melodramatic gesture as he pulled himself into a romantic stance. "Saint Valentine is past: begin these wood birds but to couple now?"

"Funny, Chunie-ah!" Jaejoong let go of Yunho's waist, slapping at his friend's shoulder. "Don't you look before you open a door?"

"You're outside of the apartment! Against the front door like something from *Sol-na!*" Micky protested, his malleable face grimacing, sticking his tongue out at the group's leader and lead singer. "How many times have you checked to see if someone was leaning on our front door? How long have you been out there? Is there still paint left on the door from you rubbing against it?"

Pushing past the younger man, Yunho guided Jaejoong into the apartment, a hand on the singer's lower back. Jae stuck his tongue back out at Micky, twisting around Yunho's shoulder to do so. Yoochun closed the front door behind them, newspaper and custard forgotten now that

the hyungs were home. Yunho headed directly to the back bedroom, gifting Jaejoong with a light kiss on the forehead before disappearing. The singer soaped up his hands, washing them in the kitchen sink then looking for a towel to wipe them dry with.

“Chunnie!” Changmin frowned, spotting Micky coming around the wall separating the foyer from the main living space. Junsu sat next to him, the wide couch occupied solely by their pressed in bodies. Changmin guiltily glanced at the oblivious Junsu, the other’s attention on the wide television, bright colours rolling by on the screen “You’re back so soon! Where is the custard?”

Min’s elbow jabbed at the other singer on the couch, the youngest pulling away from Junsu’s crouched form, the controller gripped firmly in Su’s hands. The jostle made Junsu jerk, hitting the controller levers hard, spinning the onscreen ball out of control. With the singer snarling at the television, Su’s unruly katamari banked a river bed before careening into a wall. With a forlorn moo sounding from a tiny cow tucked into a nearly hidden niche, Junsu’s barely begun level ended, kicking him back to a disappointed King of the Cosmos.

“The elders are back.” Yoochun nodded towards the kitchen, Jaejoong poking around the refrigerator hoping to find something he could make into a brunch for himself and the others. “You should see Joongie-ah’s neck. It looks like an octopus got mad and attacked him.”

“Chunnie-ah!” Jae shouted, horrified at the younger man. Claspings his hand over his throat, he glared at his friend before hurrying down the hallway to the bedroom he shared with Yunho. A glance at the mirror behind the door showed him a small constellation of purpled marks, slender nibbles on his fine skin. Coming up from behind, Yunho slid his arms back around his lover, resting his chin against Jae’s shoulder.

“What’s wrong? I heard you yelling at Yoochun.” Yunho sucked at Jae’s earlobe, squinting his eyes when Jaejoong pointed at his own neck. “What?”

“You bite! Look at me. It looks like you haven’t eaten in a week.” Jae rubbed at one of the marks, seeing it redden. “Chunnie said it looked like an octopus assaulted me.”

“You didn’t complain when I was biting.” Yunho shrugged, smiling at his lover in the mirror. “They’ll go away. If anyone asks, we’ll just say you got a girlfriend.”

"I don't have time to have a girlfriend. They'll know it was one of you." Jaejoong sniffed, suddenly tired. "I don't want to..."

"Don't say anything about not wanting to live like this." Yunho warned his lover off. "We have ambitions. Neither one of us want to give those dreams up. And we don't have to. We can have the group and each other. You have to remember that, Joongie-ah."

They both fluctuated between telling the world and not caring...to hiding behind the covers and hoping the world would just go away. Neither solution would work right now, not with Yunho's possessiveness and Jaejoong's wild, carefree spirit. At the most, their affection could be passed off as the closeness of friends, a brotherly fondness grown deep from living through trials and obstacles. Yunho knew the day would come when they could just walk away into the sun, leaving the past behind them. Until then, their lives together would be behind closed doors.

The ride back from the hotel had been nearly giddy, a trip back through the time they spent together. Yunho had tried on the stained hoodie, realizing his shoulders did fit into its breadth any more, giving it back to his lover when Jaejoong pouted at him. Jae never found his underwear, the briefs lost somewhere in the spacious room. Yunho left his off as well, a token display of solidarity that was rewarded by Jaejoong's fingers along the length of him, the singer's hand sidling down Yunho's waistband while the driver was intent on maneuvering through traffic. The leader's shocked shout jerked the cab driver's eyes back to the seat behind him, his narrowed eyes wondering at what the two young men were doing, a fey-faced beauty slanting towards the other, their hands hidden by a pool of greyed fleece.

Streets then flew by too quickly for Yunho, his desire aching to pool into his lover's tight grip. Grabbing at the hoodie, Yunho waited while Jaejoong paid the driver then hurried the other man upstairs, holding him fast against the door to capture the pout that teased him through the miles. Jae's hands once again wandered down to the zipper of Yunho's jeans, tugging at the flesh hidden behind there until the leader's body jerked with the spilling. Sucking the pleasure from his fingers, Jaejoong's catlike tongue lapped at the milky seed. Yunho's body surged again, the thought of his own body being taken into Jae's with each delicate tongue lick. It was that moment when Yoochun opened the door, nearly spilling them down onto the foyer floor, Yunho's jeans still partially undone and the taste of him on Jae's hands.

“Come on.” Yunho grabbed at a pair of towels hanging behind the door. “We both need to...clean up.”

Jaejoong slanted him a telling look, a realization dawning on him as the other dragged him out into the hallway and into their bathroom. Shutting the door behind them, Yunho slid his fingers under Jae’s shirt, yanking it off. The leader stared at the pale, lean form of his lover, a sculpted marble body hidden under a veil of clothing. There wasn’t time for candles, rose petals or taste of a freshly picked strawberry. Time was something neither one of them could afford purchase as undeniable lust raging between them arced and flowed, an electrical spark Yunho knew would ignite once the water hit them.

“Take the rest off.” Yunho found each and every one of the bites he’d already left on the singer’s neck, laving at the minute bruises, worrying one into a ripe plum. It would be hidden under a shirt collar, Yunho reasoned to himself, the gasp of want from Jaejoong’s panting mouth more than worth the singer’s consternation. The leader felt a need to mark this young man, make sure that even if no one saw the ownership of his mouth, it would be there for Jaejoong to feel.

“Yunnies...” The singer wondered if the door behind them was locked, trying to reach the knob to feel the lever. “The others...”

“You keep saying the others when we’re behind closed doors.” Yunho turned Jae around, leaning him back against the door, hands on either side of the singer’s head. “No one is going to come in. Trust me, Joongie. They’re outside... and will stay there. Now, pay more attention to me...not them. Just me, Jaejoong... only me.”

The shyness came back with a flood, Jae suddenly assailed by the realization that they were here, in the home they shared with the others. This was no longer the spot of paradise in a hotel where they had no identity. When they left the bathroom, bodies beaded with the remnants of their sweat and hot water, the other three would know what they’d done... know who they were. The “we” in their relationship would suddenly no longer be a fantastical fiction kept hidden away from all other eyes. It would be there, evident and a real, forever thing.

Yunho’s love of hot water was tempered by Jaejoong’s more tender skin, the leader adding enough cold water to the mix to bring down the scald. They shed their clothes slowly, taking more time in helping one another be free of the constraining materials, hands searching out the curves and dips of each other’s bodies. It was different this time, a leisurely stroll

over more familiar territory, no longer the race to consume one another's essence, trying to bring together two parts.

"Mine. So much mine." Yunho's breathless whisper lacked the obsessive urgency from before, a declaration of what was real, not of what he'd hope only in the dark recesses of his heart. This man was his, solely and only his. Jaejoong responded in kind, kissing his lover's chest briefly, stepping back into the shower stall and tilting his head back, letting the water course down over his nudity. "I want to make you beg. I want to beg in return. I don't think either one of us will have any voice left when we die. My last gasp of breath will be filled with wanting you."

"How many times again?" Jaejoong finally asked, most of his weight resting on the ball of his foot, the other leg bent slightly as he glanced over his shoulder, licking at his mouth with the edge of his tongue. "How many times do I have to beg you and say please?"

"Three." The leader stretched his arms out, hands on the shower door, the glass enclosure running from the floor to the ceiling, just a tiny marble set lip to kept the water at bay. "Three times, baby. Just three times."

"Please." Jaejoong's head canted to the side, reaching with his hand to tug on Yunho's hair. The leader stepped into the shower, remaining at arms' length until the singer bent forward, his mouth on the round of Yunho's earlobe.

With his breath hotter than the water pounded at their bodies, Jaejoong sighed into Yunho's thoughts. "Please..."

The hitch in Jae's voice resonated in Yunho's gut, the tiny little mewling noise when they joined echoing in its depths. With a growling retort, Yunho stepped in closer still, hands on Jaejoong's hips as he pulled the other closer, sliding the smaller man against the tile wall.

"Please." The final whisper was accompanied with a lingering kiss, a hot trail of tongue and teeth marking the beginning of Yunho's jaw line and ending at the plump ripeness of the leader's lips. Yunho's control wavered and then spilled, desire breaking free when Jaejoong panted into Yunho's waiting mouth. "Make me yours."

Rain-proof lotion provided Yunho with enough soothing liquid to explore Jae's body, a lemony fragrance Changmin bought for his dry hands. The citrus scent eased into the water, a few splashes of the pale buttercup fluid splashing onto the darker beige tiles. Reaching around and under,

Yunho eased into Jae, the other man holding onto his lover's shoulders to give himself support. A single finger quested inward, stretching him slightly, Jae's body tight and clinging. A crescendo of mewling began in Jae's throat, kittenish sounds that purred in the singer's chest when Yunho added another finger, his mouth touching Jae's to capture the noises into his lungs.

Sweeter than any wind off of the ocean, Jaejoong's mouth tasted of sugar and his own saltiness, Yunho's passion lengthening with a strong want. His teeth ached, wanting the feel of his lover's throat under them, scoring and marking the precious skin stretched over Jae's flesh. The singer made him crazy with need, the moon fallen from the sky and caught in Jaejoong's eyes. Within a few short months, Jaejoong had become everything for him...friend, lover and family... the foundation of his day. Chaotic and wild, the singer gave Yunho purpose, a balance to his controlled discipline... teaching him to laugh at the darkness and straddle one's fears.

"You give me strength, Joongie-ah." Yunho pressed Jae against the marble, turning him by the shoulders until the other's arched body rested on the water-warmed tile. "There is so much power in your soul... I marvel at it."

Kissing at the tenderness of Jaejoong's nape, the man nudged his lover's legs, urging Jae silently to spread apart for him. Leaning into the singer, Yunho rested against him, the length of his sex nestled in the crest of Jae's rear. They stood there, a torrent of water coursing down, filling into the dips of their bodies, pressed so tight none of the runnels found purchase to pour between them. Jae's arms slid down over Yunho's, hands wrapping into his lover's fingers. The singer played with the webbing along Yunho's palms, running finger tips over the sensitive flats, pulling the air cupped there with stroking motion.

Neither moved, not wanting to give up the cocoon warmth of their togetherness. Resting his cheek between his lover's shoulder blades, Yunho listened for the quiet beat of Jaejoong's heart beneath the spread of bone, each second affirming the life of the man he loved. Yunho's body ran hot, aching to be buried deep into the promise of Jae's silken warmth, an obsession he now welcomed with an open soul.

"I never want this to end." Jaejoong echoed Yunho's heart, his soul poured into those words.

The singer knew the world outside would soon come crashing in around them. It could be anything to draw them back... the other three pounding

at the door, demanding attention; the pressure of another dance routine that would take them to the edges of exhaustion and tears or; the remembered strain of their voices in trying to perfect a sound that only one of the members could distinguish... but for now, it stayed behind the locked door. In the quiet of the now, all Jaejoong wanted was the man holding him to rock him until the night fell again.

Their bodies drifted together, a slow dance where the music suddenly became a deep throbbing pulse within them. Still tender, Jae's hissing pants warned Yunho to go slow, each small thrust measured with a lingering kiss on the singer's mouth, the keening of his throat mingled with the wet of Yunho's tongue.

Everything outside of the glass shower walls stopped moving, just the sounds of the water and Jaejoong's gasping breaths with Yunho's soft encouragements. The leader's hands spanned his lover's hips, kneading at singer's muscled back before moving to his stomach, stroking at the soft skin around the piercing. Jae shook his head when Yunho let his fingers trail lower, his flesh too sensitive from rubbing on the slightly rough cold-tainted marble. With the inferno of his lover's body on his back contrasting with the iced feel of the stone, Jaejoong felt the universe pour through him, unable to take much more without splitting his soul apart.

A nudge pushed Yunho in farther, the tip of his length rocking against Jae's moist passage. Yunho's breath strained with the amount of control he was exerting, nearly every nerve in his body begging for Jaejoong's sweetness to engulf him. It was too warm.. nearly hot in texture. Yunho shivered, his shaft poised on the clinging flesh, hearing the deep inhaling pants ratcheting through Jaejoong's body.

"It's too much, baby." Yunho stopped, nearly drawing free. Jaejoong's fingers clenched on the back of his thigh made him pause, the singer's fingernails digging in sharp and hard. "You're too raw. Honey, no... it's been too much... I don't want to hurt you. Please, don't let me hurt you."

"Yunnie, please... " Jaejoong begged, tears in his voice. "I need you to bring me home...to have me here where we live. It will make everything we are... real. I need to be real for you."

It broke Yunho, that plea...those tears unheard by anyone else in the world. Those were only for him, a sobbing pleasure married with the hot want of his lover's body. Jaejoong rocked backwards, sliding the tip of Yunho's shaft against his moistened rosette, teasing the pouting head until finally Yunho's nerves tingled down to the soles of his feet, an

copper bitter taste curling up from his stomach... the denial of Jaejoong's body finally becoming too much.

The slide into the heated silk was torture, a long slow process punctuated by weeping cries of pleasure from Jaejoong's bared throat. Head thrown back, hair wet into a long strands of ebon plastered over his fine features, Jae bit hard into the tender spot under Yunho's jaw, the pain of the caress shuddering through Yunho's spine as his hips met with the curve of his lover's body. He stood there, still against Jae's shivering, wrapping one arm around Jaejoong's chest, another around the slender width of the other's waist. Fully engorged, Yunho was both afraid to and desperate to move, buried deep into the heat he knew he would dream of forever.

Jae worked slowly around his lover, his hips moving in soft circles, pulling Yunho along a sensuous, erotic path, the small nub of pleasure buried deep along his passage rubbed with each passing stroke. Cradling the other man, Yunho began to lave at the singer's shoulders, pleasure found in small kisses and finger strokes along Jae's navel, enticing the pout of his lover's navel with the edges of his fingernails.

The rocking became insistent, a slide of Yunho's sex against the ridge of Jaejoong's tight body, the lotion providing a slippery caress over their clenched joining. Yunho heard Jaejoong's rumbling moan, so familiar of a sound now that Yunho wondered how he lived his whole life without hearing it. It completed him, filled him with everything Jaejoong had in his soul, taking the leader on a ride through clouds he'd only wished he could reach, angelic wings spread wide and proud.

The pressure on their bodies didn't take long, already depleted from a long night spent cuddling and loving, the small amount of energy they had poured down into their sexes, unwilling to stave off any further delay from sipping at the pleasure offered. Jaejoong trembled, his sex curling up against the marble, the sac beneath tightening up into the hollow of his body until they rolled and gave in, surrendering every last drop of seed he'd held in.

Yunho followed, drawn by the convulsions cascading around his length, ripples of muscles forcing his nerves to respond with a surge. The leader seized his lover tightly, buried deep within and let go, swallowing at the thickness growing in his throat, emotion stammering his mind until it lay numb beneath the wave of fulfillment Jaejoong cast upon him. A milky flood poured into Jaejoong's depths, unseen by the world but felt between the shared bodies of two young men touching the spot within their souls where they found the other. Yunho's chest gave a shuddering

heave, his voice found in the raspy cry of his release, Jaejoong murmuring in response with a tired satisfaction.

Unwilling to slide free from his lover's body, Yunho tenderly stroked at Jae's back, pulling free as his lover clenched a hissing breath into his lungs. The tenderness spread in deep, a burning flutter along his core. Turning Jaejoong around, Yunho wondered if the singer could see the tears on his face, lost amid the shower spray. Jae leaned his head in, licking at the other's cheeks, tasting the salt he knew was there.

"I love you, Joongie." Yunho cupped Jaejoong's face, staring into the perfection of chaos that tumbled into his heart. "When your demons come... when the monsters find you, I'll be there with you. There will never be anyone like you...no one but you. Remember that."

"I will." Jaejoong nodded, turning his head to kiss Yunho's fingers. "I will always be your love... like you'll be mine. Nothing...not even death ...will part us."

Thirty-Five

Seoul's night sky was brilliant with stars, a sea of twinkling nights hung in a blue-black velvet. Junsu and Changmin leaned against the rooftop wall, trying to find Cassiopeia amid the stretch of constellations, not sure if their beloved token was visible in the winter sky. The futon pad had been transported to the roof, somehow the five young men maneuvering up a narrow flight of stairs to the access door, Yoochun complaining that he was carrying most of the weight when the floppy sofa-mattress bowed in the middle.

Bundled warm against the nip still lingering in the air, Jaejoong rolled over onto his stomach, head bent in close to Yoochun's, their whispering low amid the noises rising from the street below. Yunho pulled at a pillow caught under his elbow, the fabric smelling of cloves and his lover's kiss, Jaejoong's mouth had clenched around several ends of pillows while walking behind the futon, his arms overflowing with cushions and a spare blanket. Most of Jae's body splayed over Yunho's, the singer's lanky legs wrapped around the leader's thighs, his rear cupped into the curve of Yunho's ribcage.

Watching the other members chat, Changmin pointing up to the stars they could see lined up along the horizon, Yunho wondered if Yoochun noticed Junsu lingering glances back. More than like not, the leader thought, watching Yoochun and Jaejoong lay on the futon, laughing softly at some shared private joke. A troubled look passing over the Junsu's face when he spotted Micky lean in and lick Jaejoong's cheek. Their intimacy spoke of a private love, easy going and willing, something most people would assume included shared bodies and hot nights of sweat. Yunho knew better. Jaejoong just loved generously when he did love. It was a love Yunho wondered if he himself would ever recover from.

Yunho understood the jealousy on Junsu's face. He still had pangs of twisting green in his belly when the two friends wrapped around one another on the couch or Yoochun rested his chin on Jae's shoulder, slumping the singer into his body after sliding in behind him on the floor. Their easy, intimate friendship was something Yunho knew he would have to endure, Jaejoong fierce in his loyalties and loves.

Taller buildings around them shielded most of the wind, an infrequent coursing icy bite sneaking in between the sheltered rooftop, just enough

to make Jaejoong shiver and edge closer to Yunho's warmth, despite Yoochun laying nearly on top of him. That small little gesture of ownership and belonging firmed Yunho's love and trust, feeling the singer's affection in every action he did.

Reaching for his lover's back, Yunho slid his fingers along the ridge of Jaejoong's spine, wondering how long before they would be able to creep back downstairs, finding warmth under the thick heavy quilts and whisper of secrets they shared. At the feel of Yunho's flesh on his, Jaejoong looked over his shoulder, a quiet shy smile that often peeked out during private moments, a peeling off of all masks right before they kissed. Yunho's heart raced with a thrill, knowing Jae was finally unfolding the steel petals around his heart, letting him in more and more, without fear or reserve.

The evening had now become a gift, a symbol of more nights to come. In a flash of a coy smile, the singer offered himself up to his lover with soul wide open, a rare present normally only shared when the lights were off and he could hide his tears. Yunho trailed his hand down over the rise of Jae's rear, letting it linger over the cleft before splaying his fingers down the dip of muscle.

Junsu's face twisted once more, a thread of darkness on his bright smile. Yoochun had turned, nuzzled up between Jaejoong and Yunho, his belly tight on the singer's arm. Yunho briefly had an inconsiderate thought regarding the other singer, a menacing half-wish that melted away under the brilliance of Jaejoong's coy, flirtation smile. Yunho was about to hug them both when a shout for Micky popped the younger man's head up, grazing Jaejoong on the temple.

"Aish, your head is hard!" Jae pushed at his friend's shoulder, spreading out the space between them. "It should be soft from your thoughts being so rotten."

Yoochun made a face at the singer, dorky and mocking as Junsu shouted for Yoochun to join them. Yunho smiled to himself, sucking his lips in to avoid laughing aloud. Reaching over, the leader tucked his hands around his lover's waist, pulling him up as Yoochun slid from the futon, Jaejoong letting himself be maneuvered into Yunho's lap.

The singer's kiss was scented, the lingering sweetness concentrated in the savouring lick Yunho ran under the ridge of Jaejoong's teeth. Moaning, Jae leaned into the affection, the chill of the growing night fleeing under his lover's warmth. Wrapping the singer tight to him, Yunho held the angelic summer he found in the Jaejoong's flesh, feeling

the dig of Jae's shoulder blades into the crest of his chest. Yunho could imagine the hidden wings, phantom snow feathers tipped in a stygian black, a dusting of sorrowful crow swept clean by the tears Yunho wiped from Jae's face.

"Kiss my forehead. Chunnie's head is like a thrown rock." Jaejoong pressed his temple against Yunho's mouth, gently rubbing at the spot. Yunho pursed his lips, delivering the smallest of kisses, much to Jae's regret.

"More." Jaejoong demanded, a petulant mockery of a child wanting candy. Yunho heard that tone often enough to know his lover wasn't serious about a tantrum but definitely expected more of what he wanted.

Yunho easily complied, finding Jaejoong's neck, biting harder than he intended to but pleased with the soft kitten sound from the other's throat. Junsu glanced quickly away, satisfied that Yunho would keep the singer busy...far too busy to call out to Yoochun. A sulky Changmin shrugged off his *mélange*, his feelings would have to remain hidden, his own heart too unripe for another to pluck but the longing was there, as was the confusion of what to do when his soul leapt for Junsu's smile. Yoochun ignored all of it, concentrating on the far off skyline, seeking to find the horizon where a carnival spun its Ferris wheel, a string of lights forming a spider web against the crystal clear darkness.

Jae responded openly to Yunho's caresses, hoping to steal yet another warm night before returning to the reality of their lives. This time on the roof brought them closer, each of them knitting their hearts into a scarf to warm their souls. The day had been grueling, their manager a hard task master, benevolent in his praise but cutting in his critique. Yunho pushed the others nearly as hard, railing at Jaejoong's missed steps and rounding on Yoochun when the other man lost his place in a song, mumbling through a chorus, throwing the others off, Changmin spiraling into another verse before he caught himself.

The five worked on their ruffled feathers and small grudges out, a tiny shouting match between Junsu and Jaejoong, a misunderstanding Yunho stepped into, rereading the changes in the song and then realizing the part really belonged to him. Laughter eventually shattered the remaining burrs of their egos, edged young male pride rubbed clean from soft words spoken from apologetic tongues.

The carting of the futon and pillows had been a group effort, a laughing mess of a time lugging the heavy mattress around the final flight of tight stairs, Changmin's shout of surprise as he was pinned against the door,

unable to move or open it inwards, the futon pressed up against his spine. Junsu nearly toppled down the steps, laughing so hard he choked on his own spit, Yoochun pounding on the young man's back, hoping to clear the passageway.

Jaejoong had been no help, mouth full of pillow ends and blankets piled nearly to the top of his head. Yunho caught at his hips more than once, luxuriating in the feel of the singer's warm body under his red down jacket. Yunho's nose tip played with the cross dangling from Jae's ear, the silver winking metal nearly lost under his black hair.

Yunho worked Jae's mouth further, playing out the small mewls and moans from his open, rasping mouth until Jaejoong's pleas for his lover's body drew hoarse mewlings from Yunho's own longing. Sliding his hand from Jaejoong's body, Yunho turned the singer over until he rested on his side facing his lover, running a practiced hand over the man's muscled thigh. Urging the other singer to slide his leg over, Yunho placed a gentle kiss on Jaejoong's mouth, the beauty of his face fully visible to the leader.

"Yunho..." The question hung in the air as Jaejoong turned to face his beloved boyfriend, the fear and pain still clinging to the edges of his awareness. His perfection, the angelic beauty on his face lay hidden to Yunho's eyes and Jaejoong ached to share only that perfection, blinding himself to the reality of his existence if only for just a long, passionate moment. "I...just want you to know that I'm sorry for the pain I will cause you...for what I've caused between you and your parents."

"I want *you* to know something, Kim Jaejoong." Yunho's graceful mouth slid down Jae's neck, stopping when the singer warning Yunho from biting him, already at a loss to explain the large purple bruise under his ear, the skin dimpled with red welts.

Before the television interview yesterday, his stylist nearly poked at it, the end of the rat tail comb a small torture when drawn over the bruised nerves, the skin remembering Yunho's bite with vivid detail. Yunho had laughed at the shocked look Jaejoong shot him under the fringe of his black bangs, a snarling flare of his full mouth, mock irritation at the mark staining his neck. Jaejoong tumbled his lies together, unsure if at the end of a long ramble that he'd fallen against a table or had actually been attacked by an irate octopus.

Kissing the spot instead, Yunho continued. "You don't cause me any pain. You cause me worry and sometimes make me angrier than I even

knew I could be but you also make me happier... you taught me that my happiness is infinite."

"Yunnie-ah, sometimes your words are poison. You make me stumble inside." Jae responded, his fingers catching in the fabric of Yunho's shirt. They huddled there on the futon, shoulder to shoulder, just letting the night sky turn over them. "I sometimes am afraid that I'm going to wake up and find out that this is a dream. I can't imagine someone like you loving me, as flawed as I am...and there you are... loving me."

"I love you in your most...flawed and most pained times." Yunho pressed one hand down onto Jaejoong's hipbone as he guided the tip of tongue to the edge of the singer's exposed mouth. "The beauty of who you are lies not on your flesh but your soul. Can you not see that, my moon...Joongie-ah?"

"You are... so perfect to love." Jae whispered, nearly afraid of the emotions filling his chest. "I wonder at having you inside of me, of loving me as deeply as you do. You've become my sin. I understand what you mean when you call me that."

"You are the one that's sin incarnate. There are men out there who wish they had you to open their souls, crack open their hearts from the cement walls that they've erected around them. You're a sin because I want you all the time. Lust, gluttony, pride... you bring all of those out in me. I can't even breathe without having my lungs scream for your scent. And my food, it holds the taste of your body if I've just kissed you." Yunho laughed, the heat of his breath warming Jae's cold nose tip. "Joongie-ah, I am so far deeply in love with you, it makes me hurt when you're not around."

"Yunnie ...lover..." Bashful, Jaejoong dipped his head down, his nose touching the tiny brown beauty mark above Yunho's lip.

Jae licked at the spot, a show of affection he often was able to do quickly, and daringly in front of others, Yunho dipping his head in to kiss the end of Jae's nose. It was too hard to remain apart, especially in public. They found themselves gravitating towards one another, hands brushing and fingers tangling as they walked off stage. Little habits formed in the privacy of their home became gestures of familiarity in front of all-seeing eyes, a shared bite of food or Yunho's incessant hands finding the inside of Jaejoong's thigh. It was an intimate caress, an secret forged language they both shared, Yunho instinctively finding the curve of his lover's thighs, reassuring and comforting during times when Jaejoong's shyness overcame him.

“I have something for you, Boo.” Yunho tried to peek over Jaejoong’s head, not wanting the others to suddenly take an interest in what he was doing. He spent so much time balancing the others’ needs and Jaejoong’s private wants, often sacrificing the time he would give his lover so the three young men ogling stars would not feel slighted. He reached into the pocket of his jacket, cast off when they’d first laid on the futon, Jae’s warm body against his more than enough of a balm against the cold.

Now was a time not to be shared. Right at that moment under the universe’s all-seeing eyes, Yunho wanted it to be just he and his lover.

The pouch he’d tucked away had lain there for several days, each moment passing pregnant with wondering doubt as to Jaejoong’s reaction. Finally, lying beneath the stars with the one man he would give his heart to, Yunho knew that it was time to cross the final line between them, forging that bond he needed to feel complete. Jaejoong made no demands, wanting nothing from Yunho except his love and support, the unconditional openness of the singer’s affections foreign in its very freedom. Tugging the blue velvet loose, Yunho placed it between them, silently placing Jaejoong’s hands on the knotted cords.

“I want you to open that.” Yunho waited, his stomach suddenly sprouting with razor chrysanthemums.

The flowers bloomed, unfurling sharp edges into the tender honeycomb of Yunho’s belly when Jaejoong spread the pouch open, a curious veil over his pretty face. The cords dangled over his fingers, woven bleeds of midnight over the singer’s wrists. Feeling something inside, Jaejoong shook out the slight weight at the bottom of the pouch, a pair of silver rings chiming against one another, a belling tone, pure and quiet.

They glistened, stars captured in forged metal. Astonished and questioning, the singer picked up the rings, turning over the smaller one onto his palm. Its crisscross design formed an X on two sides, the other a plainer single band, wider in width and breadth. Yunho picked up the smaller of the rings, placing it between his pursed lips and kissing its chilled rim.

“I saw these and thought that they should... I should put this one on you.” Yunho slid the ring down over Jaejoong’s index finger. “These are...these should be wedding rings, Boo. My Jaejoong is one day going to be wearing a wedding band on the right finger and everyone is going to know that you’re mine.”

“For now,” Yunho lifted Jaejoong’s hand to his mouth, kissing the singer’s palm with a light brushing lick. “I want you to wear my kiss on your fingers. Every time someone sees you or touches you, there will always be my kiss on you to remind you...and me... that when we’re alone, I will be spreading that kiss all over your body.”

Trembling, Jaejoong’s fingers touched the heavier of the two rings, pinching it to hold it up. “And this one?”

“This ring...” Yunho took it from his lover, holding it in front of Jae’s full pout. Jaejoong’s tongue found it first, a delicate dab of moisture...the gesture one Yunho knew so well. It was always a prelude to sweetness, a tasting lap on Yunho’s mouth before Jaejoong stole a kiss when he thought no one was looking. The ring disappeared under the laving, Jae pulling back and taking the ring back, sliding it onto Yunho’s offered index finger. “This ring is the moon which I see every time I touch your skin or find the lights in your eyes when we’re on stage. When I clench my hands, I am going to be holding you in my palm...holding your kiss to my skin. And when I place my hand against my chest, I will be taking your heart into mine.”

“You are mine, Kim Jung Jaejoong.” Yunho touched the treasure he’d found in the darkness of an alleyway, the spill of bone and flesh holding the most precious soul he would ever encounter. “I don’t want you to go a day without knowing that...without feeling that. And one day, I promise you that you will wear gold... in the sunshine... and my hand will have its partner.”

“I’m not going to love anyone but you, Yunho.” Jaejoong whispered, touching his ringed hand to his lover’s face. It shimmered against the other’s cheekbone, a reminder of the kisses they shared. “Always yours.”

“I love you as well. So much so.” Yunho nodded, his words caught with the tears welling in the edges of his eyes. “And you will always be mine, Joongie-ah...as I will always be yours.”