

Starlight and Blood

London 1845

The city, fog-drenched and damp, loomed up from the Thames' riverbanks. Soot darkened the skies, casting a pall over the city, even in the deepest of midday. From Tanners Row, a stench permeated the air, the foul tallow smoking as indentured servants skimmed off chunks of fat from boiling vats. Church bells tolled the hours, the solemn ringing past tea time.

An Anglican acolyte stood in the entrance of St. Bart's parish, silently watching the students of the hospital's new medical college slink by. Pale, even by English standards, his Occidental features set him apart from the rosy cheeked young men stomping past him, splashing up great waves of muddy water with their thick soled Wellingtons.

Dew formed a sparkling web on the ends of his black hair, its thick waves falling down around his delicate features. Despite the moisture in the air, his full mouth was dry, chapped from the bite of London's cold wind. Dressed in traditional layman's black, he seemed an exotic wraith against the solid stone of the parish walls, crow-sharp eyes noting everything around him.

"They are loud, aren't they, Mr. Shim?"

Changmin jumped at the sound of the deacon's melodious voice at his shoulder, startled by the man's sudden appearance. His heart skipped, stuttering and faulting before settling back into its rhythm, the soft shush shush of its workings undermined by the offbeat of a murmur in his chest. Catching his breath, Min leaned forward, placing his palm on the parish's arched entrance. The stone dug into his palm, catching on his fine skin. The pain was welcome, a reminder that he could still feel... that he was still alive.

Life for him would be fleeting, a speck of skin and air that would fade away sooner than most. Each small pinprick or gouge on his flesh was a reminder that he continued on.

"I'm sorry, lad," Deacon Davis murmured, awkwardly patting at Min's back. "I should have announced myself. I didn't mean to give you a start."

"It's alright, sir," Min could feel the colour returning to his face, the blood pumping back under his skin. His breaths grew longer as his lungs regained function. Despite the irregular beat of his heart, his body soldiered on, intent on carrying to another day.

He didn't remember the long voyage that carried him and his mother to England's shores nor did he have any memory of the illness that took her life and nearly consumed him as well. The elder priests at St. Bartholomew The Great prayed over him as the sickness ravaged his young body, the rattle in his chest growing wetter with each passing day until his body twisted and writhed as he struggled to breathe. The hospital staff had been little help, their time and efforts spent on aiding the locals struck down with the cough, the long marble halls filled with hastily constructed cots and bedding lain straight on the floor as the sick came in droves.

The merchant who transported the Shim family from the East fell victim to the ailment within hours of landing and passed before Changmin's mother. Afraid for others' lives, the ports master ordered the merchant's ship to be pulled to the middle of the harbour and set aflame, its

dead placed into its hold and its cargo given up. The ship smoldered, billowing smoke into the ash-filled air until its bare-ribbed corpse sank beneath the waters, leaving nothing behind of the woman who brought Min to London's chill.

Min struggled to remember the pretty woman who the priests said fought to get her son into care, her broken English barely understandable between her hacking coughs. He had nothing of her, not even a memory or the whisper of her voice in the middle of his dreams. She died within hours of entering the church, and he was left alone in the world, owning nothing more than the name she gave the priests, Min lay feverish for weeks, coughing up black vile liquids as members from the congregation sat with the foreign toddler, all half wondering if it wouldn't be a blessing for God to take the frail youngster to be with his mother.

The doctor who'd finally come to see him gave Min only a few days to live, at best a week. Fitful, he cried when the deacon anointed his forehead with oil and performed the rites to save Min's soul. The touch of the man's warm fingers soothed the toddler and he fell into a deeper sleep, his breathing evening out. His coughing eased and the viscous fluids from his lungs lessened, turning clear then subsiding all together. Ravaged by the illness, his heart beat in flutters, and over the next few months, the parish priests carefully tended the sickly child, knowing that he would never truly cross over the threshold to manhood.

"You should get out of the cold, Mr. Shim," The deacon said, feeling the brisk air on his face. Winter lay on the wind, promising to freeze the ground solid. "We don't want to risk you catching your death on the cold."

"Yes, sir," Min replied, bowing his head respectfully before turning back into the church proper. He'd grown used to the priests coddling him, watching his every breath as if it would be his last. It was tiring, but he'd grown used to it.

The inner sanctum of the annex was warm, lit by rows of white beeswax candles. It smelled of apples and cinnamon, the fragrance coming from the kitchens as a tart of stored fruit baked, made by one of the housekeepers charged with the priests' caretaking. The food was plain, sometimes stew for days on end, but the rare treat was worth everything. When he was younger, the cook would sneak him an extra piece of dessert.

Now they snuck him two.

Dinner was a few hours off by the sound of the bells calling out the time in the dank London air. Restless, he took off the long black coat he'd worn to ward off the outside cold, and settled down into the soft comfort of his bed. Sleep claimed him, as it usually did, his body worn from the walk. Each day became a greater struggle as his heart fought to keep its pace. As Min drifted off into the welcoming darkness, he wondered if this was the time when he didn't wake.

"Do you miss home so much that you're now hunting down little pieces of it?" Dong-Wook asked, exhaling a plume from his pursed lips. The cheroot's tip burned cherry red as he drew its smoke into his lungs, letting a trail seep out of his flared nostrils, draconian will o' wisps scalloping around his handsome face. A bit of ash fell from the cigarillo, floating on the cold air until it lay to rest on Yunho's topcoat.

The men stood on the walkway overlooking the hospital, seemingly unaffected by the cold in the London air. They were a sharp contrast to the rabble of students bustling in and out of the

medical facility's school and even farther away from the droves of poor huddled around the heating vents near the hospital's entrance, hoping for a bit of food and care before trudging back through London's filthy streets. The casual passersby slid a stealthy glance over the tall forms, their trim bodies fitted with the latest fashion but their foreign beauty gave them an exotic air among the English frippery, two lean Siamese cats lounging with open disregard among prides of scrawny moggies.

Exotic was fine behind closed doors but in the watery glare of London's fading sunlight, it became monstrously strange and a dangerous flirtation for the person who for a second, considered speaking to the men.

"Chil, did you hate home so much that you have to run from it?" Yunho rolled his eyes, teasing the other man. His mouth formed a tight smile but his lips moved up just long enough for his blood-brother to see the tip of his fangs. "Or since we are in England, do you prefer Se7en now? I was at the club and someone said you were affecting that as your name."

The complicated tendrils of their forged brotherhood tested both men, strong willed personalities that butted heads over nearly everything. Their mistress often called them by the order that she took them into the darkness, losing their names in her memory. Her beauty first entranced Dong-Wook, a dancer in the court. Within a few days of filling him with her blood, she spotted a young soldier making the rounds of a township and plucked Yunho from his life and into hers.

Like all fancies, she grew tired of them after several decades, her fondness for the exotic moving to the Southern Continent where she roamed now, delightfully rummaging through the labyrinth cities of Morocco. Left to their own devices, the men drifted through Europe, never more than a few miles from one another. Past resentments of sharing the same woman lingered in both of their minds but they remained nearby, pulled together by their shared heritage and bound blood.

"I don't mind." The older vampire shrugged nonchalantly, knowing the casual gesture would irritate the more exacting man. "It is a lucky number here. Several of my... companions call me that. It's easier on my ears than Dong-Wook. They slaughter my name with every twist of their tongue. But ah, we weren't talking about me. We were talking about you and the fresh-faced boy you called me to stare at."

Se7en carefully rested his elbows on the walkway's stone railing, avoiding the larger of the bird offal on the ledge. With their change came advantages, a keener eyesight and sharper senses one of the many. The now sensitive nerves of their bodies could adapt to many things, piercing through shadows and absorbing ambient light. They were warned to be cautious as their adaptations also bore a price; the sensitive skin was now unable to bear the brunt of full sunlight. London's dim afternoons made walking during the day possible but the danger still existed, especially when one of their own was caught unaware. They'd both seen the third member of their mistress' cadre smoke under the wink of an afternoon sun, his hand carelessly falling through a carriage window and into the noon's fire.

The smell of him cooking haunted them both as did his screams of pain over the next few weeks when the servants laboured to scrape away the dead tissues every hour to force his healing.

"How long have you been hunting him?" Se7en asked his brother, flicking his cheroot with his fingers. He watched the ash fall to the pass below, a grey-white mote on the trodden wet grass.

"I'm not...hunting him," Yunho said, shaking his head. He leaned his weight on the flats of his palm, staring through the shadows and into the youth's bedroom. "I want him, Dong-Wook. I want my blood in his veins. I want him with me."

Se7en froze, eerily still as what Yunho said sunk in. It was... unimaginable. They stood in a foreign land, nearly a century after they'd left their homeland, and what Yunho was proposing seemed... incredulous. If he brought the young man to a life of endless nights, they would have to leave, fleeing their comfortable life in London for another city where it would take them at least a year to reestablish themselves. It would mean more lies, half-truths told to too many faces until everything blurred into one long thread of fiction.

And there would be another name...another face... that they would have to memorize these lies for.

"You're mad," Se7en whispered. "Do you know what that means? Don't you remember how it was for us? How confusing and unsettling?"

"It will be different," Yunho insisted. "I know..."

"You know?" The other man retorted. "It sounds like you've planned this out already. As if you have stories you already are going to have at the tip of your tongue when people ask after a young priest suddenly moving in with you?"

Turning, Se7en flung his cheroot over the railing and pressed in against Yunho's shoulder, hemming the man in against the railing. The other man's chin came up, defiant against his blood-brother's arguments. Eyes narrowed, he squared himself off, readying himself for Se7en's attack, his fists balling up at his sides.

"Is he there to save your immortal soul, Eight?" Pushing in, Se7en nudged Yunho off balance, the leather of his boots squeaking as he took another step. "Is that what you're going to tell your housekeeper? That you've found yourself needing the comfort of the clergy? Are you going to make him wear his collar when you take him? Is that the perversion that calls to you? The seduction of one of God's men?"

"He's not a priest," Yunho said, pushing at Se7en's shoulder, shoving the man away. The former dancer turned on his heel, baring his canines with a hiss. Yunho responded with a display of his own, a carefully peeled back lip, refusing to back down from the other man's aggression.

They stepped away from each other, simmering in the stew of their irritation. Oblivious to the drama escalating a few hundred yards from his tiny parish room, Changmin closed his eyes, staving off the fatigue leeching his strength. Yunho gripped at the railing, digging his fingers into its carved stone and stared at the long-limbed young man stretched out onto the thin bed.

"How long have you been watching him?" Se7en asked, his voice nearly taken by the rush of wind sweeping through the streets. "How long have you been planning this, brother?"

"I noticed him when he was... sixteen or so." Yunho's eyes grew distant, remembering the evening he'd spotted the youth walking through the crowd. The Asian kept his head down, either bashful of his lanky height or, more probable, conscious of his foreignness among the English. He'd not seen Yunho falling into step a few feet away nor did he notice the vampire following him nearly to the church's doorstep.

Intrigued by the mystery of an Asian dressed in the black-crow drapery of an acolyte, Yunho shadowed the young man, learning bits and pieces of his routine. He'd been nearby when a carriage horse reared back, nearly striking the youth in the head. Yunho was startled to see a blue tinge form around the young man's mouth, his skin drawing in tight as he struggled

to catch his breath. With clutched fingers at his chest, he'd fallen, crying out with little gasping mewls and Yunho fought the stream of people to reach the young man's side.

The youth's eyes were already rolled back in his head when Yunho stepped onto the walk, his chest rattling with a final breath. Alarmed, he nearly grabbed the young man but a pair of liver-spotted hands were there first. A sour-faced deacon grappled the youth's shoulders, shaking him violently once... then again. About to protest the rough treatment, the blue-lipped young man gasped, and inhaled sharply, a vicious wet cough racking his body.

"You'll not die on me, you filthy ding," The priest spat, straightening up to stand over the young man's weakened body. "Now get to your feet and head back to the parish. I'll tend to the Brownings myself."

"So he's sick, then?" Se7en asked, nodding when Yunho grunted. "Have you talked to him about this? About becoming one of us?"

"No," Yunho admitted, staring at his fingernails. "I've never spoken to him. It never seemed to be... the right time."

"You've lurked after him for what? Three or four years and you've never spoken to him?" Snorting at the ridiculousness of Yunho's predicament, Se7en wiped at his face. "Think about what you want to do, brother. You're talking about binding someone to us... to our mistress... to our blood for however long he can stand it. Is this starling so enchanting that you're willing to risk our lives on him? Because that's what you'll be doing, Yunho. You risk us by approaching him and making him one of us. Everything we are depends on secrets. Can you risk this?"

"I want to. There's something in him that draws me in." He watched a flock of pigeons round the hospital's towers, heading back to roost. "I feel something there. And not just because he's... Korean. I can't explain it."

"You'd do better taking in one of the gypsy boys that pick pockets on the square. At least they'd bring in money," Se7en said under his breath. He frowned as Yunho stepped away from the rail, the other man adjusting his coat. "Where are you going?"

"I've a game at the club. I promised one of the members that I'd play cards with him," Yunho said, shrugging off Se7en's annoyance. "I'll talk to you about him later. Maybe if you have time to think about how I feel, you'll understand."

Se7en watched his mistress' get fade into the fog, losing Yunho in the swirling mists. Clipping off the tip of another cigarillo, Se7en struck a match and lit its end, drawing on the fragrant smoke. He took a one last look at the young man who captivated his blood-brother before stepping into the dank vapors himself.

"I'll have to break you of your obsession, dearest brother," Se7en said to himself, an idea forming in his mind. "Let's see how easy it is to seduce your young bird."

It began as a simple plan. He would follow Yunho's new pet, searching for weaknesses in the young man's character. By exposing the frailty of Yunho's chosen, Se7en would prove to his blood-brother that the youth in question was unworthy of an eternal gift... and more importantly, the men would be safe from betrayal.

A simple plan, Se7en told himself. A masterful plan.

Se7en spent a week stalking the young man's movements and learning his habits. Bookstores and libraries made up most of the youth's time, his afternoons mostly taken up by

visits to members of the parish's congregation. An occasional visit to a museum broke the monotony and after a few days, Se7en was about to burst from boredom. Tired of skulking about in the shadows, he moved in, rounding the stacks and came face to face with his prey.

And fell into the young man's smoky amber eyes.

He'd not stammered since he'd first seen his mistress, her lush red hair a fiery fall over her pale shoulders. The young man brought the same heart-pounding reaction, the stilled blood in his veins surging through his limbs. Gulping, Se7en nearly choked on his own breath, his carefully phrased seduction collapsing into ash on his tongue.

Recovering quickly, he swallowed, refocusing on his mission. The boy was dressed in his typical black shroud, his lean body cloaked under the dark fabric. His overcoat was thin and worn in spots, mended at the hem in too many places for Se7en to count. The sleeves were too short for the young man's long arms, a good portion of skin showing above his wrist bones. He was luckier with the pants for length but not for fit. The trousers hung slack on his thighs, too loose to be fashionable. It was an endearing look, Se7en thought, much like a young child suddenly finding himself too grown to wear his own clothes and not large enough to carry his father's.

A carefully placed nudge brought a clutch of portfolios tumbling from the table, its erotic leaflets scattering about the polished wood floor. The young man immediately bent over, murmuring words of apology for knocking over Se7en's reading materials. The vampire smiled when a red flush worked from the young man's cheeks and up to the tips of his ears poking out from his mop of black hair. He gulped several times, clutching at the vellum sheets as if unsure if he should hand them to Se7en or fling them back to the floor.

"Oh." If the blush was sweet, his voice was hot sugar poured on snow. The heat in his face was palatable, searing Se7en's fingers when the vampire brushed at the flush on the young man's cheeks. "You... um, I must have hit the edges...when..."

He'd chosen that particular folio on purpose, erotic images of men intertwined in various states of undress and sex. The sketches were skillful, careful attention paid to the men's faces and their throes of passion. Nothing was left to the imagination, each rendering captured at the point of penetration when both men were at their most aroused.

"It's a curious thing, isn't it?" He didn't take the vellum from the youth's hands. Instead, Se7en stroked at the back of his trembling hands, mimicking the long strokes a man gave his lover's sex. "We're so intrigued with the act of sex but when faced with the most natural and beautiful thing that God gave us, we stumble and hide. Don't you agree?"

"I..." He never got farther than that, swallowing hard when Se7en's thumb brushed over his lower lip.

The young man's mouth was kissable, Se7en decided, and his long neck begged to be bitten, regardless if the biter drew blood to suckle on. He nearly died inside when the acolyte's tongue dabbed out nervously, leaving a spot of moisture on the pad of his thumb. The innocence of the response nearly burned him with its purity and his body responded to the guileless widening of the young man's brown eyes.

"What's your name, pet?" Se7en caressed the word on his tongue, a modern day affection weighted down with delicious possibilities.

"Changmin Shim." His Adam's apple bobbed as he spoke, his words sliding around the breadth of Se7en's thumb. He shuffled back half a step, enough of a distance to separate himself from Se7en's touch but not far enough to be impolite. "Max is the Christian name they gave me

but I don't use it often."

"Changmin." Giving the young man a slight bow, Se7en held his hand out in introduction. "I am Dong-Wook Choi but many of my English friends call me Se7en."

Cocking his head in confusion, Min asked, "Seven?"

"An affectation," He replied with a slight smile on his full lips. "A...nickname of sorts from my mother. You might say I'm her seventh son."

"That's supposed to be lucky." He nodded.

"So they tell me," Se7en agreed. He rubbed at the memory of the youth's lips on his thumb, spreading the scent of him into his skin. A few steps brought Se7en up against Min's slender body, capturing the young man against the stacks. Placing his feet on either side of Min's, hemming him in. "What matter of priest tarries in this section of the bibliothèque? Are you taking notes for a hellfire and brimstone sermon that you're giving? Are you doing research on what to warn your flock off?"

Shim Changmin... fit. The young man's thighs curved where Se7en's dipped, the triangular divot of muscle where the older man's torso joined his limbs was filled with Min's succulent hips and legs. A slither of flesh twitched against Se7en's trouser, elongating to nudge at the fabric. The feel of Min's arousal, however conflicted, warmed between them, trapped against Se7en's leg.

Startled, the young man raised his hands as if to ward Se7en off, placing them on the vampire's firm torso. His palms slid over the older man's silk jacket, resting on the muscled curve of his chest and pressing the heels of his hands against Se7en's body. Shifting his feet, Se7en brought himself closer, nesting the youth tight against him. The wood shelves dug into Min's back and he instinctively arched his back, trying to ease the pressure.

"I'm... um... not a priest," Changmin whispered. The older man stood nearly eye to eye with him, a rare event in Min's life. The man was broader across the shoulders and stronger, the picture of health compared to Changmin's thinner frame.

"Ah, so I see now. I don't know how I could have missed it." Se7en plucked at the youth's black collar, edging his fingers around the space where a white tab would poke through. "So then, tell me something else...why does a pretty young man wear old priest clothes and lingers in the very naughty section of the folios?"

"I've always worn..." Cocking his head back, Min stared into Se7en's dark eyes. "I need to go. I have to help the deacon prepare for evening services."

The vampire moved in, his lips nearly brushing against Min's. A tempest of heat flared between them, the proximity of their flesh creating a sear along Min's protruding lower lip. A fang slid free of Se7en's smile, glistening in the shadows thrown over their faces. Its tip lightly dimpled Changmin's lip then raked across the pearly pink skin. Pulling away, Se7en ran his tongue over the canine, suckling Min's taste from the enamel.

"Of course, little church mouse," He said, taking his time sliding away from Min's legs. "I don't know what came over me. It's probably because I've not seen a fellow countryman for such a long time... excepting for my brother."

Changmin was forced to duck around Se7en's arm to get past and he brushed against the man's stomach, unconsciously allowing his fingers to linger there for a moment. A wave of panic rushed up from his chest, its tightening warning him of an impending attack. Forcing himself to calm down, Changmin slowed his walk, trying to catch his breath before his heart beat raced out of control.

“If I find myself needing to speak with God, pet,” Se7en called out after him before Min could step out of earshot. “Where would I find Him?”

“God is everywhere, sir,” Min replied, a defiant tilt to his chin.

The vampire’s closed-mouth grin was infectious and Changmin found himself smiling in return. “Where would I find you, if I needed to talk to you instead?”

“St. Barts,” He blurted before he could catch himself.

Min reddened, still feeling the burn of the man’s legs against his hips and thighs. The too-intimate touch was a daring pleasure, nothing he’d experienced before came close to the rush from Se7en’s proximity. Too late, he wondered if he’d survive the man’s bare flesh touching his own. Hell’s fires couldn’t burn as hot as the blush on his face when Min stumbled out into the street, breaking into a fast walk to reach St. Barts before the bells began to toll for service.

Chapter Two

Changmin searched the congregation that night for Se7en's face. He tried to convince himself that it wasn't disappointment he felt when he didn't see the man sitting among the regulars. For the next few days, he found himself scanning the crowd, once even losing track of the service and falling out of step when the deacon began his final prayers.

On the fourth day following his encounter with the older man, Changmin swept the last of the ashes from the living area's fireplace and headed outside to dump the refuse into the ashbin. The smell of sweet cherry smoke wafted from the lawn on the side of the annex and a tall, firm shadow detached from the tall hedges trimming the outer circle, heading towards Min.

The faint moonlight coming through the clouds shone on Se7en's face, throwing his cheekbones into stark sweeps under his dark eyes. He was cast in blues and ebonies, the colour of his skin and clothes leeching from the silver swaths falling through the night sky.

"Hello, church mouse."

Min's sex reacted, thickening instantly on hearing Se7en's voice. Swallowing hard, he stumbled over his words, trying to find something sentient to say amid the tangle of thoughts that bloomed in his mind. The ash bin clattered to the cobblestones, the noise bouncing against the sides of the nearby buildings.

The other man was by his side before Min could speak, a rush of air blowing the young man's hair back from his face. Capable, long hands gripped Min's fingers, turning them over to check for injuries. A spill of warm embers smoked on the damp walkway, burning a bright red as the wind picked up, blowing them to life.

"Are you alright?" You didn't burn yourself did you?" Se7en asked, running his fingertips over the young man's palms, checking for rising blisters. "I didn't mean to startle you. *vision.*"

"I'm fine." He reluctantly drew his hand back from the older man's, rubbing at the spots Se7en touched.

"Let me help you clean this up," Se7en said, taking the ash whisk from the bin. He started to sweep up the pluming embers, carefully angling the walking bin to capture the sparks before they flew.

"You shouldn't," Min protested. "You're... too fine to do this. Your clothes..."

"Are just fabric," Se7en laughed, working the bin around again. "I'm not so noble that I forget what it means to work, pet. Here. All done."

Min took the walking bin and dumped it, closing the trap when he was done. He gave the sweeper tools a quick wash in the back trough, shaking loose most of the water with a twist of his wrists. Standing there, he was unsure of what to do next. His instincts told him to run but something inside of him begged him to remain. It was...decidedly nice to see someone's face that resembled his for once. Too often he'd stared in the mirror, wishing his eyes were rounder or didn't crinkle unevenly when he smiled. There had been times when he was growing up when other children would point to illustrations in books and shout that he was devil spawn because of the slant of his eyes and the tone of his skin.

"So, what else does a serious but naughty young man do in on an early evening?" Se7en leaned against the wall of the annex, studying Min's expressive face. "Cards? Gambling?"

"I'm not naughty," Changmin said, his temper rising. Small whispers floated in his mind,

traitorous mewlings that suggested with this man, he certainly could explore every aspect of sin. "Or at least, I try to. Besides, it's a childish word. There are others that are more suitable."

"Suitable?" He mused, contemplating other choices. "Like what? What would you prefer?"

"I would choose... wicked or wayward. Maybe mischievous, if what I'd done wasn't too..." Min unthinkingly licked at his lips, wetting their pout with his tongue. "Harmful. I wouldn't want to harm someone else. That would be wrong."

"So there's a difference between sin and harm then?" Se7en traced the path of Min's tongue with the tip of finger, rolling over the moist trail. "Maybe you can teach me that difference, church mouse?"

"You're older than I am," He replied. "If you don't know the difference by now, how do you expect me to teach you? Maybe the deacon can help you?"

For a moment, Se7en thought the boy was serious but the twinkle in his honeyed brown eyes hid a sharp intellect, a teasing that the vampire didn't think Yunho's prey was capable of. He'd seen the flash of temper and the rigid control of a strong-willed man fighting it down; two signs that Shim Changmin was more than pretty underneath his crow-wing rags.

He would have to fall back and re-think, Se7en decided. More so because his tongue itched to follow where his finger had just been. And even more so, his teeth ached to bite into the fulsome pout until the young man moaned and clutched at him. The small of his back needed to feel the wrap of the youth's long legs, his fingernails digging into Se7en's bare back until they both bled into one another.

No, definitely time to step back and think things over, he thought.

It would be better to step forward and take what you want, whispered the wicked, naughty demon in his soul. Yunho can always find another playmate. This one...this little church mouse... is something more. He is made of untapped sin that you want to plunge into. Take him. Apologize to your brother later when this one is lying in your bed, undone and sated.

"No, pet. If anyone is going to teach me what true sin is, it will be you." Se7en said finally, stealing a kiss from Min's startled mouth. Their tongues met, a little dab of sex exploding in their throats. He savoured the young man, tasting the untouched world of sensuality that lay under the golden skin that pled to be brought to a blush. A sliver of apple and cinnamon mingled with a touch of sin, the offering of a snake to God's chosen, begging to fall from grace so pleasure could be born.

He pulled away before he surrendered to his basest instincts, leaving Changmin gasping for air. A final brush of his thumb over Min's mouth and then Se7en turned, disappearing in London's rising darkness.

Changmin had no one to talk to, none that shared his secrets and confidences. The room he'd slept in for years was barren of anything connected to a home, its walls naked of pictures depicting family or a far off land he'd never remember. Stacks of books kept him company, worlds trapped on the page and ink. He flew off to distant places in the flicker of the evening light, immersing himself in foreign tastes that he could only imagine.

Books gave him a window out of the grey dismal world, shining down colours where none existed. Most of the priests frowned upon the secular trappings of his reading but the deacon staved them off, reminding the men that Changmin was a scholar among them. The Deacon

often said; How would the boy know of what is out there in the world if not through the eyes of others? His frail heart won't allow any travel. Better he spend what time he has walking the lands through the pages. We can allow him that much.

After the final session of Sunday prayers, Changmin returned to his room, fatigue drawing the grey out to the surface of his skin. The carrying of duties wore him down, his breath coming in short pants as he struggled to light the candles that cast a glow down on the altar. He'd nearly passed out before the service ended, the world spinning with a checkered flash of lights and shadows. The priest doing the service shot him a stern look, as if daring him to die before the final blessing and Min straightened himself up, forcing his body to hold on for a few minutes longer.

It had been relief when the deacon excused him from clearing the church and he fled back to his room, holding onto the walls to steady himself until he could lie down. The streetlights were lit, illuminating his room, fractured by the leading of the oddly paned window. A beam of light struck his bed, catching on the gold clasp of a large book.

The leather binding was a fine goatskin, tanned to a rich mahogany and bound expertly with thick thread. A thick runner ribbon lapped out from under the cover, its brocade weave a merry mingle of greens and golds. It was a book that a rich man would own, too fine for the likes of a broken bodied foreigner who scraped for each penny novel he could purchase.

His fingers trembled as he opened the book, daring himself to see what was inside. The roof of his mouth was filled with his dry tongue, a steep nervousness shaking his bones. Touching the gold filigree end caps on the cover's corners, he carefully opened the tome, wondering how such a treasure found its way into his room.

A folded foolscap whispered out, drawn by the rush of air from the cover opening. The paper rested on his worn quilt, a bright handmade cream flecked with threads of silver. Picking up the note, Changmin unfolded it, feeling the richness of the paper crinkle in his fingers as he read the strong handwriting inked over the page.

"Mink." Changmin frowned, unsure if he liked the word or if the letter was even for him. Continuing, his frown lightened, the grip on the letter lessening as his worry eased.

"I saw this and thought of you. It was a delight to find because tales from our homeland are rarely documented, much less in English. I wish it were in French so I could read it to you. That language is so pretty to hear in the cup of one's ear. More importantly, I wish I can one day hear you read it to me in Korean. I shall enjoy teaching you the correct pronunciation of your name. There are certain twists of the tongue that you need to learn. So, you shall teach me what sin is and I shall teach you how to sin. Your servant in wickedness, Se7en"

His weariness was forgotten, buried deep under the need to see the land his mother came from. Carefully picking up the treasure that had been left for him, Changmin nested into the pile of pillows he curled to sleep in and opened the cover, losing himself into a tale of a fox sister and her appetite for liver.

On a walkway across the lawns, a vampire stood, contemplating the fall of light over a young man's face. He lit a cheroot, exhaling a plume of smoke into the air before walking away, telling himself it was too soon to place himself where a book now rested.

"I wanted to thank you for the book," Changmin said first, sitting nervously down in the

wing chair. The sweets shop was no place for a church mouse like himself, the nickname sticking in his head. "But it's too rich. I can't accept it."

He'd received a note from Se7en asking to meet at the chocolatier's, a luscious smelling drawing room that Changmin passed often enough when making rounds for the parish. There were times when he wanted to peek through the door, its heavily glassed pane marbled with gold leaf and boasting the names of the men who worked the confections inside. The *ton* frequented such places, lofty exclusive shops where he would bring stares not just for his face but his demeanor and clothing.

Se7en looked as if he'd been born to fit such luxurious surroundings, his long legged body draped elegantly in the leather chair, its brass upholstery tacks glinting into a beaming aurora around his head. Changmin blanched at the sight of Se7en's lean thighs encased in fitted trousers, the dark fabric run through with thin white threads that elongated his height. The dark red of his jacket shone like blood on gold against the tanned leather chair, his white shirt and black ties lush on his tanned skin. The leather of his boots glistened with polish and Min was keenly aware of the blunt dullness of his own serviceable shoes.

But Se7en greeted him as if they were old friends, standing to clasp him around the shoulders and pulling him into a tight hug. They lingered a moment too long for society's comfort but no one murmured sharp whispers although he did see several women sigh, pressing their hands to their chests when Se7en brushed a light kiss over his cheek before sitting down.

"Nonsense," Se7en replied, nodding as a servant brought them a steaming pot. He waited until the man finished serving them, pouring out the thick, bittersweet drinking chocolate. Lightly dusting each drink's surface with confectioner's sugar, the man withdrew, leaving the men to their exotic afternoon repast. "I got the book for you. It's yours. I even wrote your name on the bookplate."

"Aish," Min hissed, a rough sound that delighted Se7en. "I can't believe you wrote in a book! That's just..."

"Sacrilege?" He supplied the word, handing Min a steaming porcelain tea cup. The servant brought out sturdier cups rather than the delicate florals used for the women but the young man's long fingers easily wrapped around the bowl. "It's the bookplate. That's what it's there for. Drink your chocolate."

"I shouldn't have agreed to meet you here," Changmin said, nearly setting the cup down. "I can't afford this, Se7en. Will they take it back?"

"I have more than enough money to buy all of England a cup to sip. Don't let's worry about the cost," Se7en said, stopping Min before he poured the chocolate back into the pot. "Drink. Relax. And tell me how you like it."

The first sip was an aberrant peek into Heaven, angel wings carrying the voice of God in a rain too delicious to describe. The grains were slick on his tongue, a melting cloud of darkness heavy with cream, sugar and cinnamon. It was something unexpected and erotic, a molasses flavoured with unfulfilled sex and wanted kisses.

It tasted like Se7en, Min thought. This is what this man tastes like.

"It's good," He murmured softly, his hands shaking as he took another sip, careful of the heat of the liquid on his tongue. It would burn him if he would let it... much like the man who sat in the chair opposite of him.

Let him burn you, His mind echoed his heart's wish. You won't live long enough for any other

fire to touch you. Stand in this flame now. It was ignited for you. Only for you.

That thought was chased away by Se7en's laughter at the satisfied smile on Min's face and he leaned forward, pressing a tray of cakes at Changmin, urging the young man to taste one of everything, two if he liked it. They spent the afternoon talking about the legends of that far off land, and Min tried his tongue around the foreign words Se7en began to teach him.

The first word he learned was mother, something he could whisper in his prayers when he thought of her soul reaching Heaven's gates and the angels welcoming her in.

The second word Se7en taught him was kiss, which he demonstrated with a skillful slant of his lips and tongue on Min's mouth.

It was the word Min remembered best and the one he whispered as he fell asleep that night.

Chapter Three

The first time they kissed it was under the moonlight of the Queen's rose gardens, standing amid the winter damasks. In the wind was the faint refrains of an orchestra, the strings playing a waltz that Changmin didn't know. His musical exposure lay mostly in hymns with the occasional bawdy tune he heard on the docks while taking soup to the poor. To his ears, the refrain sounded as if it sang to his soul, urging him to open his mouth and let Se7en in.

He did and the stars fell around him, the clouds no longer able to hold back their light.

When Se7en bit into Changmin's skin, he gulped at the sunlight poured from the darkness of a man's body. Noon and sunrises burst onto his tongue, his throat filling with the essence of a man he wanted deep inside of his soul. There were dreams and worked silver in Changmin's kiss, delicate but strong embellishments that made Se7en realize his world lacked the prism of Min's laugh... of his smile and mostly of his musings.

"Se7en," Changmin gasped, his heart pounding erratically. He knew what the creature was doing... what the man was doing to him. The stories he'd read spoke of darkly sinful men who would drag their victims off, bringing death with each bite of their long teeth. He could have pulled away. Se7en's hold on him was loose and comfortable.

Instead he held the man closer, wanting...needing to give Se7en the only thing he could give him.

"Just a little bit, pet," Se7en whispered, biting down on his thumb to open up a cut along the pad. Sliding past Min's white teeth, he placed himself on the other man's tongue, letting his night-tainted blood spread to fill Min's mouth.

Changmin's thirst and need overwhelmed him and he closed his lips over the man's offering, drawing Se7en in until he could feel the ridge of a thumbnail on the back of his throat. It scraped along his roof, hitting each ridge and leaving a small slice along the soft of his palate. There, in Min's mouth, they mingled for the first time... a delicious taste of moonlight and candied violets, the treat lingering on Se7en's fingers from their afternoon tea. Sugar crystals fought with the sweetness of his own blood, blending into the dark richness of Se7en's taste.

He swallowed and his world opened, the shadows deepening, casting the colours into a bright contrast. Se7en's flesh filled him, curved over his tongue until the breadth of it wasn't enough and Changmin's core ached to feel the touch of his maker in the depths of his heat.

It was over too soon when Se7en pulled back, leaving Min panting for more. His chest pounded with the strength of his heart beats, thrusting blood into each inch of his arteries. Min felt alive for the first time in his memory, each pulse of his blood filling his body. The feeling subsided, leaving him with a throb along his spine. Changmin trembled in Se7en's arms, cursing his body and its illnesses.

"Damn." Min curled his fist, smacking with a futile strength at Se7en's chest. "Damn. Damn."

"Don't worry, pet," Se7en licked away the tears forming at the edges of his chosen get. "It'll be twice more and you won't ever have to feel like that ever again."

“You fucking son of a bitch,” Yunho screamed, his voice cracking as he spat into Se7en’s face. A bruise purpled the other man’s chin, a thin trail of blood leaking from a cut on his lip. “You fucking knew he was mine! You knew! And you did this! For what? To teach me a lesson? To hurt me? Of everything that you’ve ever done to me, brother, this by far the worst.”

Yunho paced across the living room of Se7en’s flat, uncaring of the mud he tracked over a Persian rug. He’d spotted Se7en walking with Changmin from a tea shop and followed the pair, a mute and betrayed shadow choking on his brother’s treachery. He lurked outside of the church for a few minutes before fleeing to his blood-brother’s row-house.

He’d struck as soon as Se7en crossed the threshold, landing a stunning blow across the other’s face. Se7en blocked the second but didn’t see the third, falling back onto the hard wood floor. Looking up at his attacker, all of the angry fled the older vampire’s demeanor. He didn’t have to be told that Yunho knew. The hurt in his brother’s face told him everything...told him Yunho had seen everything.

Now he could only apologize and hope for forgiveness.

“You knew I was in love with him.” Yunho rubbed at his face, trying to erase the image of Se7en kissing the black-draped young man from his mind. Dropping his hands, he stared out of the bank of windows overlooking the city. His tears reflected back at him, shining trails rolling down his cheeks. “You knew that. You knew I loved him.”

“No, brother. You fell in love with a face,” Se7en said, picking himself up from the floor. “I fell in love with his soul.”

Crossing the space between them, Se7en hesitated before clasping Yunho on the shoulder. Turning his brother around, he expected resistance but the younger vampire yielded easily, allowing himself to be pressed gently against the glass.

“His name is Shim Changmin,” Se7en closed his eyes, needing for words to sink into Yunho’s heart. “And when I am with him, brother, I remember what it’s like to dream.”

“I watch him as he takes his first steps into a world that he thought he’d never have. I was there when he took his first sip of chocolate,” Se7en laughed, remembering the first time he’d tasted the delight. “It was as if lust crystallized on his tongue and he was experiencing the lust of gods in his mouth. It changed his face so much, that tiny little sip and I fell in love right then and there.”

“Did you mean to?” Yunho asked tightly. The strain in his voice opened Se7en’s eyes and the other man ached when he saw the glitter of bloodstained tears clinging to Yunho’s lashes. “Did you mean to fall in love with him? Or was it just a game?”

“It was supposed to be a seduction,” Se7en admitted. “A seduction to show you that you didn’t need him and that he would fall for anyone but instead, he seduced me. Tell me, brother, have you ever been seduced by Innocence before?”

Yunho’s lips pressed into a thin line as he controlled his emotions, shoving them back down under the surface of his thoughts. He took a deep breath before answering. “No, I haven’t.”

“It’s like a butterfly has fallen from the sky and wrapped its wings around your whole body,” Se7en whispered, staring past Yunho’s beauty and into the city, unconsciously looking for St. Barts amid the bristle of buildings. “And then it flies off, leaving a glittering powder all over your skin and you rub, hoping that if by some miracle, you can rub it far enough into you, you’ll grow wings yourself and be able to finally... fly.”

“Every second that I spend with him brings another star into the pitch of my night. I cannot wait to see the entire universe spread out in front of us. I long to see the world through him. That’s how I love him, Yunho,” He sighed, resting his forehead against the glass as his brother’s arms lifted to hug him. “Can you say the same?”

“No,” Yunho admitted softly, brushing a kiss over his blood-brother’s temple. “I will leave him to you, then. Just promise me that you’ll make him happy.”

“I vow to make him as happy as he makes me,” Se7en said, feeling his brother’s heat slip away as Yunho let his embrace fall away. He said nothing more, listening instead to the beat of his heart and the rain begin to hit the glass as his blood brother closed the door behind him, leaving Se7en alone with his thoughts.

They lay against one another, fitted into each other’s bodies, much like the first time Se7en approached Changmin in the bibliothèque.

Nude, they explored with slow, languid fingers and mouths, tasting every inch of pleasure each other could offer. Shy at first, Min was reluctant at first then grew bolder as he discovered he had as much control over Se7en’s release as the other had over him. With the promise of moonlight threatening the canopy of clouds banked against the windows, they laughed at ticklish spots and moaned when an unknown spot proved to be erotically charged under the bite of sharp teeth.

They tore at the sheets, each needing more of one another. A purple jacquard throw slithered to the ground, thrown aside as its spotted tassels brushed against Se7en’s bared nipples, scratching at his tender skin. Min’s fingernails replaced the throw’s caress, rolling the other man’s nubs back and forth under their dulled edges.

“Just once more, love,” Se7en promised as he turned Changmin over, sliding his oil-damp fingers into the cleft of his body. “Then we’ll be like this, forever joined.”

The young man arched, rising up partially on his knees and pressing his chest against the soft bedding, spreading himself open for Se7en’s intrusion. It would be their first time joining together and his young lover burned trails of desire through Se7en, each unconscious sensual action bringing them both closer to spilling. He would have to take his time, both in loving and in changing the young man. It would be better for them both if they found pleasure together.

The initial thrust was short, just enough to stretch Min around him. They both stopped, gasping and mewling as they fought not to pick up the primal rhythm that rose to the surface of their minds, their bodies twitching to fill the space between them. Pushing in deeper, Se7en gave Changmin time to adjust to the intrusion, feeling the young man gasp and twist under him. Clasp his fingers over Min’s hand, he started to rock into the curve of his lover’s heat, letting his desire ride them both until Min caught fire with want.

Changmin’s hips rose to meet Se7en’s thrust, his mouth open and begging, murmuring in a forgotten language that his tongue seemed to speak while his mind fled under the night sky. The push of Se7en into him both broke him apart and healed him, his heart faltering its beat, drawing his breath in sharp as the pain in his chest spread until his ribs screamed with ache.

“Now, baby,” Se7en urged his lover, placing his wrist under Min’s open mouth. “After me. You will need to drink as deep as you can. Take as much as you can into yourself. Feel me inside

of you. Feel all of me inside of you.”

Baring his fangs, Se7en dipped his head and closed over the pulsing line of Min’s neck. Sinking in, he thrust again, burying himself as far into his lover as he could. Gasping, Min’s body responded and the drops of Se7en’s blood already in his veins blossomed, forcing his teeth to elongate. They grew, ripping and shoving apart his gums, tightening the space between his teeth and moving slightly forward. Drawn by the scent of Se7en’s skin a few inches in front of him, Changmin reached and bit, taking his first sip of sin and Se7en’s blood.

They spiraled under the night, the moon throwing its silver down on their bodies from its perch in the sky. Min’s hand spread over the window, running through the heat-induced dew their sex cast on the glass. Se7en’s fingers closed over his, intertwining as the vampire took Changmin over the edge of their spill, their thrusts growing harder and deeper.

With Se7en’s blood filling his mouth, Min swallowed once and then filled himself again, wanting to become everything he could for the man who brought his heart to a thundering beat. The world’s shadows deepened around him and colours began to emerge from the black as his body changed, driving the light from Min’s blood. Gasping, he cried out, his seed erupting from his sex and soaking into the sheets as Se7en’s release filled his core, reaching into the parts of his body becoming alive under his lover’s blood.

Together they lay, breathing hard and letting their love bathe over them as the night took Changmin into her burnt velvet embrace and Se7en smiled, feeling his soul sing as its mate joined him.

Chapter Four

The train clacked over its thick steel wheels, following the long stretch of rails towards Scotland. Se7en had rented a lodge there, urged by Min's desire to see long-haired Highland cattle and hear the keen of bagpipes in the air.

Enamoured by the countryside, Changmin leaned forward until his forehead pressed up against the window of their sleeping car. Fluffy sheep dotted the hills, white puffy clouds darting about green rolling curves. A cairn jutted up over the horizon, the kings' grave a solemn sentry watching them past in silent dignity. Min pointed in delight at a spread of pheasants taking flight as the train approached, their long golden tails trailing behind them, flashing in the sunlight.

"I would have taken you to Paris and shown you the life there," Se7en muttered under his breath after the fifth bouncing of sheep bounded across the countryside to Min's robust laughter. "But no, you want to go to peat-bogged, heather fluffy hills instead."

"It'll be wonderful," Changmin grinned, tucking away the furry cloth fox-doll Se7en had made for him in London. "I've always wanted to see the castle where Lady Macbeth scrubbed the blood from her hands and mourned the loss of her sanity. And haggis! I want to try haggis!"

"I give you chocolate and pomegranates and you want organ meat and turnips stuffed in a cow's stomach,"

Se7en chuckled, listening to his young lover's agreeing murmur. Clearing his throat, he drew out the waxed envelope he'd received from Yunho. He'd forwarded their plans to the other man's home as requested but a part of him ached anew at the thought of being apart from his sometimes-friend, always-brother. Opening the letter he'd tucked into his jacket, he re-read Yunho's words.

"My beloved annoying older brother," Yunho's words started. I can see now what you mean about love. I spent the evening thinking on your words and discovered... a hole inside of my soul... a hole that your little church mouse would never be able to fill.

And yes, I said your. Don't gloat. I am conceding that he is yours. I saw the stars in your eyes when you spoke of him... the ones his kisses caught aflame in you and I was jealous. I want someone to look at me that way. I want someone to look that way for me."

Se7en stopped, his attention drawn up to stare at the geese filling the sky, hoping he made an appropriate response. Changmin's light slap on his thigh told him otherwise but the young man nodded when he spotted Yunho's letter, motioning for his lover to continue reading.

"Leave word for me at my townhouse when you and your church mouse settle," Yunho wrote. I'll leave the house open so we'll have someplace in London to come to. I hope you and Changmin know that you are always welcome there for it's your home as well.

"I leave you to find the half of my own soul. I need my own stars, Choi Dong-Wook. I need to have the night filled with moonbeams and silver for me as well. I know that. Thank you for showing me that. So off I go, in search of my own love. I am envious of you finding it first. But perhaps I will find it better? I can only hope. Love to you and your beloved... Forever your brother in both blood and heart, Jung Yunho."

"You'll miss him," Changmin whispered, touching his lover's arm. "I wish he'd come with us."

“He couldn’t,” Se7en said with regret, folding the letter and tucking it away. “Yunho needs to find what he’s missing. He’ll come back. *Huit* always does.”

“Heh, eight.” He laughed, wrinkling his nose at Se7en’s chagrined smile. “So that’s why you’re Se7en. Does that make me Nine?”

“No, pet,” Se7en said, his voice pitched low as his desire for his lover grew. “You are One... my only One. There will be no one besides or after you. Just you, Minku. Only you.”

The curtains of their compartment door fluttered close with a twitch of Se7en’s fingers on the sash, shutting off the view to the outer walkway. Tumbling his lover back, Se7en moved the fox-doll aside, placing it carefully on the other long upholstered seat where it rested against the book of Korean fairy tales Changmin brought to read. It lay there, jet bead eyes glittering as Se7en began his eternity with his love, showing Min each drop of starlight he brought to life in Se7en’s heart.

Red Windmills in Moonlight

Paris 1891

The smell of sweat and cigarette smoke curled through the air of the dance club. Dim lights flickered along the balcony railings, large glass bulbs sparked to life with electrical current. Music blared through the tight crowd, pouring around the flashes of thighs and peeks of bare breasts as the dancers dipped and wound about, hoping to catch the eye of a wealthy man looking for a bit of fun. Waves of crinoline and stained satin broke in a tide of rustling sound, the clack-clack-clack of heels stamping on the wooden floor in an uneven beat.

Yunho scanned the crowd from his vantage point above the main floor, his elbows resting on a thick wooden railing. He cradled a snifter of brandy, sipping at the fiery liquid with a careful purse of his lips. The alcohol would burn through his accelerated blood like a flash of gunpowder but he enjoyed the slow pursuit of a drunk, seeking to numb the edges of the gaping hole in his soul.

His jacket crinkled as he moved, its inside pocket plump with a letter from his blood brother, Se7en. Dong-Wook's words were scrawled loosely over the pages, curving around notes from his lover, Changmin. They spoke of Venice and the need to have Yunho with them as they traversed through the city of canals. Changmin wrote of museums and the art, with a special interest in the classic masters of science that filled the city's nearly forgotten labyrinth of libraries.

Dong-Wook told him of meals and rare wines, boasting of the shellfish creations that they'd tried on a Saturday night while dining on a barge. His words tugged on Yunho. He missed them... missed their silly and cynical banter as they prowled through the townhouse they shared with him in Paris. His heart echoed in the absence of their laughter but Yunho was determined to let them have some time alone, especially now in his melancholy state.

The search for someone that could make him whole ended in dust and he'd found himself in Paris, alone and battered by his travels. The lovers joined him as soon as he sent word of his settling down and they'd made the townhouse lively with their love.

It only made the pain in Yunho's soul ache, sharpening the razor edges of his anguish, cutting open his heart with every beat.

A month after the lovers left Paris to visit Venice, he'd gone around to the Moulin Rouge, succumbing to the exhortations of his club's younger members to visit the wild hall on Boulevard Clichy. The squat building was garishly embellished with lights, the bright silo with its red fake windmill blades visible from down the street.

He'd been in the Moulin Rouge before, drawn by boredom when it first opened. Se7en had come with him, giving Min some time alone to pour over a Dumas novel he'd found at an estate sale. The men dutifully climbed into the belly of the elephant bar in the garden, pretending to be scandalized and intrigued by the bare stomach of the dancer undulating in the near darkness. Other men clustered around her, stroking at her pale skin and marveling at its satiny feel.

Se7en wrinkled his nose at the thought, leaning over to whisper into Yunho's ear. "It's like licking at a piece of candy you've found on the street. How many feet have stepped on that sweet?"

The orchestra moved to take a break by the time Yunho drank half of his brandy, the instruments clanging under the loud raucous of courtesans near the stage. A slender man nervously fitted a hard wax cylinder into the talking record machine, carefully moving his fingers to avoid leaving marks on the tube. Crackling noises overrode the conversation as the flirtatious women listened to the initial announcement but the chatter rose again, drowning out any music that might have been heard.

Hunger drove him to the club this time, an unquenchable thirst for something new and exciting amid Paris' jaded society. The hall's courtesans were out, dripping with jewels and displaying plump breasts barely contained by their tight décolleté gowns. Feathers were the rage, bristling from towering piles of curls or sweeping down to battle with the wearer's necklaces, a parade of frilled colours and ribbons entering the dance hall's broad interior from its wide side entrance.

The thirst came slowly, creeping into the corners of his mind before clenching at his throat. It bloomed, cutting into his resolve until the edges of his fangs dimpled the inside of his lips and Yunho knew it was time to feed. Sips of brandy did nothing to ease the tightening in his blood, only slowed its heightening grip on his senses.

Yunho needed. It was that simple. The hunger of their blood drove them into the shadows, picking off the unwary or drunk. He'd fed a month ago near the Arc de Triomphe, finding a pretty faced Englishman looking for a bit of danger in Paris. Yunho's exotic features and accented English gave the young man a thrill and he willingly sank to his knees to suckle at the Korean's sex but the act left Yunho cold and empty. Feeding quickly, he left the Englishman dizzily caught in a sexual frenzy that Yunho felt no desire to sate.

"Never leave your prey unsatisfied," Yunho ground the words out of his tortured throat. It was a lesson their mistress reminded them every time they'd sipped from a human. Their kind's survival depended upon leaving no questions... on leaving nothing behind in a human's mind except for a pleasant experience and the rush of an encounter with a dangerous beauty. Kisses were often enough or the spill of their seed into a willing mouth but Yunho was unwilling to part with even that little of himself.

There was so little of who he was that he could share openly. Even the smallest kiss seemed to be giving away a dusty piece of his heart to someone he'd never love. He'd be damned if he carved off little bits of his heart to give away to anyone who wanted a kiss. Not when it beat empty and aching.

Slowly, a trombone lolled in the dark as one of the musicians took up his instrument and blew softly into the mouthpiece, testing the wind in his lungs. Another player joined in, playing off a quick trill on a bright coronet. Bass beats soon followed, rumbling out a line for the others to follow. The Moulin Rouge's orchestra, known for its bawdy renditions of classical pieces, assembled quickly and fell into tune, waiting for the band leader to put them through their paces.

A rolling darkness rose from the percussion section, sensual and erotic. The music reeked of sex, stained bedsheets and spilled red wine on naked skin. Yunho recognized the piece as Chaminade's Scarf Dance, a rolling ballet that now ran sultry hot through a sinful rollick. He smiled against the rim of his snifter, amused at the music's decadence.

Movement in the shadows across the hall caught Yunho's attention, a subtle roll of a form lost in the black pitch under the eaves. The balconies were reserved for the elite, privacy being a premium in Paris' adulterous society. The motion was above the upper tier, nearly hidden by the wide support beams that held up the club's elaborate ceiling.

Despite the gift of his blood, Yunho couldn't pierce the gloom of the eaves and he smiled, contemplating the small mystery under the Moulin Rouge's roof. The club's owner was strict about maintaining the wonder of the dance hall, hiding even the real names of the courtesans that danced over its wooden floors. Squinting did little good in helping Yunho see into the darkness and he debated moving closer, arguing with himself that the undulating movement was probably nothing more than a couple finding passion amid the cobwebs and dust.

Bored, Yunho rounded the balconies, avoiding the large-breasted woman calling to her lover from the far tier. She smelled of cheese, even from several yards and her coarse features and caterwauling turned Yunho's stomach. Slinking through the velvet curtains blocking off the access walk, Yunho stopped short, his heart frozen in mid-beat.

A fallen angel danced in the shadows. Lean and enticing, the black-haired young man was lost in the music, letting it flow through his body and lifting the grace from his soul into his bones. The streets clung to the youth, drawing fatigue along his almond shaped eyes.

He danced because it freed him. Yunho saw that in every roll of his slender hips and slide of his legs. The ballet made sensual became erotic with every turn of the young Korean's body. His eyes would be dark like a starless night or perhaps as honeyed as a sunrise, Yunho decided, but either way, they would be wary windows into a passionate soul. The pout of his mouth was made to be kissed, suckled until pink and then bitten red with soft long chews of Yunho's teeth.

"Gods," Yunho whispered. And the world stilled, draped in the silence of the vampire's heart.

Yunho didn't have to close his eyes to see the young man sprawled boneless on the bed he'd bought, its blood red velvet duvet, naked and pale. He wanted to have the man waiting for him, spread apart and panting, Yunho's name on his tongue as the vampire crossed over to him, his hands cupping under the dancer's rear as they became lovers for the first time.

Sex poured into flesh and bone; that's what the young man was, Yunho decided. Sex and the heat of a Parisian night made real. When the young man turned, his eyes flew open in surprise at seeing the other standing quietly in the shadows and a soft moaning whisper escaped his parted lips, their pout full and glistening when he dipped into the sparse light.

His eyes were cinnamon kissed anise, wide and astonished at Yunho's presence. The young man stepped back and stumbled when his heel hit a jutting board. Dust flew into the air, dancing golden in the streams of light spanning the ceiling's ridge. It cloaked him, settling on his torn fitted trousers and freckling his pale skin. Yunho reached for him, catching at the youth's hand but he jerked back, fingers trembling as he drew away.

"No..." The youth's French was horrid, guttural and street. It made Yunho wince, a coarseness at odds with the young man's beauty. The dancer's bones were delicate under the stretch of his skin and thin shirt, his collarbone sharp at the curve of his chest. He needed feeding and warmth, cold shivering pinpricks over his cheeks and arms.

"I'm not going to hurt you." Yunho's fingers brushed on the young man's slender shoulder.

A pain gripped his upper arm and the shadows tilted, going awry. Hands took hold and picked Yunho up, flinging him away from the young man. His limbs windmilled wildly and he strained to right himself in mid air, struggling to avoid falling over the balcony. Catching his

balance, Yunho twisted, changing his trajectory and slamming hard into the ceiling supports.

The wall rattled when Yunho hit it, aching bruises forming on his back where he struck a wooden beam. Plaster fell around his head, shattered off of the ceiling. He rolled, springing up to his feet and hissed, baring his fangs at the dancer.

And stared in shock at the young man's elongated canines.

Stopped short by the man's true nature, Yunho didn't see the balled-up fist until it flew into his jaw. Stars burst across Yunho's vision, a black curtain threatening to close in on him as he tumbled back. Years of conditioning took over, his instinct curling him into a ball to absorb the punch's impact. He landed hard, striking a railing post with the middle of his back. Pain stretched down to his kidneys, promising to develop into a dazzling array of bruising. Rolling over, Yunho rose to his feet, squaring his shoulders before facing the young man.

"I'm not hunting..." Yunho stopped, turning at the panicked sounds behind him, a scrambling over the rough wood planks.

Small dust storms swirled on the floor the young man danced over, leaving streaks over the dirty planks where his knees and hands crawled over as he escaped. A trap door slammed, its rope handle flopping about with a twist. Dirt plumes filled the air, clogging Yunho's lungs as he moved to follow the youth. Gripping the rope, he tugged, trying to lift the heavy door. It stuck and rattled, jammed shut by something on the other side.

The music drowned out his frustrated growls, shouts of the dancers rising to hit Yunho in the face as he ran to the railing, hoping to catch a glimpse of the other vampire among the crowd. Skirts twirled up over pale thighs, long sensual views of silk stockings and garters, with the briefest flash of pantaloons made transparent from sweat. The laughter bubbling up from the floor sparkled, a music ripe with desperation and want. Moulin Rouge was a sea of colour and sound, its waves cresting over Yunho's senses until he drowned in its excesses. His prey was gone, lost in the tide and the vampire swore, catching his lip on his sharp fangs.

"Damn it." The railing shook when Yunho hit it with his clenched fist. A drop of blood from his cut lip spread over his tongue. He unconsciously licked at the sweet taste, wondering how he'd taste spread over the dancer's porcelain skin.

Yunho gave up searching the shadows for the young man. The vampire was gone, he thought sourly, fleeing to whatever hole he lived in. His gut whispered of places the young man might be found but the river's many bridges were too numerous to search through given the hour and despite his strength, Paris' alleyways were dangerous even for him. The thieves and beggars slinking in the city's underbelly were numerous and Yunho knew from experience that a colony of rats could take down an elephant if they were hungry enough.

His key rattled when he tossed it on the alabaster and gold leaf table near the front door. Piles of letters and invitations overflowed over a basket's edge, individual communications picked out and placed in an orderly pile nearby. His housekeeper avoided the post, claiming a gentleman was entitled to his secrets. Yunho accepted the excuse, knowing the woman had little skill in reading, a sad condition of Paris' poor.

A light shone into the main foyer, the hall illuminated from the study's doorway. Frowning, Yunho checked the time, wondering if his housekeeper arrived early to start her work before the sun rose. The clatter of crystal decanters froze him in mid-step. The woman barely made a

sound when she cleaned and as far as he knew, never so much as let a drop of wine cross her lips, much less get into his brandy.

Yunho recognized him, even from behind, his brother was distinctive. Especially from behind.

"Kim Junsu," He said, entering the study. The younger vampire turned just enough to give Yunho a nod, pouring a glass of brandy first for his older brother and then one for himself. "What are you doing in Paris?"

Junsu took his time answering, sipping at the smoky liquid with a murmur of appreciation for Yunho's taste in liquors. Innocence warred with the haughty arrogance of his face, a curious blend that drew their maker to Junsu. He was the ninth of her children, and in Yunho's eyes, the most favoured of her Korean get. Quick to smile and tease, Junsu was also the most disciplined of spirit, choosing to spend his life in acts of benevolence.

"I think I've lost my way, hyung," Junsu said, nearly draining the brandy snifter in a single gulp. "I keep traveling to look for something but I don't know what it is."

Yunho frowned and set his glass down. Their younger brother was not one for drinking, usually a small sip of wine with a meal or a pint of beer. Taking Junsu's hand, he led the other vampire to the lounge, settling him down into a casual embrace. Sighing, Junsu turned, resting his back against Yunho's shoulder, letting the older man loop an arm around him.

"Are you staying long?" Yunho brushed a gentle kiss over the other's brush of hair, inhaling Junsu's sweet scent into his lungs. Their mistress took the youngest because of his innocence and bubbly nature. In the passing years, the younger vampire's laughter only grew sweeter and his nature sunnier. Yunho smiled as he held a piece of the sun against him.

"Not long," He replied. "I'll be leaving tomorrow morning."

"So short?" A frown creased Yunho's forehead, his eyes narrowed in annoyance. "Why so short? Where are you going?"

"I want to see New York. I hear it's become very cosmopolitan." Junsu sighed, his romantic nature putting stars in his eyes. "I want to get lost in the crowd and hear new music as it's being played for the first time. It would be nice to sit among the many and just listen to the world beat its heart around me."

"You'll still stand out with your ugly face," Yunho teased. "Nothing can change that."

"Hah! You are just jealous because people like me more than they like you." Junsu bit lightly down on Yunho's arm, his teeth bared in mock battle. "I can't help it if I'm prettier and nicer than you. It comes naturally."

"So now you've gone insane as well as ugly," Yunho sighed. "We will have to confine you in a tower soon, sealing you behind a mask so none can see your hideous nature."

"It was a mask of black velvet," The younger man corrected. "And he wasn't sealed away because he was ugly. It was because he knew too much. Like I know too much about you. Your threats are empty. Who else would listen to you bully the stars besides me?"

"I think that's the problem," He muttered. "I have no one to listen to me coax the universe into turning."

"I saw Dong-Wook and his lover in Valencia," Junsu changed the subject as he rested his chin on Yunho's forearm. Slouched, he was a slight weight against Yunho's broader body. "They look happy."

"They are," Yunho agreed, reluctantly. His joy for his older brother fought with the jealousy of their love, the elation narrowly winning out each time. "Did he tell you that I fell for

Changmin first?"

"He did." Junsu's laugh was thick with irony. "He also told me you didn't even know Min's name; just worshipped him from afar. Not the proper way to have a love affair, hyung."

"No, it's not," Yunho sheepishly rubbed at the back of his head, embarrassed at his foolishness. The jealousy died a quick death, burned away by the brilliance of Junsu's smile. "But it seems to be the way that I do things."

They sat there, listening to one another breathe. Junsu sighed, calming his heartbeat until it fell into the soft rhythm of his brother's pulse. There was a lie somewhere in Yunho's words, Junsu could hear it but he waited, letting the other vampire take his time, even if it took forever.

Yunho swore he would leave the Moulin Rouge alone. The other vampire was nothing but trouble, he'd told himself in the coldness of his bed. Life would be much easier without the complications of pretty faced boys and their sweet mouths and supple bodies. Or at least without the ones that Yunho wanted to wrestle up against a wall and taste until he hungered only for the touch of skin and hands on his own body.

"No," He said to himself as he walked past the Arc de Triomphe. "I would be better off finding some catamite in the lower docks to suckle me than chase after a feral street thief."

Or so Yunho thought until he found himself staring up at a blood red monstrosity of a windmill and hearing the bawdy roll of dance music coming from the dance hall. Laughter poured from the open doors, nearly drowning out the orchestra's rendition of an American tune.

A woman hurried past, her hand clutched tightly on her son's fingers, the boy dragging his heels as he craned his neck to see the sins of Moulin Rouge through its open doors. Yunho's mouth quirked into a smile, watching the young boy tug at his mother's imprisoning hand. Within a few years, he would swagger into dance halls to catch a glimpse of temptation then roll back home on drunken fumes, hoping that his mother couldn't smell the alcohol on his breath.

The café nearby bustled with activity, couples leaning over tiny tables with a small candle to light their faces. Paris was very romantic, Yunho thought with a sneer. All the more reason to leave any thought of seduction behind. It was the city, he decided, the city was to blame for his lust. It was the only thing he could think of that would explain his desire to chase after a half-wild Asian boy, and one that probably smelled at that. No, he'd never lacked for companionship before, Yunho nodded to himself, he wasn't going to lack for any now.

"I like the elephant best." The young man's voice was soft, a sultry velvet along Yunho's shoulders. "They said the Arc was supposed to be an elephant instead with rooms that you walked through but they never built it. Can you imagine an elephant that big?"

"No, I couldn't," Yunho jerked around, catching a glimpse of the Arc rising above the squat buildings around it. "Damn you, you are quiet on your feet. Where did you come from?"

"The dark," The young man's smile was thin, satisfaction at having surprised Yunho clear in the sparkle of his eyes. "Even now. Scared me yesterday."

"I am sorry about that." Yunho found himself apologizing and cursed himself but the softening of the vampire's face warmed him. "I didn't mean to startle you."

The other vampire circled, his eyes fixed on Yunho as he walked through the shadows of

the side alley. Around them, people faded away, lost in the fog softly rolling in. Yunho stood stock still, letting the younger man get comfortable. The cant of the his head and the looseness of his limbs was misleading. There was power in the tightness of the young man's muscled thighs and broad shoulders, hidden by his slender frame and oversized clothes worn smooth at the elbows and torn at the knees.

The grace of the vampire's stalking movements reminded Yunho of a tiger he'd seen in India. Their mistress took them deep into India in search of a reprieve from the sweltering dry heat of China's lower reaches. The humidity often drove them into the jungle, bathing in cool ponds, naked and uncaring of the insects buzzing in the air.

Coming out of the shadowy coolness of the green lush forest, the massive black-striped feline startled them into stillness. Its curious snuffle made Se7en laugh, a deep chuckle that pricked the giant cat's ears up. The three predators stood in silent companionship, soothed by the cool rain dripping from the tall overhead forest canopy. After a minute, the tiger paced away, powerful and beautiful in its sleek strength, hidden by the shadows as it continued on its way.

The young vampire stalked the shadows as easily as the tiger prowled the rain forests of India.

"You're like me," He said finally, stopping just short of sniffing at Yunho's neck. The vampire's warm breath left a kiss of heat on Yunho's skin, igniting a trail of fire down his chest and curling around his sex.

"Yes, like you," Yunho agreed with a nod. "I'm called Yunho...Yunho Jung here."

"*Juin?*" He slurred the word, dropping the Korean pronunciation for a more familiar French. "Like the month? That's an odd name."

Yunho laughed, startling the vampire. He retreated a foot, edging back slowly as Yunho motioned him forward. "No, Jung." He enunciated. "You can just call me Yunho. What do they call you?"

"Jae...Jaejoong." He looked at the other man from under his lashes, listening to himself pronounce his own name. "We are both *Juin*."

"That we are," Yunho returned Jae's shy grin with an easy smile. "Where did you hear they were going to build an elephant instead of the Arc?"

"Men were talking about it when they were putting in the bottom part," He said, the light catching his eyes as the vampire tilted his head back. "I don't remember when. I was shorter...younger. I didn't know what they were talking about...until later. Now, I wonder how it would have looked; an elephant that big. Then there was the dead man they brought through but there weren't any elephants then. That is when they should have had an elephant."

Distance grew in the young man's eyes, time filming over memories. Yunho nearly touched Jae's face, wanting to shake him from the dreaming he seemed to fall into. Goosebumps rippled over the other vampire's neck, pale pinpricks disappearing as his brown eyes widened, focusing on Yunho's face.

A quick calculation in Yunho's mind put the other man at eighty, maybe a little more. He'd watched Napoleon's procession carry his exhumed remains under the Arc before beginning the somber journey to Les Invalides where they laid him into his tomb. If the other vampire had been there for the construction of the arc, he would have preceded the emperor's return by nearly by at least thirty years.

"When was the last time you fed?" Yunho risked a touch, alarmed at the icy cold feel of the

other's skin. The vampire let Yunho take his hand, turning chilled fingers over and clasping them tight. A weak pulse beat at the juncture of his wrist, the vampire's veins long blue lines disappearing as they wrapped under his corded muscles.

"I had bread this morning." Another tilt of his head and the line in his throat beat erratically, a fluttering blue butterfly under his pale skin. The skip-beat-step of his pulse alarmed Yunho but not as much as the haze clouding his honeyed eyes. "It should have been this morning. The sun was up, rising up over the city. There was a gold caught in the orange clouds, and candy floss pink. I was drinking coffee, I think. Or tea. Something hot."

"It rained this morning," Yunho said, stroking at the vampire's palm, bringing out a flush to his cheeks. "And the morning before that. When was the last time you had... blood? Human blood."

"No!" Jae jerked his hand out of Yunho's grasp as if the man's touched burned him. His lips trembled and the vampire brushed the tips of his fingers across his full pout, catching on the chapped peels marbling the tender skin. "Not from people. It turns black in your mouth and the beat-beat-beat of their heart slows down too much. I don't do that."

"It only does that if you take too much," He stressed, wondering how the younger vampire survived the thirst of their kind. He'd heard of others denying themselves blood only to be driven mad by their cravings. "You need...human blood. No, don't shake your head. You do, or you get too weak. What do you feed from? Cats? Rodents?"

"*Poulet*," Jae replied, nodding. "Easier to catch than rats. They sleep at night. Turn them over and bite at the legs."

"The farmers must think there's a fox prowling their hen houses," Yunho chuckled then he grew somber. He was beginning to rethink his assessment of the young vampire's sanity. "Chicken blood will barely keep you alive. Where's your..." He struggled for the right word. "Your creator?"

"God?" The vampire's eyes glistened, going pitch as his pupils dilated and his attention drifted, seeming to settle in the direction of the old *Palais du Louvre* and the cathedral beyond it. "Heaven, yes? The priests say that."

"No, not God," Yunho thought fondly of the woman who took his death from him. "Well, sometimes it feels that way but no, the person who made you... like me." He bared his fangs, carefully hiding his face to passer-bys. "The person who changed you."

"I don't know." His shoulders jerked up, a casual Gaelic shrug incongruent with Jae's Asian features. "He... bit me, tore my skin. I bit him back, many times and fought him then he left me there. I woke up with some of his arm in my mouth and...like this...changed into this. I don't know where he went."

"He didn't stay? The one who... made you didn't stay?" Yunho reeled back, his breath tight in his lungs. "No, why would he? He attacked you. He was a monster. He'd have no reason to stay behind."

Their mistress was so careful with all of them, choosing each of her children with a discerning eye. Once in her bloodline, she nurtured them, teaching and guiding them along until they were comfortable with their change. There were rules; Yunho could still hear her say; rules that we must follow lest we become nothing more than raging beasts, massacring the very people that they came from. Drink carefully, and give back comfort when doing so; he'd learned.

"Is that why you look like me? Because someone changed you?" The vampire returned

Yunho's prodding with a delicate touch of his fingers along the almond curve of Yunho's eyes. "What did you look like before? Did you have yellow hair? Or brown? Does everyone who looks like us need to drink blood? Is that why Miss Jade at the Red Lantern Inn has those sharp sticks in her hair? I don't think her teeth are sharp enough to cut skin."

There were times in Yunho's life when his mind stopped working and the rush of blood cresting into his forehead was a subtle warning that soon, all thought would escape him. The conversation he was having was rapidly turning into one of those moments.

"No, we're...not... Oh, Dong-Wook would be laughing if he heard me right now. We look different because we're from the Orient, not because someone made us this way," Yunho stumbled, trying to straighten out the tangle of his thoughts. "Let me start over. Let us start over."

"Maybe," The wariness was gone, replaced by curiosity but Yunho saw the tiger in Jae shift, eager to be back into the shadows. "Tomorrow, maybe."

The black swallowed Jaejoong whole, embracing him into its depths before Yunho could even react. Yunho's hand tingled, still burning from the touch of Jae's skin beneath his fingertips. Lifting his hand, Yunho brushed the edge of his thumb over his lip, tasting the brightness of the other vampire on him. A promise laid in the sweetness of Jae's scent, suspicious and wary but still holding a whisper of trust that would have to be earned.

"Tomorrow then, *chaton*," Yunho whispered into the shadows. "Tomorrow."

Yunho's tomorrow came and went with no sign of the other vampire. The night was filled with cold empty walks, long strolls down by the canals, and brief forays into cathedrals in case Jae went looking for a slice of God. By the second week, Yunho's insouciance turned to worry then finally panic; sharp pains jabbing into his guts whenever he heard a sultry laugh on the wind or the hint of velvet in someone else's voice.

Combing Paris for Jaejoong became an obsession, turning Yunho into a driven, ghost of a man. His exotic face brought looks at first then as the nights passed, the denizens of Paris' underbelly grew used to the Korean stalking the shadows. He offered money for information on the Asian young man and while some knew of Jaejoong's presence, no one could tell Yunho where he lived or where he could be found.

Rats scrambled in a mewling slurry as Yunho trod under one of Paris' many walking bridges. The smell of unwashed human skin forced him to breathe through his mouth, the flat crackle sour permeating his nostrils. A Romany friend pointed him towards the lower canals, giving him the name of a street he might find Jaejoong.

"Watch where you walk, *jaune*," The gypsy warned him. "There are bigger predators down there than you."

Les Halles at night ripened with scents, spoiled fruit and food left to rot in the cold rain. A woman called out to him, her sing-song chant accented with a heavy dose of North London. The curtains over the door were meant to mimic a silk noren but it hung badly, draped over a dowel. A hint of opium hung in the air, the breeze carrying a faint smoky sweetness. He ignored her then turned around, looking at the address again.

"I'm looking for a man," Yunho said. "He looks a little like me. Slanted eyes but with a fuller mouth."

"We don't sell that kind here, love," She laughed, dropping any pretense of the Orient. "You'll have to go down the street for that kind of bit. This here's where you chase dragons."

"I know," He replied. "And I'm not looking for a whore. A friend of mine said I could find him here."

"You're welcome to come in and look." She tilted her head to the side, holding out her hand. "For a price."

"Of course." He'd come with small bills, wadded up for handing over. A few made their way past her fingers which snapped closed as soon as he let go. Yunho pushed past the woman, ducking under the curtain when she moved from the door. The dark swallowed him whole and he left her behind as she began cajoling a passerby to come inside and lose himself.

A long passage cut into the depths of the den, its thick walls built up to mask any sounds. At the end of the hall, a faint light peeked around another soiled curtain, promising succor. Burnt oolong tea fought the sweet toxic scent of the burning opium but it surrendered after a few feet past the front door. Its earthly perfume dominated the tight hallway and Yunho sighed, knowing he'd come out of the den with a headache.

He'd visited dens before, dragged through one in China to look for one of their brothers. The broken down inn with its bare cots and filthy linens were a far cry from the extravagant luxuries of the Asian dynasty. Dirt caked the floorboards, a few spots shiny where booted feet trod. He stepped over a limp arm hanging over the edge of a rack and headed to the door at the back of the room.

No one moved to stop him. Yunho wasn't expecting any of the drugged men to leap up from their dreaming to block his way. They were lucky if their bodies continued breathing, considering the depth of the smoke in the small chamber.

The air past the doorway was cleaner, and a slight wind carried a muddied water scent through the hallway beyond. Rank from the canals, the odor was still better than the soiled sweetness of opium smoke. Yunho coughed, clearing the rasp from his throat.

"Go past the first room and into the hall," Yunho heard the Romany's words in his mind. "Head back towards the canals and go up the stairs. There's a loft at the top. You'll find a *mangeur-sang* there."

Cracked glass from high windows let the canal air into the hall and Yunho spotted the narrow stairwell leading up. Uneven planks were hammered into supports that looked as if they were stolen from a boat, the door frame around the stairs' entrance leading Yunho to believe that the area started off as a closet at one point. There was no railing but the walls were close enough to provide stability.

Taking a deep breath, Yunho climbed up, preparing himself for the worst.

He smelled the blood before he reached the top of the stairs. Its copper taint stank of black and rot, curling Yunho's lip back from his fangs. His stomach churned in loud rebellion, threatening to spill up the luncheon he'd hastily eaten before heading into Les Halles. Breathing in with shallow pants, he climbed the rest of the way up, afraid of what he might find.

His eyes adjusted to the dim light, a wisp of light from the street lamp outside working through the cracks in the wall. The heel of his boot caught on a nail, twisting Yunho's foot about. He steadied himself with a hand to the wall and peered into the darkness.

A hiss came from the corner of the attic space, small flashes of pointed white warning Yunho against coming any closer. Sighing with relief, the older vampire ducked under a beam, and half-crawled to the source of the hissing, carefully keeping his head down. As he drew

closer, he heard Jae's laboured breathing and the shush-shush sound of a punctured lung. The gloom faded from his eyesight as his senses adjusted to his surrounding and Yunho gasped, when he saw Jaejoong lying on a pile of used potatoe sacks.

Dried husks of rat bodies lay scattered near Jae's hand. Exsanguinated, they'd drawn too close to him, hoping his still body was food and fell victim to the injured vampire's hunger. The smell of rotted blood came from their remains and the spread of dried ichors along Jaejoong's nearly naked, bruised body.

"Jaejoong," Yunho said, releasing the breath he'd held in his lungs since climbing the stairs. He'd feared the worst for the young vampire, given the tales he'd heard from the Romany. "What happened?"

The vampire turned his head, his eyes nearly white with pain, and tried to focus on Yunho's face. His pupils were pale, the colour leeches from their depths as his body struggled to maintain its functions. The full pout that Yunho dreamed about was cracked, dotted with black spots, splashes of dried rodent blood marbling his jaw and face. A thicker line of black cut across Jae's throat, the edges of a deep gash peeling back from the healing wound. The cut was raw, flapping loose and red with infection.

"*Juin?*" The sound was rough, broken gravel against tin.

With Jae's throat moving, the gash opened up, tearing along the too-thin skin, spilling bright red onto his pale flesh. His body strained to close the wound, knitting the jagged rip as Yunho watched. Jaejoong gulped for air and it tore again, beading drops of blood on the floor. They pearled in the dry dirt, glistening bits of life Jaejoong desperately needed.

"Don't move," Yunho whispered, the young vampire's condition leaving trails of panic in his stomach.

Pulling his shirt free from his waist, Yunho tore off long strips from the tails, wrapping the bandages around Jaejoong's torn open throat. Jae murmured in protest, weakly pushing at Yunho's hands as he lifted the other's head. His struggles stained the shirt cloth deep crimson and Yunho shushed Jae with an impatient hiss, ordering him to stay put.

"You worked so hard to stay alive, *chaton*. Don't fight the one trying to help you with that," Yunho admonished, tying the bandages off into a small knot. Satisfied it would hold until he got Jaejoong someplace safe, he slid his arms under the young man's too-thin body, lifting him from the dirty floor.

Jae arched his back, fighting the rescue then sighed when Yunho murmured in Korean, hoping the comforting words would soothe the fevered vampire. Nestling into the crook of Yunho's arms, Jaejoong rubbed his cheek against the other's chest, relaxing in the embrace.

"Why did ...looking for me, *Juin?*" Jae's lips cracked as he spoke, his mouth unused to speaking. "Nothing to you."

Jaejoong wasn't awake long enough to hear Yunho's answer, falling into a deep, safe sleep as the older vampire descended the stairs. His eyelashes were dark on the bruised circles under his closed eyes, fluttering as he dreamed of things Yunho couldn't even begin to imagine. The stink of the canals and street were heavy on Jae's body, scrapes of dirt and things Yunho didn't want to think about muddied the surface of his skin.

"Why did I come looking for you?" Yunho repeated as he walked past the North Weezy woman standing in the doorway. She slithered out of the way, pressing herself against the wall as the fierce eyed Asian carried his burden into the foggy night. "And I think you're wrong, Jaejoong. I think you could be everything to me."

Chapter Two

Dried blood formed a black lace over Jae's slender throat, his pale skin marbled with dark bruises and cuts. A dampened wash lay draped over the hastily made bandages, soaking through the ripped fabric to make it easier to remove. Yunho tested an edge and winced when Jaejoong's skin came up with it. Steeling himself, the older vampire checked Jae's weak pulse and he breathed a sigh of relief at the faint thump under his fingertips.

He'd carried the lifeless vampire up from the dens, willing Jae to keep breathing as he took each step. Hailing a carriage on the main avenue, he urged the driver to hasten their journey but to keep the ride steady, promising double the fare if the carriage was handled smoothly.

When he'd arrived, the house was empty of staff and sadly, Junsu. Not for the first time since his younger brother left, Yunho wished the bubbly Korean was there waiting for him. If anyone could coax a smile from a wild cat, it would be Junsu. Not giving a second thought to the expensive linens on his bed, Yunho slid Jaejoong carefully into a nest of pillows and worried, brushing at the shock of black hair falling into the younger vampire's face.

"God, I am sorry I have to do this," Yunho whispered into Jaejoong's ear, an unshed tear watering a line over his lashes. Gripping the end of the bandage tightly, he jerked the cloth up, tearing it from the wound.

It bled, too much for Yunho to stop with his fingers. Instinct drove him to lower his head, a small dip of his tongue into the dark sweetness bleeding from Jae's throat. His fangs extruded and Yunho hissed, his breath hot against the back of his throat and he inhaled the sharp copper temptation winding over the other man's pale skin.

"Calm yourself." Yunho pulled back, taking in lungfuls of cold air to soothe the hunger crawling through his body. Taking Jae's blood while he lay battered and darkened by bruises was akin to rape, Yunho shook himself loose of the thrall he'd fallen into. "Keep yourself in tight, Jung."

"Fangs," Jae mumbled. His lashes fluttered, a weak protest against the lethargy pulling him back into unconsciousness. "Eating me?"

"No!" Tossing the bandage aside, Yunho pursed his mouth, willing his fangs to retract back into his gums. "Stay here. We need to get some blood into you."

He left Jaejoong lying there, ignoring the mental image of the lanky beauty sprawled on vermillion bed linens. A quick trip into the kitchen secured him a chilled bottle of blood from the wine cellar. Stopping long enough to grab a clean glass and a decanted Madeira, Yunho tucked the bottles into a basket then added cheese and bread, hoping to get food into the other man's stomach.

Jaejoong was awake when he came back, shifting uncomfortably when Yunho approached. The dark circles and puffed bags under his eyes were vivid on his face. Too weak to pull away, Jae murmured a protest as Yunho lifted him up, resting the vampire against the pillows.

"Shush," Yunho ordered, pouring a measure of blood into the glass. Adding a good dose of wine to the blood, Yunho swirled the vessel until the fluids blended together. Cradling Jaejoong's head, Yunho tilted the glass until the blood-wine touched the vampire's parched lips. "You need this. You're not going to heal if you don't drink this. No arguments. I'll pour it down your throat if I have to."

There was a small struggle, more of Jae turning his head an inch to the side but Yunho's hands were stronger than the weakened muscles in the other vampire's neck. A drop of the blood-infused wine on Jaejoong's pout was all it took.

His hunger did the rest.

Jaejoong's mouth clamped over the glass rim, his throat opening to receive the rush of blood wine. Gulping, he struggled to get more into his mouth, his ravaged body taking control of his senses. His fangs lengthened, stretching his too pale gums until they were white from the increased pressure.

Yunho struggled to keep the flow even, not wanting to flood the younger vampire's mouth but Jae pressed, his trembling hands closing over the other's wrists and forcing the glass up. Ravenous, Jaejoong fought to take more, the beast in his blood roaring to be sated. With a deep growl, he bit down hard, his instincts driving him to seek more.

Without warning, the battered vampire's teeth clamped down, closing over the rim. The glass shattered, breaking under the force of Jae's hunger. Shocked, Yunho pulled back, throwing the shards to the floor. Risking his fingers, and possibly his sanity, the Korean dug his fingers past Jae's sharp fangs. He felt around the other man's tongue and teeth, slicing open his skin on the broken pieces of glass in Jae's mouth.

"Merde!" Yunho yanked small shards out, throwing them on the floor. They made tiny starburst pings as they hit, leaving pockmarks on the seasoned wood. Digging his fingers in again, he forced Jae's mouth open, praying he got all of the glass before the younger vampire swallowed any.

The soft heat of Jae's mouth enveloped Yunho's fingers, the younger man's tongue laving at the small cuts on the intruding tips. Yunho's eyelids dropped, hooding against the darkness rising in his belly. The suckle of Jae's lips rushed blood into his sex, the flushed pink flesh pouting around his length ignited delicious, wicked thoughts in his bestial mind.

His blood, invigorated by his temper and the richness of his mistress' embrace whispered over Jae's face and Yunho watched as the hunger in the man's pretty face changed to a wanton lust. Mingled with the wine already in his lean belly, Yunho's blood was intoxicating, a powerful drug feeding the sensual embers of need in Jae's wide eyes.

"You have to stop, bebe," Yunho warned, reluctantly extracting himself from Jae's sweet, wet embrace. The feel of Jae around his flesh was a tantalizing promise that he couldn't rationally extract, not in the man's current weakened condition.

Jae's keening whimper shot ice into Yunho's heart and he closed his eyes against Jae's look of disappointment. Shaking his head with regret, Yunho rubbed his thumbpad against the other's lip, smearing a drop of blood over the man's plump mouth.

"Trust me, love," He whispered softly. "It's better that I don't take advantage of you. As much as I want to, I think it would be better for both of us if I let you sleep. You're not reasoning yet. Your body is too hurt."

Watching Yunho with narrowed eyes, Jaejoong cocked his head, the bloodlust of their animal nature driven to the surface by his ravenous hunger. Simple instinct drove too much of the young man's actions, Yunho decided, nodding to himself in resigned satisfaction when he prodded gently at raw wound at Jae's neck. The edges were slowly closing, the younger vampire's healing accelerated by the blood he'd taken in.

"Stay here." Yunho said, sweeping up the broken glass into the bandages he'd removed from Jae's body. "I'll get you more blood but this time, little one, let's try a pewter stein. I don't

think I could survive having your mouth around me once more today.”

The bath water ran red and black, swirling on islands of suds as Yunho gently scrubbed the streets from Jae’s body. Too weak to do anything but protest, the younger vampire snarled when the washing cloth came too close to his nose, the damp fabric nearly smothering him; or so he complained. He also griped as Yunho leaned him forward to dump cups of water down his back, his rib bones jutting out from under his skin and creating ripples in the smooth flow. A pair of Yunho’s under-breeches provided Jae some manner of modesty and gave Yunho some measure of self-control over his unreasonable lust for the skinny street urchin.

“Cold,” Jae chattered, dramatically clicking his teeth.

“Really?” Yunho responded casually, watching the steam rise from the water. “No colder than a winter night spent outside, eh?”

“Pfah.”

“You smell.” A tap of Yunho’s finger left a burst of bubbles on the end of Jae’s nose. “And I can’t see how well you’re healing under a layer of dirt and rat shit. I’m almost done. Just have your hair to do and...”

He would have to wash under the breeches, removing the wet cloth to reach the younger man’s intimate flesh. Schooling himself, he helped Jae lift himself up from the tub. The other’s arms shook with the effort of supporting some of his weight, his legs threatening to give out underneath him as Yunho worked the wet breeches off. Jae’s body was painfully thin, his enormous eyes dominating the thin pinch of his still-pretty face and Yunho felt ashamed at the rise of lust that stirred in him. Hastily scrubbing the area, Yunho nearly breathed a sigh of relief when Jae collapsed against him, unable to stand any longer.

“That’s going to have to do until you’re stronger.” Yunho nodded, pulling the plug from the tub. Dripping warm water from a carafe, he scrubbed at the filth in Jae’s hair, tsking at the black runnels of dirt flowing down around the younger man’s ears and shoulders. “Didn’t you ever bathe?”

“Cold,” He repeated, rubbing at his arms, a tinge of blue forming on the edge of his lips. The porcelain bathtub was cooling off faster than Yunho liked but Jae’s tangled hair needed another scrubbing and then a clean rinse.

Working as quickly as he could, Yunho washed the weeks of neglect from Jae’s hair, rubbing a thickened egg yolk and grooming oil mixture into the tangles before using the last of the hot water to wash it out. Grabbing a thick towel, he wrapped its radiator-warmed length around the thin vampire’s body, using his shoulders to bolster Jae up until he could lift the younger man from the tub.

“You’re as thin as a squab,” Yunho grumbled under his breath. “You even have a pigeon bone sticking up out of your chest. Lucky for you, you’re too scrawny to eat or the cook would be in here with cranberries and oranges to stuff you with.”

“If I’m going to be stuffed,” Jae’s words slithered an erotic whisper of heat into Yunho’s ear. “That’s not what I want to be stuffed with.”

Yunho’s hands trembled as he lay a dozing Jaejoong on the clean sheets. He resisted the urge to stroke the sleep from Jae’s mouth. His tongue withering against the roof of his mouth, Yunho closed the bedroom door behind him and drew a cold bath to soak in.

"It smells." Jae pulled back from the dish, wrinkling his nose. Poking at the mess of pepper-reddened vegetables, he made a face. "Is that cabbage? And what's that? Zucchini?"

"Yes, that's cabbage. And no, that's cucumber." Yunho picked up a piece of the pickled vegetable from the banchan dish and held it up to Jae's tightly pressed mouth. "Try it. It's from our home. It's what makes us..."

How did he explain to an abandoned child the concept of home when every parent Jae might have ever known disappeared? Answers about his mother shifted with each question and the young man was reticent about explaining anything about his making other than the attack. Home to Jaejoong was nothing more than a place out of the wind and within reach of a rat to drain of blood.

The lack of family made Yunho's heart ache and not for the first time, he wished Se7en and Changmin would return from their jaunt across the continent.

Jae's mouth closed down around the tidbit pinched between Yunho's fingers and left a kiss of heaven behind, a burning moisture from the flat of his tongue. Without thinking, driven by something deep inside of him, Yunho placed his wet fingers into his mouth and sucked the taste of Jae's mouth from his own skin. The sweetness he imagined burst on his tongue, mingled with the tart-hot taste of the kim chee.

"God," Yunho murmured as he closed his throat against his swallow, wanting the flavours to linger in his mouth. "This is what home really tastes like."

"Shit, this hurts." Jae gritted his teeth and took another step, his legs nearly buckling under him. Arms trembling, he gripped Yunho's forearms and stopped, panting from the effort of walking.

"Come on, just a few more," Yunho encouraged him, taking a step back to stretch the distance between them. "We're almost to the bed. You can do it. Almost."

They'd begun the disheartening task of trying to regain Jae's balance and muscle mass a few days ago, starting at the bathroom door and taking baby steps towards the bed. The first day, Jae collapsed after a few steps. Yunho caught him easily, the older vampire increasingly alarmed at the man's bird-like weight. Jae's steadfast refusal to drink blood hindered his recovery and Yunho was reluctant to press him, half-hoping to keep the feral vampire long enough to fatten him up.

"You just want to get rid of me," Jaejoong joked, taking another step forward. Beads of sweat dotted his forehead, a teardrop of effort running down his cheek.

"Never," Yunho admitted. "I'd keep you here forever if I could."

Jae's startled glance up bore into Yunho's belly, the truth of his feelings laid bare in the older man's eyes. He hesitated, visibly torn between his instinct to flee and a spark of something flaring in his face. "Monsieur..."

"I've seen you naked," He reminded Jaejoong. "I think you can call me Yunho. Come on, *agi*. Just another step forward."

Jaejoong did fall, his body pitching forward as his knee gave out. Yunho's arms cradled him long before he could hit the floor. Scooping up the younger man, Yunho carried him to the bed, listening to Jae breath against his chest.

"I fell on purpose, you know," Jae whispered into the crook of Yunho's neck. "To see..."

"I know, *byeol*." Yunho buried his face in other man's hair and chastely kissing Jae's temple.
"I will always catch you when you fall, Jaejoong. Always."

Chapter Three

Lightning threads stitched through Paris' night sky, punching holes in the darkness and staining stars into Jae's stare. The apartment was eerily silent, each shift in the rafters echoing in the empty bedchambers, the building groaning loudly as it adjusted its bones. He refused to sit in the front room, pretending to be an old woman's dog waiting for its mistress to come home.

Grumbling to himself, he tried not to start when he heard Yunho's footsteps on the stoop, and when his stomach tingled at the other man's calling out that he was home, Jaejoong told himself that was merely hunger that twisted his guts tightly under his heart.

"Ah, there you are," Yunho said, shrugging off his coat and loosening his cravat ties. "Did you spend the whole evening here in the bedroom? The rest of the house is yours to explore if you feel up to it."

"I can see the storm from here." Scowling at his reflection in the window pane, Jae growled. He'd promised himself he would be sullen and pout at being left behind but Yunho's smile snuck under his skin, spreading until it warmed his insides. "The French Folly keeps getting hit. I am wondering if it will melt from the lightning."

"Huh, that's a good question." The older vampire came up behind Jae, wrapping his arms around the young man's shoulders. Grasping his hands loosely over Jae's chest, he rested his chin against on Jae's collarbone and listened to the shush-shush of the other man's heart. "How do you feel? Better?"

"Better." He nodded and leaned back into the man's embrace, smelling the night air clinging to Yunho's fine linen shirt. "I tried going downstairs but the steps made me dizzy."

"Ah," Yunho sighed, finally understanding the pout on Jae's temper. The young man's fiercely independent nature rebelled at the slightest hint of being caged and the slow recovery from his wounds tested Jae's already thin patience. "I would have stayed in but you need to feed."

"I don't ..." Jae scowled past Yunho's finger when the vampire shushed him. "Pig blood is fine."

"Pig blood is not fine," He corrected the younger vampire. "Not for how weak your body is. And I don't mind doing this. It's something your sire should have done when he made you."

"He's a pig that should be fed on," Jae took Yunho's offered hand, rising from the window seat. "Rats should have eaten through his skin and nested in his guts."

"Good to see you're so forgiving and compassionate," Yunho teased, cupping his other hand under Jae's elbow, ready to catch the man if he stumbled. They'd argued before Yunho left and with Jae in a high temper, it had been difficult for the older vampire to concentrate on what he needed to do while hunting. "Come on, bebe. Let's make you stronger so you can go out with me soon."

The bed waited for them, pillows propped up against the ornate wooden headboard his mistress had imported from Bombay. A bottle of dark red wine sat uncanted, breathing in preparation for their evening. Jaejoong trembled in Yunho's hands, his skin prickled with anticipation. Settling the younger man down onto the bed, Yunho turned off the luminescent globes wired through the room and lit a trio of thick candles, the sky's lightning providing him with enough light to move about the dark interior.

His hand supported much of his weight as Yunho rested on the edge of the bed, dimpling the pulled back covers. He tried not to hiss when Jae's cold fingers undid his buttons, the backs of the other's hands sending a chill over Yunho's chest where they brushed on his warm skin. With more care than he needed to, Jae pushed the fabric from Yunho's muscled shoulders, catching on the cuffs still holding his sleeves closed.

Laughing softly, Yunho removed the ebony fastenings, tossing them on the night stand. They clattered, coming to a rest against the ridge of a crystal dish, dancing another step before rolling to a stop. The shirt fell to the floor, a whispering ghostly scrap on the Persian rug. It fluttered momentarily to life as Yunho pushed it aside with his bare feet then lay in the darkness, a stark white slash amid the shadows trembling under the candlelight.

"Are you sure about this?" Yunho asked, his voice soft and pleading despite his efforts to sound in charge. Being around Jaejoong made him tender, driven with the need to protect the feral young vampire. They'd spent days together, Yunho reading from his favourite books and teaching Jaejoong to form words from the scribble of black ink across the page. The younger man learned quickly, far quicker than Yunho had, his busy mind only confined by the amount of strength he'd mustered that day.

Their evenings were often spent playing cards and Yunho was fairly certain that Jaejoong cheated with each hand, he'd yet to catch him. Jae accused him each night of being unwilling to accept that he was a better card player but was willing to let Yunho deduct the costs of his staying at the apartment from his winnings.

They both knew it was a concession to Jae's pride, one Yunho was more than willing to make if it meant the younger man's angelic face would be there when he woke in the morning.

"Come here, *agi*," Yunho's voice rumbled, a low purr as he nested against the pillows. Lightly gripping Jae's wrist, he drew the vampire to him, turning Jaejoong around on the thick mattress until the other man's back was resting against his chest.

Reaching over, Yunho poured out a glass of wine and brought the beaded rim to Jae's waiting mouth. The younger vampire's hands closed over Yunho's, tilting the goblet up until the rich scarlet liquid poured forward into his waiting mouth.

He gulped and then choked a bit, swallowing too much at once. Yunho waited, patiently holding the glass steady until Jae relaxed against him then he lifted it again, letting Jaejoong sip from it. Passing it back to Yunho, Jaejoong let his head fall back and felt the lethargic pull of the wine's seduction creep into his bones. Everything around him faded, softened under the butterscotch kiss of the candlelight. Yunho's skin glowed with strength.

"Your skin's like gold velvet," Jae murmured, watching Yunho's face through the ruby fire in the glass. "It makes my tongue itch."

"That's because you're hungry, *agi*." Yunho offered Jae another sip, reveling in the feel of the other man's hands on his thighs as he drank. The press of Jae's body on his made it hard to hide the thickening of his sex and he shifted deeper into the pillows, laying Jaejoong back until the younger man's head was comfortably resting on his chest. "I'll take care of that. I promise."

With only a few drops left, Yunho placed the rim against his lips, licking at the spot Jae's mouth suckled on. He drained the glass slowly, letting the taste of the vampire wash down his throat. Bending his head, he moved until Jae was curved into the hollow of his shoulder. The man's eyes were hooded, sensually heavy from the effects of the wine and Yunho's control came undone when a peek of Jae's tongue darted out to dab at a stray drop on the corner of his mouth.

Groaning, he inhaled sharply and held Jae close, sinking himself into the pleasure of the man's hands on his hips and naked back. The scratch of Jae's nails into his skin felt good, even better when the air hit the abrasions, sending a smarting tingle across his shoulders.

"Are you ready for me?" Yunho whispered, brushing his mouth against Jae's cheekbone. A trio of dark stars shone on the young man's pale skin, a dapple of kisses left from a god's mouth. He'd traced those stars as the vampire slept besides him, studying their movement when Jae smiled or bit down on his lower lip in deep concentration. He tasted them now, savouring the slight ridges on the tip of his tongue, nonpareils on Jae's wine-flushed skin. "Are you hungry, *agi*?"

"Yes."

Jae's whisper was Yunho's undoing. It held promises, dark sweet promises flavoured with midnight kisses and soft moans as hands clenched tightly into fine linens. A drunken moon rose in that single word, wobbling through the shadowed sky as it hunted for a dawn that would never come. Swallowing hard, Yunho pulled Jaejoong close and offered himself to the other man's mouth.

Jae started slowly, as Yunho taught him, a lick of his tongue against the satiny soft skin of Yunho's wrist. The older vampire's thumb pressed back, he sought out the pulse beneath the man's mons, finding the thump with his tongue. With Yunho's recent feeding, the beat was strong, reverberating against Jae's lower teeth. Reluctant to end the sensation of want crawling under his skin, Jae licked again, using the flat of his tongue to lave Yunho's scent from his skin.

The sensation of Jaejoong's teeth skittering across his wrist made Yunho gulp air into his lungs, the need to wash cold into his body increasing as he felt the skin on his shaft roil around with need. The press of his head against the seam of his undergarments was an unwanted friction, much less desirable than the promise of Jae's mouth around him.

"Suck on me, *agi*," Yunho commanded roughly and hissed when Jae's mouth closed over his pulse. The vampire's suction pulled a mound of skin and flesh in and the feel of Jae's fangs extruding into him tightened Yunho's skin. "That's it, bebe. Bite into me. Take what you need."

He was always ill-prepared for the slice of teeth into him, despite the years of feeding his brothers and his mistress. Yunho hissed at the sharp pain, its spidery talons hooking into his nerves and pulling hard until his cheekbones ached with the press of anguish.

Needle sharp, Jae's teeth pushed in deeper, finding the long artery that ran below the rise of Yunho's thumb. No amount of skill could deny the incessant pushing away of flesh under the brunt of a vampire's hard teeth until the rush of Jae's saliva hit Yunho's blood stream and the pain was replaced with a euphoria that rivaled the lightning breaking the night's hold on the sky.

Jae suckled, pushing in as much of himself as he took out of Yunho. Absinthe kisses sent butterflies into Yunho's blood, numbing the area and curving a wanton heat into the hard shaft pressing up through Yunho's trousers.

The blood hit his throat, gushing from the piercings he'd placed in Yunho's skin. Closing his mouth over the wounds, Jae swallowed and pulled for more, closing his eyes against the pleasure of his hunger being satiated by Yunho's blood. With his arm wrapped around Jae's shoulders, Yunho edged the younger vampire closer, letting him feed with a wanton abandon Jae rarely expressed.

Lost in the lull of Yunho's blood, Jae sighed and slowed his suckling, swallowing sips as if drinking wine. Stroking at the younger man's hair, Yunho watched in envy as his wrist

provided succor for the hungry vampire. Murmuring with encouragement, Yunho let Jae feed, trusting the other man to stop when he was full.

They'd fought long and hard against the feeding, Jae insistent on refusing human blood until Yunho pressed him against a wall, demanding answers. Shaking the younger man until his teeth rattled, Yunho finally got his answers, a tearful confession of a hunger that drove Jaejoong insane and broke his heart.

An old man once spent his evenings feeding the stray cats under a bridge, parceling out scraps of fish he'd saved from the morning's takings. A head was a particular prize, its spongy eyes a treat for the stubborn kittens who fought viciously over the carcasses. He'd spotted a different type of hungry cat in the shadows, calling out to a hidden Jaejoong. Unable to coax the boy from the bridge's underbelly, the old man gathered up the choices of the fish scraps and stretched to place them too high for the cats to reach.

The ritual continued for nearly seven weeks until one day Jaejoong found himself waiting for the old man long past the time he should have shown. Worried, he untangled himself from the beams and ventured out, searching for the scent of the elderly man along the waterfront. Cries drew Jae down a dark alley and the scent of blood made him stop short in his tracks.

Three men, large and menacing, stood over the old man's too-still form. One man's hand dripped with blood, the splash of drops hitting the Parisian cobblestones with a steady beat. The smell of it drew Jaejoong in and a rage covered his eyes with a red that was darker than the blood seeping from the cut across the old man's forehead.

He didn't remember slashing open their throats. Nor did Jaejoong recall tearing apart their faces in his maniacal anger. The first clear memory he had was the old man's look of horror at the monster he found crouching over him. His terrified scream echoed in Jae's nightmares and the pleas for mercy hid in each toll of Notre Dame's bells.

Words of explanation were lost in Jaejoong's shame. Horrified at the carnage around him and the man's repulsion, Jae fled the area, his tears running through the blood on his face until all he could taste was the salt of the dead and the sorrow of his own tortured soul.

"Their deaths weren't on you, little one," Yunho murmured. He knew Jaejoong couldn't hear him under the ecstasy of the feed but he knew the other man could feel his concern and affection. "You were helping him, repaying him for his kindness. God knows of your soul. You are not the monster that man saw. You could never be that horror."

The feeding slowed and Jae licked the spot, urging the skin to close. Yunho sighed, partially satiated of his desire and half-inflamed by the kitten licks of Jae's tongue. The rough texture tugged and pulled on Yunho's shaft as it twitched and twisted beneath his clothes.

Jae pulled away, his breath whispering a chill over the vampire's damp wrist and he kissed Yunho's palm, tracing the lines of his fortune with the curve of his lips. A flick of his tongue marked the long life line cresting over Yunho's mons and he matched his hand against Yunho's, entwining their fingers as he sat up.

"I need more," Jae whispered, crawling up Yunho's chest until the tip of his nose brushed against Yunho's lips.

“You stopped,” Yunho said, confused. “You could have kept drinking, baby. Especially if you need more...”

“No, Yunho. I don’t need more blood,” He said, shaking his head. His mouth found Yunho’s lips, tasting of blood, sugar and lightning when Jae’s tongue slid into the other’s warmth. “I need more of you. Give me more of you.”

Chapter Four

"You're blood drunk, *chaton*," Yunho sighed. "You don't know what you're doing. And if you do, then God help me, I don't want you to stop."

Jaejoong's hands slid over Yunho's thighs, running down the seams of his pants and cupping the rise of the vampire's ass before gripping at his back. He kissed like a star burning for the first time, bursts of lights against the tightness of Yunho's control. Fisting his hands into Jae's hair, Yunho returned the kiss, angling until he covered Jae's lips and dove in deep, willing himself to drown in the vampire's sweet mouth.

Yunho knew he should slide away, leaving Jaejoong to sleep off the intoxication of their mingled blood but the darkness in him numbed his legs, paralyzing Yunho with its needs. Trying again, Yunho bent down to whisper his regrets into Jaejoong's ear.

And the scent of the other man's body stilled his thoughts.

Heaven shouldn't smell like wine and lavender, he thought but Hell definitely wouldn't look so sweet.

"I should let you sleep," Yunho said, reluctant to pull away. He closed his eyes, willing himself to walk to the door and leave the drowsy young vampire to rest. His heart warred with his mind, its desires fueled by the tingle of nerves along his shaft.

"Tired," Jae murmured, rubbing his cheek against Yunho's bare chest. "But this is so....good. God, I *am* drunk. You made me drunk. Better than wine. Better than absinthe. Like sunshine."

The friction didn't help the older vampire's dilemma. His body responded to the caress, heating up and thickening with each stroke of Jae's fingers along his areola. Yunho's breaths shortened into sharp, hot pants when Jae shifted and slid his long legs between Yunho's knees. A dab of Jaejoong's tongue against the peak on his chest made Yunho growl, and he let his fingers wander, unable to resist running his hand down the length of Jaejoong's back. A puff of air blown from Jae's pursed mouth chilled the moisture left by his tongue, prickling Yunho's skin with goose bumps.

"Everything is dark until you come to me," Jae sighed, his fingers playing with the ends of Yunho's hair. "I don't ever want the sun to go down for me, Yunho. Please. Don't let the daylight leave me."

"Jaejoong..." Yunho heard himself moan, his attention fixed on the other's mouth. A pink flush coloured the man's full lips, revitalized by the blood he'd taken from Yunho's wrist. "If you don't stop..."

"Tell me to stop. Tell me to go away. Send me away, Yunho. Before I fall..." The vampire growled, propping himself up with a sinuous slither of his body against Yunho's chest. The older man had barely time to wonder where Jaejoong put his bones when he found himself breathing in the young man's kiss. "Before you make me fall."

Yunho's tongue traced the dip in Jaejoong's lower lip, a curved succulent bite of flesh he could capture between his teeth. Fuller still, Jae's upper lip demanded attention, the slight ridge creasing the swell begging to be bitten or suckled. Giving in to the desire riding him, Yunho drew the raised flesh into his mouth and laved at the spot until Jaejoong melted against him.

The bed rocked on its frame as Yunho turned Jae over, slamming him against the mattress

with a force that rippled the sheets. Exhaling sharply, Jae's lips parted and Yunho dove in, stealing the other man's breath with his tongue and teeth, forcing him to open wider or be breached by the intense assault. A sigh wavered on Jae's tongue, dangled between them and it hovered there until Yunho swallowed it, taking the young man's hesitation into his belly.

"If you want *me* to stop," The older vampire said, his eyes nearly black with desire. "You'll have to say something now. Because once I go past here, baby, I'm not stopping until I know you've lost your voice from screaming my name. Do you understand me?"

A nod. One simple gesture broke Yunho's control and he dipped his head down and took what was now his.

Delicate boned, Jae's strength lay in his shoulders and arms, muscled despite the sparse food and leaner drinks of blood. Fed by Yunho's vitality over the weeks, he felt heavier than the fragile broken sparrow child Yunho first brought in. A man lay under the older vampire now, one that stoked a fire that sear them together.

"Yunho," Jae gasped when the other man's teeth found the soft skin under his ear. His hips twisted, arching up to meet the hard length of Yunho's sex. Grinding himself against the turgid line, Jae groaned when Yunho's growl sent shivers over his pale skin.

"Do you have any idea how you looked to me? How damned good you looked to me at the Moulin Rouge? How damned good you look to me now?" He smiled at Jae's perplexed shake of his head. "It was like God poured the light out of the moon and made me a lover. Then, when I hunted for you, I was so worried that something happened to you... something you couldn't survive. I almost died when I found you there, weak and nearly dead."

"Baby, I didn't start to breathe until I saw you. I swear," Yunho said, his words nearly lost on Jae's mouth as he stole a kiss. "Then I had to learn to breathe all over again when I kissed you."

"I know what I'm doing," Jae pouted when Yunho laughed at him. "So I don't know exactly what I am doing but I know what feels... good. I know what I want."

"And what's that, baby?"

"I want you to make me feel... human again." He continued, putting his fingers over Yunho's mouth before the vampire could interrupt him. "You're the only person...the only one whose touched that cold place inside of me. It's like a dark spot that no one ever sees and I thought... that is where I'm a monster. That is what the old man saw that night; that ugliness inside of me."

Yunho heard poets talk about tears being carved from sapphires, faceted brilliant drops of water poised on settings of flesh and bone but he knew better. Tears were sharp glaciers of frozen sorrow. They fell, leaving behind trails of gloaming water but the damage they did to the soul beneath was cataclysmic. If Jaejoong ever felt as if he were special or loved, it was eroded under the downpour of anguish he'd suffered.

If I run my fingertips over your face, Yunho wondered, would I feel the gouges your suffering has left behind?

"I think I'm too ugly for someone like you." Nearly too soft to be heard, Jae whispered, "I wish I was someone you could keep."

"God no," He protested, stroking Jae's cheek with the back of his hand, ruffling the soft downy lengths falling over his ears. "Jaejoong, the man who crossed you over into this life, he was the monstrosity, not you. There isn't a bit of you I find ugly."

"In fact, that's probably the last thing I think of when I think of you." His mouth found Jae's

again, pulling small kisses free from the man's lips and tongue. He tasted himself on Jae, the deep richness of his own blood blended with one of his favourite wines. He ached to fill Jae's emptiness with other tastes from his body, pouring every bit of himself until the younger vampire was satiated and happy. He would find a sliver of the moon in the darkness that haunted his... Yunho canted his head as he stared down into Jae's startled face.

"Lover," Yunho admitted. "You're more than someone I've shared blood with. I've spent an eternity waiting for you to be here... next to me. I kept searching for the wild, feral kitten in the shadows of every alley I passed, thinking that maybe I'd find you. You were what I was looking for. A little lost, maybe, but someone who would find me as well."

"How could I have found you?" Jae snorted, wrinkling his nose. "I spent most of my time lying in bed and half-asleep."

"Because I found that I'd spent my nights wandering Paris looking for excitement and instead," He nibbled on Jae's chin, laughing when the other vampire pulled away in mock disgust. "I found that lying in bed and reading a book to a half-dead, mostly-tamed street urchin suited me than bedding the most sumptuous of courtesans."

"Pfah." Mimicking one of Yunho's favourite dismissals, Jae pushed lightly at the other's chest, enough to show his disbelief.

"Pfah," Yunho responded. His eyes softened and with a stretch of his body, covering Jaejoong. "And why are we talking?"

"Nervous," The vampire admitted, dropping his gaze. His long lashes shadowed over his cheekbones, fanning out over his skin.

"Don't be." Bending over, Yunho brushed his lips over the ridge of Jae's eyebrow, feeling the delicate strength in the other's bones. "I will never hurt you, baby. Never."

They started slow, peeling off clothing. Exploring every inch revealed as Jaejoong shed his shirt and pants, Yunho placed his mouth and fingers on places he only envisioned in wet, messy dreams. Muscled and lean, Jae glowed against the saffron bed linens, shy as Yunho exposed him to the storm's flashes of light.

"You are..." Yunho searched for the word he wanted, settling on the simplest. "Beautiful."

He sipped, taking his time to explore the body he'd fed over. His teeth worried lightly at the sprinkle of beauty spots on Jae's hipbone, finally tasting the area he'd washed clean when the other man was trembling with weakness. His tongue licked and dabbed, leaving moist trails over Jae's face and collarbone, hoping to erase the paths of countless tears, leaving himself behind to fill the chasms in Jae's soul.

Yunho filled his mouth with Jae's length, savouring its tip against his palate. Pulling back, he caught the head's ridge against the back of his teeth, flicking his tongue until the pout of Jae's sex honeyed, weeping a drop of sweet-salt.

Jae's hands roamed, trying to find purchase on his new lover's shoulders but the pleasure driving through his body made him wild. Writhing, he twisted around, swallowing the jumble of words caught at the back of his throat. His nails scraped and tore at Yunho's skin, scoring red welts over the vampire's shoulder blades.

"Yuuuun..." Jae mewled, hearing the beg in his voice. "Please... please."

"Please what, baby?" The vampire said around the treasure he had in his mouth. "Say what you need, baby."

"You," He gasped, digging his fingers into Yunho's arms as he lifted his hips to plunge himself deeper into the soft, moist heat of his lover's mouth. "Need this. Want this."

“Anything you need, Jaejoong,” Yunho said, pursing his lips to draw down slowly over Jae’s hard length before pulling back to suck at the tender, sensitive tip. “I’ll give you anything you need.”

His canines drew down, pulled by a hunger for something wilder than blood. The tip of one fang slid over the slit of Jae’s sex, rimming around the opening with care. Its sharp end scored the tender flesh, making Jae hiss with pleasure and pain. Lifting his head, Yunho watched as a drop of blood beaded crimson into the swirl of spit and seed he’d pulled from Jae’s body.

Yunho knew if he never fed again, that single drop would sustain him for eternity.

A coppery wine spread over Yunho’s lips, smearing Jae over the edges of his mouth before seeping onto his tongue. It intoxicated him, plunging him into the belly of stars until he couldn’t tell what was light and dark. The rush of Jae’s body exploded, a river of honey filling Yunho’s mouth before he could swallow what he’d taken from Jae’s sex. Rich and pearlescent, Jae’s spill washed through Yunho’s senses, tasting of the storm that raged outside.

Listening to his lover’s gasping sighs, the older vampire continued to pull lightly on Jae’s sex, wrapping his mouth tightly around its length to work the last of Jae’s pleasure from him. His fingers bruised Yunho’s shoulders, the pressure a welcome anchor amid the crashing waves that threatened to drown them both.

Feeling Jaejoong’s spasms lessening, Yunho licked him clean, swallowing a drop of release he held at the tip of his tongue. Kissing the jut of bone at Jae’s hip, the vampire bit down, scoring the skin with delicate swirls. Sliding his fingers into Jae’s mouth, Yunho tilted his head up, reveling in the heat of the other’s tongue against him.

“I need to have you around me, *chaton*,” He whispered, taking his time in kissing the corners of Jae’s mouth, feeling his fingers pressing against the soft of his lover’s cheek. “And I want only you to moisten my way.”

Dripping, his fingers slid between Jae’s legs, finding the tightly wound curl of his body. Pressing, Yunho slid one tip into his lover’s heat, working past the ring and into the velvet that lay beyond. Jae’s body reacted, tightening against the intrusion. The pressure felt good, promising an intense pleasure if Yunho could breach the resistance.

“Need,” Jaejoong whispered, lifting his hips and willingly opening for Yunho. Ravaged, his mouth burned pink from his lover’s kisses, his teeth worrying at the plump. “Please, Yunho. I need...”

“Know this, Jae,” Yunho chased Jaejoong’s tongue, capturing their mouths in a fierce embrace. Still pressed against his lover’s lips, he worked himself into the other’s body, their gasps at the joining sharp and bright. Swallowing the mewling pouring from Jae’s throat, he kissed at the joy he found there before releasing his heart into Jae’s open mouth.

“I love you, my kitten,” He said, closing his eyes and letting his tears fall onto Jae’s face. “And I will let you go only when the moon falls from the sky.”

Chapter Five

They didn't move, a tentative joining of bodies as Jae's shifted to accommodate Yunho's girth. The older vampire trembled, the feel of the other around him nearly too much to hold back the want inside of him. Resting his weight on his hands, Yunho waited, holding his primal needs at bay while Jaejoong rested his cheek against Yunho's shoulder, panting with the effort to take more of his lover into him.

"Wait...please," Jae moaned, tilting his head back. His weight crushed the pillows at his shoulders, pressing back into the mattress as he hissed out the slight pain cramping his body. Yunho dipped and the pressure grew into pleasure, radiating out from Jae's centre.

It was nearly intolerable, a too sharp keening delight raking through his nerves and spreading over the surface of his skin. Pin-prickles scored Jae's cheeks, a rush of shame-cold-need warring with the hot want of tightening around Yunho and never letting him go.

Then his world exploded into bits of stars when his lover leaned forward and captured his mouth in a bruising kiss.

Their tongues lapped eagerly, entwining together when Yunho's hips rocked forward, deepening his thrusts into his lover. Jae's moans were lost in Yunho's mouth, swallowed by the older man's barrenness. The mewls filled Yunho, drops of golden moonlight striking the bottom of Yunho's once-empty heart. The gloam spread, pouring into the recesses of the older vampire's mind until he felt as if he were the one being penetrated, stretched apart by the other man's bared-open soul.

Slowing his strokes, Yunho pulled up and watched Jaejoong's face change. Once coloured with a faint fear, the other's eyes were rapturous and his mouth dimpled under the bite of Jae's teeth. A hint of fang peeked out around the pink flesh, the promise of a kiss Yunho yearned to share with his new lover.

Slick with their bodies' joining, they moved again, slowly to match the rain hitting the window, finding the beat-beat-beat of the water against the glass setting their rhythm. A flash of electricity hit the sky, quickening their blood. Yunho responded to the thrush of power in the heavens, pushing himself deeper in the velvet cocoon of Jae's body, stretching his arms out to capture Jae's fingers in his, closing themselves off from the sky's fury.

Unheard, the storm raged outside, slamming against the window while nature celebrated their joining. Flashes of light stroked the room, lashing the darkness back as the lovers fell into one another, pulling back and forth into their pleasure and slowly working at the tightness binding them. Jae arched, pushing his shoulder back and pressed up, meeting Yunho's thrusts with unabashed wildness. Full of his lover, he gasped and mewled, needing more and wanting the long slides in and out of his body to continue, urging Yunho with every panting breath.

His insides aching for release, Yunho bit Jaejoong's shoulder, sinking his fangs into the tender flesh. He needed to feel the other man against his teeth, reassuring himself that the pretty, feral lover he'd found in Moulin Rouge's decadence was real. The splash of Jae's blood in his mouth struck him hard, making him gasp around the bite. The taste of him burned Yunho's throat, a rich sultry star bursting in the darkness of Yunho's mouth.

Jaejoong gasped, holding Yunho to him with trembling hands. He lay open, bared to the core for the man who taught him of a world outside of the dirt and alleyways he haunted.

Silken pleasures held his body apart, ties of blood and soul tying him to the man who held him. Their mingled voices became a music to his ears, a sensual concert playing along his body and touching each part of his abandoned soul.

His breaths came fast, hard short pants against Yunho's chest. Jae lifted his knees up, hooking his shins over his lover's hips and let the other man's motions ride him to the edge of his control. The spill of his seed poured into the tight space between their bodies, seeping through the tiny gaps of their flesh until Jae's release connected them together with its heat. Unable to hold back any longer, Yunho followed, sliding his length in as far as he could go into Jae's core and rocked his pleasure deep into his lover's core.

Jae's teeth found a tender spot below Yunho's collarbone and in the jerking spasm of his climax, he bit down, sealing the circle of their blood and sex. Gasping, the older man stilled and licked at the marks he'd left on Jae's shoulder, lapping at the tiny splashes of crimson dotting Jaejoong's pale skin.

"Mine," Yunho growled around the mouthful of flesh he held between his fangs. The words were muted, reverberating through Jae's body but the other man heard them clearly, soaking the sound of Yunho's possession into his bones.

"Yours." Jae agreed, lifting his chin up to meet Yunho's kiss.

Moving slowly, they rocked with the last of the sensations riding their bodies, unwilling to separate. Languor claimed them, stealing over them as Yunho slid around to press against Jae's back. His arms wrapped over his lover's chest, one hand draping down to brush through the beads of seed on Jae's stomach.

The storm rolled over Paris, crashing through the silence of the night. Yunho listened to nature's rage battering the city, the sweetness of Jae's heart beating against his forearm as the vampire fell asleep. The mingled perfume of their bodies ghosted through the room, claiming it as their safe haven against the storm and Yunho smiled, his lips pressed into Jae's sweat dampened hair.

"Mine too," The young man mumbled, rolling his cheek over Yunho's bicep, placing a fang-dimpled kiss on the other's salty, flushed skin.

"Very much so, kitten," Yunho agreed, closing his eyes to let the storm its worst. "I am very much yours."

Days flew by, marked by picnics and strolls by the river with an occasional foray into Paris' museums, Jaejoong wrinkling his nose at some of the world's famous paintings hung for viewing. Yunho did his own wrinkling, most often when confronted with the messy peasant food Jaejoong rooted out of small cafes in tucked away corners of the city.

After purchasing a roast chicken marbled with rosemary and cranberries from a woman selling cooked meats out her houseboat's kitchen, Jaejoong climbed the river bank to where Yunho sat waiting. The older vampire's gaze followed a V of geese as they made their way across the sky. He let his attention fall, fixing on the long-legged Korean clambering up the grassy hillside, smiling up at Jae when he reached Yunho's side.

"I got the bread, cheese and wine," Yunho said, waving the still-warm crusty loaf at his lover. "There's a Stilton and a Cheddar which smell good but I can't vouch for the grape. We could be using it to dress our vegetables if it's gone to vinegar."

"We could put it on Cook's potatoes like you did the last time." Jae grinned. "She might only hit you once this time because you're not being wasteful."

"Funny."

"Oh, the wine is..." Jae swallowed, forcing the sip down his throat. "It's sour."

"Really?" Yunho frowned, taking the bottle from Jae and taking a tentative sip. "Oh God, that's terrible. Come here."

"Why?"

"Because I want to see if it'll be sweeter if I drink it from your mouth."

"Aish," Jae pushed at Yunho's shoulder. "You're horrible."

"Only because you make me beg for kisses."

The chicken grew cold, a forlorn sad fowl resting against forgotten cheese. Maligned, the bottle of wine lay on its side, its cloudy contents spilling when Jae's foot nudged it aside, his attention solely on Yunho's pursed mouth. A flock of house sparrows watched the couple, then a single brave bird fluttered down to peck at the bread, breaking through the crust and delving deep into its soft spongy interior.

The flock descended, emboldened by the pair's disinterest. They'd nearly eating a third of the loaf when Yunho noticed the frantic peeping by his knee and then a cloud of feathers and crumbs as the sparrows took flight when he sat up.

Laying on his back, Jae turned his head, his index fingering rimming his swollen lips in a lazy circle. Yunho's kisses were aggressive, often biting softly until Jae surrendered a sigh, pressing in with an insistent tongue. His hands were no better, exploring what skin he could reach through Jae's clothes, bemoaning the fashionable clasps and buttons on the wool and linen.

"I think the chicken's gone off on its own," Jae said, lolling his head to the side. The pie tin he'd brought their lunch on was empty save a smear of juices and discarded cranberries, their juice-plumped corpses rolling about the edge as he tilted it to look inside. "Yes, all gone."

"Well that couldn't have been the birds."

"Unless they're vampire birds," He teased Yunho. "Perhaps they've been waiting for weeks to feed, barely strong enough to fling themselves down from the branches, just hoping that some unwary diner would bring them the flesh of their cousins to feast on."

"Ah, no more wine for you," Yunho said, tweaking at Jae's nose with his pinched fingers. "You've gone mad with that one sip."

About to respond, Jae blinked as a raindrop struck his lashes. Another fell, hitting his cheek before rolling down to his warm mouth. It cooled the flush from his over-kissed lips and he laughed, angling his chin up to catch the rain on his tongue.

"We'll worry about the plates later." Grabbing Jae's hand, Yunho pulled his lover to his feet, dashing back to the wrought iron fence leading to their home.

The summer storm followed them, nipping at their heels and drenching them through before they could reach the relatively safety of the yard. Grey clouds rolled by overhead, steel and pansy puffs darkening with the threat of a steady downpour. Sheets of water punctured the river, pocking the surface with deep gouges washed away by churning waves.

Their wet clothes dripped, piddling water on the main hall's mahogany floors. Closing the back entrance, the older vampire smiled as Jae sat down on the floor, pulling at his remaining leather boot, the other already discarded and placed on the boot rack. A grin split his face when he caught Yunho staring. Lifting one foot, he motioned his lover forward, ordering him to help.

Bracing himself, Yunho tugged hard and Jae's sodden footwear unexpectedly dislodge from his foot. Surprised, Yunho flailed his arms, trying to catch himself from falling. His slick-

bottomed boot slid, intersecting a spill of rain dripped from his pants. Still clutching Jae's single boot, Yunho went down, scowling playfully at his lover after he hit the floor.

Growling, he lunged at the sock-footed Jaejoong, scrambling to reach the long-legged man. Shrieking, Jae dodged, slipping and sliding over the floor as he tried to make it to the upstairs before Yunho caught him. Rounding the corner of the main hall, he'd nearly reached the trestle woodwork near the sweeping staircase when he chanced a glance back to see how much distance he'd gotten from Yunho. With his fingers grazing the lower banister curve, Jaejoong slammed into something fleshy and hard, knocking his breath from his lungs.

Strong arms closed over his waist, holding Jae up. Stunned, he tried to catch his breath to yell for Yunho when he heard his lover coming up behind him, the playful growl in the other vampire's throat moving from mischievous to something darker and slightly dangerous.

"I'd thank you to unhand my lover," Yunho said, disengaging Jaejoong from Se7en's grasp. "You have your own, remember?"

"How can I forget?" Se7en's grin was friendly, ignoring the flash of jealousy in his brother's eyes. "He snores when he has too much wine and talks in his sleep. I think he's composing a story in his dreams."

"Yunnie-ah!" Min came through the open front door, shaking the rain off of his overcoat. His hair curled slightly from the damp, brushed his shoulder blades, once queued back for journeying but loosened from running in the rain. Crossing the threshold, he approached the older vampire with a wide grin, his open, honest face filled with delight at seeing Yunho. "We're home!"

"I can see that, Minku," Yunho released Jaejoong and hugged Changmin in welcome, patting at the young man's broad shoulders and back. "Come here, I want to introduce..."

"You've got to be Jaejoong," Min extracted himself from Yunho's hug and threw his arms around the lean, smaller man, embracing the other as if he'd known Jae for years. "It's good to finally see you. Yunho writes about you in his letters."

"Letters?" Jae cocked an eyebrow at his lover. "You wrote letters about me?"

"Long ones," Se7en interjected. "Long sugary sonnets of love and lust that I thought I'd never hear the end of. Min recited from them so much it was like I'd had sex with you, brother."

"Come, let's talk about Yunho's letters," Jae's eyes narrowed and Min laughed, hooking an arm around the other's waist. Leading Min to the sitting room, he canted his head at the younger vampire, "We've not eating. The birds and a cat stole our lunch I think. Are you hungry?"

"I am always hungry," They could hear Min say as the pair disappeared into the bowels of the house. "How come you let a cat steal your lunch?"

Se7en waited until he was sure the two were out of earshot before punching Yunho on the shoulder. Growling in response, Yunho held back his fist when the couple's driver deposited the last of their baggage into the front room. Waving Se7en off, Yunho dug into his pockets to find change for a tip, apologizing for the bills' soggy nature. Shrugging, the driver closed the front door behind him and the house once more eased into a comfortable silence.

"You look good," Se7en said, eyeing his brother. "Love agrees with you."

"It does." Yunho nodded. "Min's happy."

"Ecstatic." Se7en sat down on the steps, hitching his trousers up to remove his boots. "He wanted to come meet your lover. I think he plans on being Jaejoong's best friend. He mumbled something about solidarity and providing a united front against us. He's a plotter, my Minku."

"Ah, Joongie doesn't plot. He just strikes quickly until you bleed and are left there wondering what you did and what happened." Yunho laughed, refusing to help pull off Se7en's boot. "Oh no, that's how I bruised my ass to begin with. You do that yourself. I've my own to attend to."

They sat together, bumping shoulders occasionally as the sound of impish laughter rang down the hall from the sitting room. Shaking his head, Se7en whistled under his breath. "The two of them will be the death of us."

"I'll be glad to die that way," Yunho murmured and Se7en's expression softened from teasing to tender. "I love him, Dong-Wook. He... completes me."

"So it's good between you?"

"Mostly," He admitted. "Sometimes he infuriates me and I spend so much of my time arguing about nonsensical things until I realize that he's teased me around to his point of view. For someone without schooling, he has a wicked labyrinth of a mind. He can turn me onto myself. I'd avoid playing chess with him if I were you. Unorthodox and brutal are the words that comes to mind."

"Good, he and Min can tangle over the board," Se7en sighed as he wiggled his sock-feet, his boots laying on the floor. "I can go back to cards and drinking. My ego's taken enough of a beating from Min. I don't need your pretty thing to mock me too."

"He is pretty, isn't he?" Yunho grinned boyishly, pride overcoming any sense of proprietary he should have had. "And sweet, most of the time. Funny. He makes me laugh."

"It's good to hear you laugh," His brother said, hugging Yunho with one arm. "And he's gorgeous. But don't tell Min I said so. He's got a wicked streak for revenge in him. I don't want to wake up missing my eyebrows again."

"You'll have to tell me that story." He bumped Dong-Wook away, dodging his brother's punch. "Junsu told me he was heading to America but then I got a postcard from him in Venice dated from a week ago. Did you see him?"

"Ah, our little oddly lonely nine." Se7en nodded. "We passed one another by one day. He was arriving as we were leaving. He's taken up residence in the villa there."

"Oh?" Yunho leaned forward, hearing Jaejoong call them to lunch. "Come on, food is ready. If we don't hurry, they'll eat it all. But Junsu, he's back in Venice then? After all his talk about America?"

"Ah, you see, little brother," Se7en tapped Yunho on the nose as they strolled towards the sitting room. Bright laughter burst free from its open door as Min finished telling a tale of a gondola and Se7en's unfortunate encounter with a lovestruck swan. "There's something that Venice has that America doesn't."

"Leftovers?" Yunho said, eyeing the remains of a pork shank on a plate set between Changmin and Jaejoong. Another lay on the serving plate, its crust lightly picked at.

"No," Se7en replied, kissing at a dot of apple butter trembling on Min's lower lip. "America be enticing, but I think Venice has the missing piece of our Junsu's soul."

Masques and Illumination

Venice 1893

It began simply with a kiss.

Their mouths met, soft and yielding, trapping a drop of wine between them. The pinot noir was dark, rich and tasted of pressed cherries, an intoxicating oak fragrance released in the heat of their lips. Around them, Carnivale raged, the night growing deep and starred with candles and soft lights. Music played somewhere nearby, a long sweet melody of loss and betrayal but neither heard a note, not with the sound of their own murmurs echoing in their ears.

One wore a papier-mâché half-bauta, gilded and baroque. It was new, bought from a mask maker on the west canal and sparkled with inlaid paste gems that matched his lust burgundy and gold clothes. The doublet fit snug across his chest, laced with black cords and trimmed with a thin ebony silk ribbon. His trousers were black, although the costumer insisted burgundy would look better but he was happy with the contrast. Even happier that the dark velvet hid his excitement when the other man's fingers brushed his.

The other bore a simpler costume, a black leather domino creased and worn with age. His long body wore the thief's costume well, suede breeches tucked into calf-length boots too broken in and comfortable to be just for show. A white linen shirt ruffled at the nape and cuffs with yellowed delicate lace as if stored in a chest for a few decades and brought out solely to contrast the man's velvety, tanned skin.

They touched again, briefly laving at the corners of their mouths. The leather masked man cupped the other's face, frustrated by the white and gold masque that kept him from stroking the other man's cheeks with his thumbs but he knew Carnivale was a time when the elite could mingle with the gutter and none would say a word.

In the weeks before Ash Wednesday, Venice transformed to a land of exotic demons, sultry witches and cold-faced marionettes. It was the only time when he felt comfortable walking among them, hiding his face and dark almond eyes from the crowds. The domino protected him, more than any fist or cudgel could, veiling his oddity from prying eyes.

It was chance. A touch of fingers on his palm and then hands along the small of his back. Discovering the person touching him was a man was a surprise but the warmth of his mouth was welcome. Even more so, the round lush backside pressing into his palms when he let his hands wander down the other's back.

He felt like money; smooth old coins and aged sweet wine. The doublet he wore was smooth, despite the elaborate embroidery picked out in gold thread. The lace tickling their chins was soft, tatted with silken care, brilliant ivory compared to his own time-dulled yellow.

But he tasted like sin.

For the man in burgundy, this was no simple kiss. It filled his soul, reaching deep into the darkness he coaxed back with sunshine smiles and witty charm. The moon lay on the other man's tongue, shining silver light into the shadows he thought would never see the radiance of day. He needed more but there were too many layers of cloth between his hands and the warm

skin of the man he held... of the man who held him in return. Frustrated and needy, he moaned, a slithering wanton sound that promised melted wax puddles after a long stormy night of passion.

The world faded around them, the costumed revelers becoming wisps of colour and light. There was no more music, just the sound of their mouths and breath mingling and the rough of their tongues danced slowly with the drunkenness of enraptured pleasure. The stars were gone, burnt out of the sky by the fire stoked between them. The universe stopped, slowed and captured in a burgundy and black amber kiss.

And then he was gone.

Carnivale erupted into a frenzy around them, pulling them apart and dragging them along like flotsam. A hurricane of people beat at their embrace, rendering them helpless to stop the tide tearing them in two. Hands pulled at their shoulders, arms and legs and voices begged for them to enjoy the night with others. *'A sip of wine!'*, someone shouted. *'Dance with me!'*, a woman gasped. *'Sin with me!'*, another man whispered.

Then they were lost to one another with only the moon to shed tears over their shattered kiss.

One Year Later

The lower floors of Ca' Vendramin Calergi bustled with servants, many burdened with ornate costumes and headgear while others carried hand-written invitations closed with personal wax seals to guests staying during the Carnivale season. Suite doors were left open despite their occupants' various stages of undress, a few of the newly arrived waiting for an entre to one of the important galas being thrown.

Two special guests of the Count de' Bardi and his wife, Her Royal Highness Infanta of Portugal, had no such worries. The silver tray near their door spilled over with intricately embossed parchments, many gilded and heavily ribboned. A few were plucked out for perusal by the mistress of the suite, her sensual mouth pulled into a contemplative pout as she read through the evening's selections.

"Shall we begin at the party Gabriele d'Annunzio is throwing?" She asked her youngest son, absently tossing the parchment on a stack of possibilities.

The woman wore a loose robe of her signature colour, its rich scarlet satin a vibrant frame for her pale golden body. A crimson gown lay on the dressing table, stretched out to prevent any wrinkles that might ruin the silk. Delicate pink pearls strands waited for her neckline, elegantly positioned near her evening's attire. Her exotic Pan-Asian features were already dusky from a thick line of kohl and swirls of powder although a golden-white cat mask adorned with a mane of golden feathers would cover her face.

"Susu? Did you hear me?" She asked, thoughtfully staring at the line of her youngest's back. Here in Venice, she was known as Signora di Cremisi and while others called her Mistress, her beloved sons often called her nuna, a thoughtful consideration to acknowledge her youthful beauty. "And has your costume been delivered yet? I haven't seen it."

"I'm wearing the burgundy and black," He replied, watching the gondolas drift down the Grand Canal.

He was considered too pretty for some in Venice's high society, usually by older men he'd refused to spend time with. Others thought he looked cold despite his angelic face. The fashion of the day for men called for stiff lines, high collars and padded jackets but he eschewed these sensibilities in favour of a cut of clothes that hugged his slender waist and set off his shoulders and long legs. While other men were waxing mustaches, he remained clean shaven and his heavily lashed sloe eyes were the envy of many Venetian women. Despite these failings, his husky voice was a bright beacon for laughter in many drawing rooms and he was well-known to be a willing and able partner to those unfortunate daughters left to the wall during dances.

But each night, he left the parties and ballrooms alone, taking leave of the festivities with a solemn, regretful lack of companionship.

"You wore that last year," Cremisi frowned, wondering what had gotten into him. "You can't be seen wearing the same costume two years in a row. People will think I'd not paid my bills to the tailor."

"Let people think what they want, nuna," Junsu said, crossing the room to lean against the back of the settee. "I need to be wearing what I wore last year... in case he is looking for me."

She sighed and lightly stroked his cheek. Her fingers touched his damp skin, drawing back with the silver of his tears. "Are you still pining for your scoundrel? It's been a year, darling. He might not even be in Venice."

"No," Junsu shook his head and kissed his sorrow from her fingers. "He felt — alone. Shadowed. Like he lived in the echoes of Venice and only surfaced to be among the bright colours and lights of the city when he can hide among the thousands."

"You were also the romantic one," Cremisi tsked. "Your brothers should never have left you that night. And I should have been here. It's not often I miss Carnivale, especially when all of you in Venice. I could have consoled your broken heart that night. I am so sorry I was not here."

"It is alright," Junsu murmured, gifting his mistress with a beatific smile. "The others were lost in one another. It was Jaejoong's first Carnivale and Yunho was busy showing him the sights. We didn't even exist for hyung and Min. When they weren't breaking beds in the hotel room, Changmin was dragging Dong-Wook through ruins and museums. I don't think they got any sleep for three weeks."

"Well, get dressed then," Cremisi said as she stood from the couch. "I'll be down in a few minutes."

"Really?" Junsu's eyebrows lifted to mock the woman who embraced him into her life. "You've mastered the ability to stop time? You take longer to get dressed than I do."

"Keep it up, little one," She laughed, slapping Junsu on the round of his ass. "And I shall not help you find your scoundrel. With your angelic face and my wicked ways, he will be helpless to escape."

Yoochun sipped at the merlot his housekeeper left uncanted on the dining room table. In the candlelight, the wine appeared black, only showing its true vibrancy when he tilted the glass to take a drink. She'd prepared him a simple dinner; roasted chicken and butter-sweet basil spaghetti but his stomach churned at the thought of eating more than a few bites. Tonight was the first night of Carnivale and he would soon be among the living as they danced under

the Venice moonlight.

To an outsider, the apartment would seem Spartan, barren of the gee-gaws and heavy furniture found in most Venetian homes but the top floor of the palazzo suited Yoochun. Its open rooms and arched windows gave him a view of an ever-changing city and its canals. From his bed he heard the morning calls of the gondoliers as they pick up passengers heading into the inner city and the sounds of the water hitting the docks lulled him to sleep as the sun rose.

He woke to the streets coming alive for the night, the merchants returning home from their rounds and the baker hawking the last few loaves he'd not sold earlier. At times he would awaken early enough to exchange a few pleasant words with his housekeeper before she left.

Unlike the others, she was a dour-faced woman who kept mostly to herself. With little to no curiosity about her odd employer and the hours he kept, she polished the woodwork to a sheen and arranged for workers to come in for repairs, oftentimes haranguing the tuners when they complained about having to climb three flights of stairs to restring one of his pianos. He called her Signora and paid her well. She called him idiot and grumbled when Yoochun slipped her an envelope full of money at Yuletide.

It was the perfect arrangement and he would be sorry when he would finally have to let her go.

By the time he'd picked enough meat from the chicken to satisfy his stomach's grumbling, it was well into the night and the Canal was alive with boats bearing glittering party-goers to their destinations. He dressed slowly, lacing up his black suede breeches until they hugged his thighs.

A pair of thigh boots would have to serve him this year. The last pair he'd purchased were lost to a puppy the downstairs tenants let wander about. He didn't begrudge the young dog the leather but the couple was mortified and wouldn't stop sending notes of apology until Yoochun finally told his housekeeper to inform them they would be evicted if he heard another word about the matter. The dog was now half-grown and a closer watch was kept on both it and his shoes.

He unfolded an antique white shirt from its place in the dower chest. Slipping his arms through, Yoochun half-heartedly fussed at the lace froth at his wrists, remembering when the tatting was a brilliant white and starched stiff. He'd not done much with the shirt other than wash it, scrubbing the nights from its weave before hanging it to dry each evening before Ash Wednesday. He wore it and the others like it only during Carnivale, searching for a small hint of who he had been before the night turned to ash in his mouth.

Pulling his thick black hair into a queue, Yoochun tied it back with a leather strip, its ends weighted with silver beads. His vest was next, its soft suede panels laced across his chest and down his stomach, flat and trimly snug. Last came the black leather domino.

He studied the masque, thoughtfully pulling at the ribbons falling from its edges. A loud cheer erupted from the Canal below and Yoochun looked up, startled by the noise.

A silver-backed mirror captured his face, holding him there in that moment of surprise and he almost looked away, unable to bear witness to what he'd become.

"You are not yet that animal," He scolded softly. "Not yet. Maybe soon."

Forcing himself to stare at the man frozen against the silver, Yoochun studied his face, seeing the strangeness of his features in the glass.

In the soft candlelight, many would not be able to see the cinnamon kiss of his eyes but the curse laid on his blood turned the dimness to near day and he could clearly make out the claret

of his irises and the soft pink flush of his full mouth. The almond shape to his lids gave him pause and he lifted the domino, tying it tightly above the knot holding his queue.

Covering half of his face, the battered leather hid his high cheekbones and slanted eyes and he choked back a sob, swallowing the anguish scraping his throat raw. His need grew, haunting his body and turning his skin to fire even though the water-scented wind cooled the room.

Confronted with the evidence of his horrific nature, Yoochun turned away from the mirror, hoping not to see any more.

The domino might have hid his strangeness, it did nothing to hide his sensuous mouth or, for that matter, the sharp fangs that showed the world the beast he truly was.

Chapter Two

The hunger drove him forward, plunging Yoochun into the gaily dressed crowd. It sank its claws into his back, whipping his nerves into a frenzy until every inch of his itched with need and want, begging to be slaked with a hot rush of copper in his throat. His skin crawled with the feeling of a thousand bee stings then tightened, making it hard to breathe.

A woman appeared, her throat pulsing with a beat strong enough for his fingers to feel its thump even though he stood yards from her. With a light rain falling, she sheltered under an overhang, her coarse face painted thickly for the Venetian festival. Her hair rose up and back from her face, a brassy bird's nest draped with paste pearls and faded ribbons. The costume she wore was old, frayed at the hems and missing buttons down the front. The corset closures were mismatched, pinned in frogs holding some of the ties together.

He took a step towards her and lost himself in the shadows.

Closer up, she appeared worn and dreary, a cagey look to her sharp eyes. The fullness of her mouth was a lie, outlined with a red wax pencil and filled in down over her chin. In the dark, most men wouldn't notice the deception but for Yoochun, there were no lies in the darkness — just his own.

She stank of the sewage floating in the Grand Canal as if her last bath had been in the yellow-green waters winding through the sinking city but he didn't care. He needed to feed and she was available. The press of his thirst ate at his calm and he could feel the fire of his hunger burning through his resolve.

A few notes passed between his fingers to her hand made her smile. While still young, the woman wore her years heavily on her shoulder, beaten down by the streets. Yoochun's mouth ghosted with a hint of a smile, hoping it reassured her of her worn beauty.

She lead him into a niche along the walk, barely more than a divot in a wall but it suited most men for what they needed to do. Yoochun glanced about, spotting no other couples lurking under nearby overhangs and pulled the woman close, pressing her back into the brick façade. Bending over, he pressed his mouth on her jaw, leaving a gentle kiss against the ripe of her ear before trailing his lips down the column of her neck.

If she smelled of rank canal sewage, she tasted much worse, the sour bitterness of laudanum soiling her skin. It would be a risk to feed upon her but the beast mewling inside of his blood could not be denied much longer, especially with the crowds milling about the city. Ignoring the dangers, Yoochun let his hunger emerge and reined in the horrific creature inside of him, hoping to control his appetite.

His teeth sank in through her fleshy neck, further down until the rich pulse of an artery shook and trembled at its invasion. The lush wine of human blood filled his mouth and he strained, trying not to gulp at the wound, needing desperately to leave the woman as unmarked as he found her. Too hard of a swallow and she would bruise or worse, the drain of blood would leave her wilting, a dead slattern in his arms.

The hunger wanted more, growling angrily as he pulled back with only a mouthful. The edge of his appetite was whetted but the rest of it would have to wait until the butcher delivered the pints of pigs blood he ordered. Most of it would go into his housekeeper's morcilla, a Spanish variant of her own buristo. Long used to his habits and believing in

restoratives, she would remove two of the pints and mingle it in with wine, leaving it in the chill room for drinking.

She moaned, driven to lust by the touch of his mouth and fangs in her blood. Grasping at his wide shoulders, the woman slithered into him, pressing her breasts against his chest, rubbing slowly to heighten her release. Begging softly, her words stumbled, becoming coarse and gutter as she whispered her need for Yoochun's hands to be on her body. Gripping at his hair, she held him in place, refusing to let him withdraw from the twin piercings on her neck.

"Need you," She murmured. Stronger than she appeared, the woman hooked her arms around Yoochun's neck, disheveling his queue. Her fingers made quick work of the tie holding his hair back and his black mane tumbled down around his masqued face, a soft curtain of midnight silk. Running her hands through it, she found the ties to his domino, and tugged at one of the ribbons, forcing Yoochun to pull back, casting her from his body.

"Bastard!" Spitting, she fell, her rough skirts falling back, exposing her pockmarked legs. The borrowed fancy gown hid a plain linens under its wide hem, a false trim of eyelet masking her lack of proper garments. Anger faded under fear and her face changed, becoming almost child-like in its terror as she gazed up at the man she wanted moments before. Crushing his domino in her nerveless hands, she gasped, covering her mouth in horror. "Oh my God. You are of the Devil. You have come to take my soul!"

He knew what she saw. Hated the look of himself as much as she did. The almond shaped eyes were nearly cat-slanted and dark, a strange red-brown not found in most Italians. His skin ran to gold, untouched by the sun but still his body retained a demonic hue. Although his head was well-shaped, the bones under his skin were marble hard and high, his cheekbones rising around a mouth created by the devil for sin.

The priest who found him dazed and wandering the hills made certain to beat the meaning of his weak flesh into his bones, striking him firmly with the thorned-rose switches until he bled more than he could take in. Each night he was allowed a sip of pig or sheep blood, enough to return him from the madness of his starved body but not enough to give him dominion over the creature lurking just beyond his sanity. Only when, years later, the clergyman died, he discovered what he was, the description of his demonic nature methodically captured in the man's journals.

"It is of a birth most foul," The priest wrote. *"Born fully a man but clearly the offspring of a witch and either one of the Devil's servants or a gargoyle come down from the stone to leave its seed on mankind. Although it wears the face of a man, its features are fouled as if God had no hand in its making. Curved eyes and face like a still-born cat, the creature hungers for blood but cannot tell me where it has come from, speaking only in a tongue that must be the language of Hell itself."*

The clergyman wrote volumes of Yoochun's wickedness, leaving messages for any who found his unnatural ward to kill it lest it breed with any woman or befoul any stalwart man. The journal entries' weakened in strength over the years and the handwriting wavered but the man's convictions and hatred of Yoochun's nature were clear.

He'd found a monster and brought it in to study for the sake of the Church. Should any of his brethren find the creature who called itself Yoochun, they were to slaughter it on sight. It would speak to them in Italian or French, perhaps even in some of the hellish words it remembered but under no circumstances were they to believe its pleas. The music it made was of the angels but it was trickery for had not Lucifer fallen from the Heavens? It made sense that the wickedness of the Hells would seek to turn the glory of beauty against a human man and

weaken his soul so the creature might feed. It had no memory of its life before being found battered and broken on the cliff faces. Any scrap of information gleaned from the priest's years of study were for naught.

It was better that the creature die in the rages of a fire than be suffered to live thinking it was as good as a man.

Those were the words Yoochun found in the priest's writings. They did not surprise him. He'd listened to those words every hour, pounding into him during the rising of his welts and the breaking of his skin. There was evidence of letters sent off but to whom, Yoochun did not know. He only could suspect the priest belonged to a brotherhood — a brotherhood that could now be hunting him down.

That horror was what he saw in the woman's face.

It was the horror he woke to every night when he opened his eyes and realized who — what — he was.

Her bitter sourness curdled in his mouth, the blood he'd taken only a sip but the taste of it going down his throat choked him — reminding Yoochun of the animal he was. The crowds were louder, too noisy for the woman's screams to be heard over their ruckus but in every gathering there were moments of incredible silence and Yoochun knew he would have to flee before the garde arrived. There would be no explanation for his dagger-like fangs, none that allowed him to remain walking among the mortals he fed from.

Running was his only choice. As it always was and would be for as long as he existed in his world of half-nights and forgotten music.

"Garde!" Her shouts became louder and footsteps echoed down the alley, sounds of someone's approach.

Grabbing the domino from her hand, Yoochun struggled to tie the ribbons about his hair, hoping to fall into the crowd and blend before whoever it was reached them. Then a man appeared — a man or a ghost of his memories and Yoochun's beating heart stopped, then skipped — a staccato refrain of wonder and fear.

The burgundy and black were vibrant, worn over a sensual body Yoochun wondered if he imagined in the haze of a blood-drunken stupor. In the dim light, the white and gold mask resonated with innocence, an angelic calm amid the shadowed evil of his demonic nature. If two beings were more unlike, Yoochun couldn't imagine how. God surely had forsaken him, any chance of ever tasting the honey of Heaven were burnt away as the man approached, warily eyeing the woman.

Any hope of covering up or running were gone. Her hand lay over the bloodied bite, leaking a trickle of red between her fingers. He'd not had time to seal the wound more than to close the artery so she wouldn't bleed out but the punctures remained, dark evidence towards his conviction.

"Bacio di luce della luna," The man whispered, reaching out with a gloved hand and stroked Yoochun's face. "What has happened?"

"He is a monster!" The woman lurched forward, clutching at the other's shoulder. Her bloodied fingers rumbled and marred the burgundy doublet, smearing a drying scarlet trail over its weft. "Look at his mouth! He is a demon risen from Hell to feed upon us."

"He is no monster," Junsu replied softly, spotting the telltale bite on the woman's neck. "Stand still, let me see your wound."

"Beware, he will kill us all in our sleep," She hissed, reluctantly baring her neck for Junsu to

see. He examined the mark, keeping half an eye on the black and white clad man standing before them.

"Here, I can help you," He murmured, gently kissing the spot.

Laving his tongue over the wound, he wrapped a tendril of his power around her, finding the weakness of her will. Fumbling through the folds of his trousers, he found a handful of notes and pressed the money down between her pushed up breasts, urging her to remember nothing other than a blond man who left a bite on her neck but paid well. A final kiss and he stepped back, silently gagging on the taste of her skin clinging with an oily stain to the roof of his mouth. If this was what the man was forced to feed upon to sustain himself, then it was a good thing he'd come along.

Junsu watched her leave, holding her skirts up and toddling along as if drunk. Turning, he faced the man he'd hunted through the streets of Venice, half-hoping to find his heart carried in the other's hands and half-wishing the man he'd kissed been a dream.

"Dreams are always sweeter than life," Junsu whispered as he approached the man he'd found one midnight so many moons ago.

"Do not..." The domino wearer pulled back when Junsu brushed his fingertips over his lips. "You should not touch me. Don't soil yourself with the likes of me."

"I think it is the other way around," He laughed softly. "The world had turned to ashen grey and then in the moon during a Carnivale I found the glory of dawn in a kiss. And now you would deny me another taste? You would keep the sun from me?"

"I do not keep the sun in my mouth," Yoochun disagreed with a shake of his head.

"That — I disagree with," Junsu replied and leaned in to take a sip of the wine he knew he'd left behind.

Over three hundred moons rose and fell in between their kiss and yet their passion flared hot as if were moments ago. The taste of the woman burned away, leaving only the complicated fragrance of their tongues and lips. Junsu heard someone sigh, surrendering into the night then realized it was his own cry of need, slipping from his love-parched throat when the other cupped his face.

The man's touch was gentle, playing a soft refrain of starry skies and wind-scattered clouds over the tremble of Junsu's sensitive skin. His hands moved down, wrapping over Junsu's neck and the balls of his thumbs pressed the other's jaw open, giving the black-clad man entry into Junsu's willing mouth.

He plundered in, sipping and nibbling on Junsu's upper lip, taking his time to savour each taste and exulting in the varying textures he found. Laving at the edge of Junsu's mask, he growled, frustrated he couldn't sample the stretch of bone and skin of the other's cheek and Junsu moaned, tilting his head back to pull the mask away.

They kissed again, fire playing between two burning embers until their clothes grew too hot and tight for their bodies. Pushing the man against the wall, Junsu kissed at the holes in the domino, letting his tongue wander over the thin press of the other's eyelids. The ties were hastily done, easily tugged free but the man turned his head, clenching his eyes tighter.

"No," He said, a rough brandy voice as potent as any liquor Junsu had the pleasure of sipping. "I am not — I cannot be seen. The woman was right. I am a monster. Not for someone like you."

"You are so wrong," Junsu murmured and pulled the domino gently from the man's face, laying a kiss on Yoochun's cheek. "Open your eyes. I want to fall into them. I want to see the

stars in them and know that you carry their light in you forever.”

Yoochun opened his eyes, staring down at the beautiful man cupping his face. “God, do the Heavens know that you’ve fallen? Why haven’t the angels come for their brother?”

Turning aside, he shuddered, hating to think of his mouth dirtying the pretty face he gazed upon. His heart clenched, knowing the priest had been right. He was the spawn of a fallen, carved from diseased angel blood and bone and left to wander the earth. The man he held was beautiful, warm and flesh pressed into the curve of his body. “Please, do not look at me. It’s not right. I am a horror.”

“If you are a horror, then I am as well,” Junsu smiled, letting his fangs slid free. Yoochun gasped, his breath catching in the cold of his chest. “But I am telling you, beloved *bacio*, you are no more a monster than any man. If anything, I suspect that within your beauty lies a heart even more wondrous than I can imagine. Let me kiss it open so the world may see it bloom.”

Chapter Three

The sun touched the horizon, spreading a pink sheen over sprays of clouds until the sky was filled with cherry blossom puffs that stretched across the Venetian horizon. Junsu laughed, rubbing at Yoochun's swollen mouth, feeling at the dips his teeth created in the other man's lips. Shyly, the smile was returned, a dimple winking in the black-clad man's cheek. Without knowing, they'd passed the night standing within the shelter of one another's arms, finding solace in the furious storm of their kisses.

When the morning finally rose, they emerged from the fire, soft gentle coos and caresses. Their thirst slaked, now was time for exploration and laughter, a sip from the other's mouth and the feel of a finger pressed onto a tongue. Yoochun shivered under the feel of Junsu's fangs running along the column of his neck, touching lightly at the base where a pulse beat erratically, skipping in excitement when Junsu's hands spread flat over Yoochun's chest.

His doublet discarded, Junsu half-leaned against the man he longed for, the fine linen shirt he'd worn underneath open to Yoochun's questing fingers. His own hands found the plum tips of Yoochun's chest and he smiled knowingly when he heard the other man gasp when he flicked his tongue back and forth, wetting the nub before sinking his front teeth into the firm flesh.

"Where do you live?" Junsu murmured, staring into the other vampire's eyes. "I want to see where you've been hiding from me."

"I — not far," Yoochun answered, stammering. He'd never taken anyone into his lair, the retreat where he licked his wounds and dreamed of humanity. Only the servants he periodically hired were allowed in and then, only to the living quarters. No one passed the threshold into his personal chamber, least of all someone he found taking up residence in his heart.

"But you need time," Junsu said, holding tightly onto Yoochun's shoulders. The man looked guilty, torn between needing to embrace the presence of an angel in his life and fighting back the shadows that choked his heart from beating freely. Laying a gentle kiss on Yoochun's mouth, Junsu breathed into the other man's core. "I will wait for you. I will wait for whenever you feel you can open for me. I will do anything I need to make you feel as cherished as you should have been and if that means the clouds are burnt from the sky because the stars are falling then so be it — it will never be too long of a wait to have you by my side. I promise you this."

They met every night, through Carnivale and then into the dreary Lent season when the night hung heavy over a waiting Spring. Junsu spent his time spinning stories of his brothers and their lovers, tattling on Changmin's insatiable appetite for knowledge and Jaejoong's curious tilted view of the world. He shared his own battles spent fighting windmill giants and searching for something to quench the parch of his soul.

Neither spoke each other's name but they knew — deep within their hearts — that the world would stop turning if they no longer breathed in the other's warmth.

It took time to draw Yoochun out. At first the man was quiet, sitting nearly too still in the

café chairs then when the wine bottles they shared were rolling empty and there were only crumbs left of the olive-studded bread Junsu loved to dip into oil and red vinegar, Yoochun would speak. Haltingly at first, leaving small drops of pain and sorrow on the silvery water of Junsu's laughter.

With his face hidden mostly in shadows, Yoochun spoke in low dark whispers. At first it was of the fear he had of being a demon and Junsu let him speak, listening intently to the other man spinning out the terrors he had for his soul.

The touches were tender then, smoothing and consoling. Yoochun's tears flowed unhindered by shame or pride. He tried turning away so Junsu wouldn't see his weaknesses but the other man was insistent on kissing them away, pressing his mouth to each salty drop as if it were the sweetest rain.

"Let me take your pain into me, *bacio*," Junsu would whisper. "You shouldn't bear the weight of it on your shoulders. Let me lift your burdens."

Yoochun shared the shredded words he carried in his heart, nestled against Junsu as they sat in a gondola, punted through the light-draped canals. A nod to the man poling the boat assured Junsu of their privacy, a canopy of silk and tassels hiding them from prying eyes and Yoochun parted the curtains of his silence to an audience of one.

Junsu heard his beloved's laugh for the first time in a library room, nothing like the rumble of humour he purred at one of Junsu's horrible puns but a full hearty burst of pleasure. A private arrangement by his mistress gave them time to view a kinoscope filmstrip of a vaudeville act brought the sun indoors when Yoochun's laugh burst from his chest. The projectionist didn't notice, used to viewers' reactions but Junsu's breathing stopped, starting again only when Yoochun leaned over to kiss the tender ticklish spot below his ear.

That night when Junsu held Yoochun's hands as they kissed each other farewell, he whispered against the tormented vampire's lips the most terrifying thing Yoochun ever heard.

"I love you so much, *bacio*," Junsu sighed, holding the warmth of Yoochun's laughter in his heart.

In that moment, Yoochun discovered the depths of his fear plummeting even further when he breathed in the kiss of air from Junsu's words and replied, "As I love you, Susu."

They stole time from the day, climbing the stairs to Yoochun's top floor apartment, tangling their bodies together. Yoochun scrambled to open the door, nearly dropping the key down into the banister well, swearing in French when the metal pinged loudly on a grate and bounced back onto his booted foot. Another attempt fitted the hasp and they were inside, cocooned in the plaster walls of his sanctuary.

Junsu stepped in first, tentative at being allowed past a door Yoochun kept closed to all souls. It was different than he expected, open and airy. Filmy curtains hung from the main room's enormous windows, framing a splendid view of a canal teeming with morning traffic. Banks of beewax candles filled the room, long thin columns of white and ivory set into iron candelabras or on porcelain dishes, anything flat that would catch the drip of wax. Unlit in the coming dawn, Junsu could still imagine Yoochun standing among them, the glow of light a golden bath over the other man's beautiful face.

A red velvet couch, battered and dinged from years of use, sat at one end of the room. Next to it, a long table scattered with pages filled with inked dots, lines and words. The floors gleamed with lemon oil, fragrant and polished to a high gloss but the honey oak merely served as a frame for the most precious items set about the room.

A grand piano dominated the centre of the room, three smaller pianos arranged at the west end. The instrument was a ebony angel wing unfurled over a strung harp, ivory and black keys slightly worn on the edges from Yoochun's fingers. Its stand held a half empty page, an inkwell and pen left nearby, waiting for the composer to return. Its piano bench looked upholstered over, a cushion covering the flat and stuffed for comfort, well suited for hours of sitting. A few guitars rested on Y stands, classical shapes made of fine woods. The fretboards were as worn as the piano keys and one lay on a side table waiting to be restrung.

Open archways led to other rooms but Junsu knew the heart and soul of Yoochun's life lay in the salon he stood in. This was where he breathed freely and worried away the hours, lost in a world of ink and notes.

"Play me something," Junsu said softly, stepping away from Yoochun to sit on the couch. "I want to hear you."

"I've never played for anyone," He admitted, shy now that he lay bare and vulnerable to the man he broke open his heart for. "I... wouldn't know what... suppose I..."

"I've heard your words and have loved you," The other replied. "Let me hear your soul. Play me something, Yoochun-ah. Let me hear what gives you life."

"What gave me life," Yoochun corrected then shuffled his feet, rubbing at the back of his head with his hand, ruffling his long black hair. "Still gives me life but now, it's sweeter. Everything I sing is for you. Every note I write is yours."

"Then share," Junsu laughed, poking at Yoochun's side when the man came over to sit on the piano bench. "Show me your life."

"This is something someone I know is working on," He ducked his head, letting the wealth of his hair hid his nervousness. "I hope I do it justice. If you don't like it, the fault is purely mine."

"I'm certain I will love it," Junsu laughed, resting his chin on the carved high arm of the couch. "How could I not? You are singing it for me."

It was not Italian, that much Junsu was certain and Yoochun's voice growled around the words, swelling and falling in a molasses sweet darkness but the composition broke his control when the piano throbbed its passion under the man's skillful touch.

A second verse, this time in a familiar Venetian tongue wrung tears from Junsu's heart. Yoochun no longer saw the room with its forest of candles and honey wood. His eyes were distant, remembering a moon set above him and a kiss that sealed his destiny. Junsu knew of the night Yoochun sang of and the yearning in his voice echoed the stillness of Junsu's heart, the coldness he braved while looking for a single man in a domino mask.

*I lungamente per voi. I lungamente per il vostro regno.
La mia bramosia è più grande quando siete vicino.
Sempre, I lungamente per il regno della vostra bellezza;
I lungamente da essere là --- anche quando sono là. ¹*

The final note hung in the air, a sultry kiss from Yoochun's lips and it whispered off, carried

¹ Hugo Alfvén: Jag längtar dig (I long for you) English Translation:
*I long for you. I long for your kingdom. My longing is greatest when you are near.
Always, I long for the kingdom of your beauty;
I long to be there — even when I am there.*

into the day on a sunbeam. A man shouted from below, the slap-slap-slap of water against his gondola punctuated with his cries of bella!, bringing a blush to Yoochun's cheeks.

Crying, Junsu stood, trembling as he wiped his face, only to replenish the tears with each step. Placing his hands on Yoochun's shoulders, he straddled the bench and guiding his mouth over the other's, drank the music left on Yoochun's tongue.

If their first kiss was wine, this kiss was brandy, potent and distilled — simmered in oak and aged to perfection amid the beauty of Venice. Yoochun's soul sang under Junsu's touch, his tender, battered heart blooming under the sunny caress of the other's words and laughter, coaxed open by the pure sincerity of his loving embrace. If asked, Junsu would say the moment his fingers found Yoochun's warmth was the instant his world sprang forth in vibrant colour. Around him, the life turned rich, a full hearty experience seen through the eyes of a man coming out of the darkness. The still silence of Yoochun's company held small humours, folded slips of gold leaf caught on his soul when they walked through the streets, arm in arm as the city laughed and sang with them.

Yoochun brought with him music, forged in the dark of the hills and beaten to a sharpness by a man full of hatred. Italy and its open arms welcomed the self-proclaimed pariah, fostering him in its bosom until he healed enough to sing the laments of his soul. Within his gilded cage, Yoochun played, lost in the strung together notes on endless pages until the day he ventured out and touched Junsu's heart.

To Yoochun, Junsu was a storm, washing him free of the sins laid on his flesh and soul by a man who knew nothing of who he was. He'd been bled, an innocent sacrifice laid upon a bed of thorns and cut open for a false priest's delusions. Junsu bathed his wounds, stitching each long rent in his soul with a laugh or a smile and for every tender kiss given, Yoochun's scars faded a little bit more.

He knew what he was now — a man, formed by the blood of an immortal creature but still at heart, a man. His soul was his own to lose or save, threatened only by loneliness when Junsu wasn't near. In the company of the almost-woman who brought Junsu to eternity, Yoochun found a teasing aunt, a benevolent heart that took him in and wrapped him in silks and love. He envied their easy relationship, seeking to forge his own between them. The missteps he took were laughed off and the triumphs he had were celebrated.

For the first time since he could form a thought, Yoochun found a peace in his soul, a stoked ember banked in the warmth of people who loved him — and fanned by the wings of an angel the Heavens let him find.

Their clothes were torn from their bodies, the heat of their skin melting away the fabric. Desperate to touch every inch of Yoochun's long form, Junsu tugged and pulled, snapping off buttons with a feverish delight. They barely broke their kiss, standing quickly enough to topple the piano bench to the floor. Piano keys sounded a disgruntled protest when Yoochun's hand slammed onto the board, his balance taken from him when Junsu's fingers found the close of his pants.

Stroked hard and weeping with need, his sex strained and fought, wanting to be touched yet the man shivered, afraid at the closeness and what it would bring. His fear turned his eyes to sienna diamonds, glittering and wet and Junsu murmured nothings, comforting the man he'd fallen in love with — the man who brought him moonlight with his voice and silk in his touch.

"What are you afraid of, *bacio*?" The man whispered, biting at the plump of Yoochun's mouth. "You have nothing to fear from me."

“Tonight — today — is a time of first for me. First, that I’ve brought you here — that I play for you and now,” Yoochun shuddered when Junsu suckled at the corners of his mouth, tasting each word as it slipped from Yoochun’s tongue. “I’ve never — shared myself with anyone before.”

“Then I will show you that pleasure,” Junsu sighed, thanking God for the gift of a man so willing to return his love. “I will show you what we can create together. I cannot wait to hear your voice rising with my name and I will weep when I cry out yours in joy.”

Chapter Four

They stumbled, moving further into the depths of Yoochun's sanctuary, tangled about one another and reluctant to release the touch of skin on skin. Bells tolled from a nearby cathedral, somber and petulant booming calls to the faithful. Shivering, Junsu heard the resonance in his soul, as if the bells cast their siren call for the young man about to bare himself to him.

As golden as the main room, Yoochun's bed chamber shone with a buttery light, speckles of silver playing across the ceiling where the sun hit reflections up from the water outside. Bare chested, Yoochun stood at the edge of a wide antique bed, the mattress plump and feather-filled. Sheets woven from hand-softened cotton from the north of the African continent stretched over the bed, the top linens casually left undone and a burnt sienna jacquard duvet cast aside. Set into a niche in the eastern wall, the bed's headboard ran an iron trellis to the ceiling, then stretched over the mattress to connect to the twisted columns rising from the footboard. Live climbing cabbage roses were woven into the curlicue pergola, delicate pink-cream blossoms faintly smelling of tea and persimmons peeking out from a canopy of green leaves.

"These are beautiful," Junsu whispered, reaching up to touch a bloom. The flower bowed under his touch, releasing a single petal. It floated, caught by some invisible wind and landed gently on the rumpled linens. Picking up the petal, Junsu ran it over his mouth, inhaling its sweetness. "Just like you."

"Come here, baby," Yoochun grinned, trying the words out in English. They'd played with the language, trying to emulate the Americans they heard in the parlours of Italy's cafes.

Junsu burst into laughter, hooking his fingers into the waistband of Yoochun's pants and pulled him closer. Switching to Italian, he made his intentions clear in case the other man didn't understand.. "No, no. You come to me."

Shy, Yoochun stood still as Junsu peeled off his own clothes, standing naked and proud. They were dissimilar in shape, Junsu's body riper and long in the torso, a delicate build of muscle on compact body. The heat from Yoochun's face fled, dashing downward until he burned beneath his skin. Junsu's smile reassured him but the butterflies in his stomach made lops and circles in his gut, churning up old fears and insecurities.

"Don't be ashamed, Chun-sweet," Junsu pressed his mouth against Yoochun's and their bodies met, stomach to stomach.

Suddenly the only thing Yoochun needed was to be clothed in Junsu's heat, plunged deep into the moisture of the other man's mouth and wrapped in the velvet silk of his body. Parts of him needed to be held, pulled on and the tug of his sex on the base of emotions ran wet with the thought of Junsu's hard silken length pressing up inside of him in return.

Fabric slithered down from his hips, pooling at his feet. Stepping up, Yoochun kicked his discarded clothes away, unsure and bared. Junsu stared into the other man's eyes, rising up to kiss him at the corners of his full mouth and said softly, "Let me show you... let me taste you."

He started slowly, pushing Yoochun back onto the bed. Urging his lover up, Junsu settled the man into the nest of soft pillows propped up at the headboard. Laying against the pale sheets, Yoochun's angelic face and form brought tears to Junsu's eyes as he marveled at the beauty of the man he'd fallen in love with.

"Have you been to *Accademia di Belle Arti, bacio?*" Junsu murmured as he licked up the line of Yoochun's belly, leaving a wet trail over his chest and circling around to a plum nipple beginning to curl and harden. "In Firenze?"

"No," Yoochun gasped, barely able to breathe. "Only here — and the hills. I've only really been...*oh dio dolce caro nel cielo.*"

His throat closed up and he struggled to speak. Clutching the bed linens with numbed hands, he leaned into the pillows, throwing his head back. The long black hair Junsu loved to run his fingers through flowed back, a wave of night run with blue against the creamy cotton. Clenched tightly in Yoochun's hand, the fallen rose petal crinkled, its bruised body climaxing its fragrance onto the vampires warm palm.

"There is a statue there." A lick and then the swirl of fangs around the nub, hooked between Junsu's teeth. "David. He is beautiful. A perfect man seen through the eyes of a genius."

Yoochun gasped and he moved, writhing under the heat of Junsu's roaming mouth. His skin was on fire and the head of his sex tightened, the vein along its length throbbing when his lover skimmed his palm over Yoochun's shaft.

"But, my beloved *bacio,*" Junsu murmured and began to travel along the crease of Yoochun's stomach muscles. "Michelangelo would weep with shame for not sculpting you instead."

Then Junsu's mouth brushed over the velvet hardness of Yoochun's sex and the vampire lost himself a sea of pleasure.

The wet heat of Junsu's tongue wrapped around him and Yoochun mewled, his hands unclenching the sheets and finding the crest of hair on the other's head. His hips twitched, sliding back and forth, instinctively trying to find a primal rhythm. His heart skipped and then, without thinking, he fell into a pattern, short strokes that ran his sex under the ridged palate of Junsu's mouth. Gasping, he curled up, held down by a gentle press of his lover's hand on his abdomen then the sensation of being swallowed hit, Junsu's throat closing over the tip of his sex.

"Wait for me, Yoochun-ah," Junsu whispered, leaving as much of his own moisture on his lover's sex. "We're not even close to finding the peak of your pleasure."

Yoochun struggled to find his own breath, his chest heaving with the effort of pulling in air. Rising, Junsu lifted himself up, straddling Yoochun's turgid shaft and gripped its base, guiding the tip to the rose ring protecting his heat.

"Too much," Yoochun mumbled. "Don't want — to hurt — not you."

"This won't hurt me, *bacio.*" Junsu smiled, the mysterious knowing smile of a man who knew the limits of his body and the pleasures he could find there. "I want you to watch my face. I want you to see how good it feels and if you want, I can give you this pleasure too."

Junsu lowered himself down, holding Yoochun taut as he eased the other man's sex into his body. The tight rose kissed the tip then swallowed it, pulling back in a teasing slither. His laugh was rough when Yoochun growled and twisted in his hand then Junsu pushed down further, sliding the other's sex in. Releasing his hold on Yoochun's shaft, he rocked gently, taking in each inch of Yoochun's hard sex until his lover was buried deep into his heat.

They found a rhythm, slow at first as Yoochun's hands gripped Junsu's hips, his thumbs rubbing small circles over the juts of bone he found there. He let Junsu set the pace, losing himself in the tight of his lover's body around him. He'd brushed himself with the palm of his

hand, frantically hurting to find release but the motion left him unsatisfied despite his watery release.

Now he understood what his body need.. what his heart needed.

And he was wrapped around Yoochun's sex and infused into his soul.

The peak came suddenly, rising from his core. Rolling up into the hollow of his legs, his sac roiled and pulled, ready to spill his seed into the depths of Junsu's body. What started the fall of his heart was his undoing again.

Junsu's mouth lowered onto his and the roses above him became pink moons, one for each night he'd longed for the feel of the other's lips against his own.

Their kiss held his immortality — his humanity — and Yoochun tumbled into the brilliance of his lover's smile. For a long second, he felt he could see the beauty of Junsu's soul reflected on him, shining away all of the shadows he clung to for cover.

Then he went over the edge, filling Junsu's emptiness.

Junsu bent forward, gasping as he lost control, spilling his release over Yoochun's belly. Falling forward, he slid free of Yoochun's softening sex, wrapping himself around the other man's stomach. They lay side by side, struggling to regain their minds and breath.

"That was..." Yoochun strained, trying to find a word that would express the joy he heard in his soul. "That was... you are... my music. My angel."

"Don't go too far, *bacio*," Junsu laughed, "I have other things planned for that beautiful body of yours."

"I want this from you. What you did with me — I want to try to share that with you." Yoochun slid off of the bed, returning with a thick hand towel dampened with warm water and a bottle of wine. Decanting the Chianti, he handed the basket-cradled bottle to his lover and gently cleansed himself from Junsu's body. "Let me do this and then, you can show me more."

"I don't mind having you on me," Junsu murmured, taking a sip of wine before passing it back to Yoochun. Swallowing, he met his lover's eyes with a seductive wink. "Do you have lotion or oils somewhere in this aerie?"

"Lemon oil," Yoochun laughed at Junsu's horrified gasp. "No? I think there are aromatics in the boudoir. My housekeeper buys my toiletries. I think she purchased some recently."

"Have you told her about me?" He asked, climbing down from the high bed, stepping onto the sun-warmed wooden floor in search of the bath.

"No." Yoochun blushed. "I think she guessed when I came in one morning with your marks on my throat and not a sign of cosmetics on my clothes."

"A lovely woman." Junsu pressed one knee onto the feathered mattress, lifting himself back up and tumbling against Yoochun's prone form. He held up a set of vials, the glass marked with the handwritten labels of a fine Venetian bathhouse. "I will have to send her roses."

"I think she already has some," Yoochun said, pointing to the canopy. "She's asked for slips of these for her garden. Duenna said they took well."

"Ah, then chocolates. What woman doesn't love chocolates?" Junsu murmured, daubing the contents of one vial onto his fingers. He paused, looking up at his lover through long thick lashes. "I should have asked you. I'm sorry... I should have asked if you wanted to..."

"I want to give you what you gave me," Yoochun sighed, cupping his lover's face and gently kissing the worry creases from Junsu's forehead. "Please."

They kissed again, languid and sweet, fueled by wine and the scent of roses on their skin as petals wafted over their dewed backs and thighs. Junsu took his time, testing and gauging each

motion of Yoochun's body. The other man responded, giving himself over to Junsu's practiced hands, gasping lightly when the other's fingers touched his core and pressed in.

"Relax, *bacio*. If you are too tense, then it will hurt," Junsu whispered into the hollow of Yoochun's neck, easing the tip of his index finger in. The oils flourished, scenting the tea rose fragrance with sweet almonds and Yoochun sighed, surrendering to the feel of his lover's touch. His body opened, taking Junsu in and cradling the slender finger against the hot of his centre. "There, beloved. Let me show you why this is so damned good."

Lightning crept from Yoochun's belly when Junsu found a spot inside of him. The first stroke lay out the rumble of a spring storm then cascaded into a full thunderous roar when another touch released the tension in his spine. The third left Yoochun mewling and writhing, pleading with Junsu for something more, anything more but the slow torture of dying slowly from unfulfilled passion and then he shouted, unable to find his mind when another finger joined the first, spreading him gently apart as Junsu worked to loosen his body.

"Please, Susu-ah," Yoochun begged, pleading with low rumbling growls. "I need... you. Inside of me. I need you to touch me. My soul. My heart."

And then Yoochun lost his mind.

Spinning under the kaleidoscope of sensations Junsu placed over his senses, he was vaguely aware of his lover's fingers being withdrawn and then the insistent touch of something wider and silken. Wider than he expected, Yoochun tensed at first, then breathed himself into relaxing, hearing the soft encouragements in Junsu's words as the other man rocked and pressed firmly in.

The feeling wasn't exactly pain, Yoochun decided. He'd felt pain, had it beaten into his bones until his marrow hurt from the bruises over his skin. There were harsher words that cut him deeper than the stretching of his inner core against Junsu's flesh. The sensation of his lover was — he thought — a baptismal. The dowsing of a soul into the holy waters of joy and to rise from the turbulence after being held down was possibly the sweetest breath of air he could take.

Yet there was more.

If Junsu's preparations drove him to the brink of insanity, the length of his lover's sex would surely keep him in the rafters of the bell towers of Venice's cathedrals. The tip slid over his delicate nerves, stroking and rubbing until Yoochun could barely keep still. His own shaft wept, the head sensitive and tender but he still found it with his hand, rubbing the shaft with his palm and circling the head to smear the dew collecting at its pout.

With his shins hooked over Junsu's shoulders, Yoochun reveled in the blanket of his lover's body over him, keeping the chill of the breaking spring from entering his bones. A few stroke of Junsu's hips and he cried out, the rough calluses on his hand from guitar strings catching on the delicate skin of his shaft and then he felt Junsu push his fingers away.

"Let me do that for you," Junsu whispered, bending over to lave at Yoochun's earlobe. "Let me watch you find the heavens, *bacio*."

Yoochun cried out, his lover's fingers expertly finding each inch of his sex with an erotic kiss of fingertips and palm. The wide silver band on Junsu's smallest finger grew warm, stroked hot by their touch of their skin rubbing against one another. It felt like a melted star against Yoochun's shaft and then the final hammering blow to his control hit when Junsu's mouth brushed on his nipple followed by sharp teeth piercing through the flesh.

He drank, softly sipping at his lover's potent blood then suckled harder, drawing out each drop as he spilled his seed into Yoochun's body. Cast into the swirling waters of his desire,

Yoochun came, crying out to the blushing roses. His hands gripped the headboard and the edifice shook, raining pink blossom kisses down from above.

The day grew quiet between them, the sounds of Venice reaching in to cradle them to sleep as the city woke up around the entwined lovers. Reluctantly, they separated, unwilling to clean off the spilled wine and seed marbling their pale bodies and held one another. With arms wrapped tight, they stroked soft whispers across heated skin, feeling their hearts pound together in the slowing climax of their love.

Sleep drew them down, settling over Junsu first but Yoochun was not far behind. Kissing his lover's temple, the once-monster whispered as the dawn rose. "I love you, *il mio angelo caro*. Thank you for waiting through the moons to love me too."

Chapter Five

Carnivale.

Venice's canals shone. Gondolas heavy with jeweled and masked partiers wove through the sparkling night waters. The punters pushed their passengers along, trying to outshine one another's calls with their deep sonorous voices belling operatic through the cool spring air. The smell of wine was in the air, coupled with roses and the sweetness of traditional pastries. The bakery below was closed but the workers inside were already labouring for tomorrow's opening. A fragrance lingered, one of Yoochun's much loved combinations for the Venetian festival; roasting pignoili nuts and anisette, mingled with candied fruit and simmering chocolate.

In his own home, his housekeeper baked for days on end, leaving him with stacks of sweets. Preparing to meet Junsu's family for the first time was frightening enough. Yoochun didn't need to wonder about what to bring. He woke to a mountain of packages left for them on the table, each expertly wrapped in foil or cellophane and marked with a label in Duenna's beautiful handwriting. Tin containers of his favourite cookie were stored on the butcher's block in the kitchen and he gave in often to the temptation of the sweet *biscotti dell'arcobaleno*.*

The rainbow cookies were impossible to resist. Even better was the taste of one in his mouth when he kisses Junsu, leaving behind a kiss of almond, raspberry and chocolate.

"Stand still," Junsu scolded, placing himself close to Yoochun's legs, standing on either side of his lover's feet. "You're ruining the look of your costume."

He'd re-laced Yoochun's necktie four or five times and fixed the buttons more than that. Junsu shuddered to think how Yoochun would play with the wide cuffs of his jacket. The heavy midnight blue brocade glistened with gold trim and buttons, an understated elegance suitable for his gentle, shy lover. Small insets of diamonds glittered from the shirt's lace cuffs and the discreet spill falling from its high collar. A dark onyx button closed the collar, nested up against Yoochun's apple. The overall effect was both European and Asian, a tribute to the musician's blood and his home.

Stepping back, he nodded, happy with his work and gave Yoochun permission to don his jacket.

Shrugging on his doublet, Junsu laced the front closed, meeting Yoochun's bemused grin with a wink. "What are you smiling at?"

"You're wearing the burgundy again," He said, running his hand over the velvet trim. "Someone like you should have a different costume for each night."

"Ah, nuna will love you," Junsu kissed the tip of Yoochun's nose, leaving a wet mark on the man's skin. "I'm wearing this... for sentimental reasons. I have other costumes at the palace. It's just that... this one is lucky. I found you when I wore it."

"Then I should wear my old one," Yoochun shouted, making to run to the bedroom where his discards lay in a chest at the end of the bed.

"Touch one item of that costume and I will burn it, no matter how fond of it I am," The vampire cautioned, laughing when Yoochun peeked out from around the archway to wink at him. "Besides, from now on, you should only wear that for me — when you are pretending to

be an pirate from the rough seas.”

“I’ll need a captive,” Yoochun pondered. “Someone to ravage, of course.”

“Of course,” Junsu agreed, handing his lover the tricorn to complete his costume. Donning the feathered hat, Yoochun cocked his head to one side, trying for a jaunty sneer but the predatory look he was aiming for reduced Junsu to a fit of giggles, earning him a growl. “I am sorry, but truly you make a horrible villain. Your face is too sweet for it. Maybe we’ll work on it, *bacio*.”

Wisteria decorated the gondola Junsu hailed to the dock. The long purple clusters hung from green leaf garlands, strung delicate near the bow and thickening to a canopy screen above the gondola’s passenger seat. The gondolier held the boat steady as they mounted, pressing the punt against the dock to lock it in place and to keep the craft from swaying under their weight. After they boarded, he pushed off, greeting others of his stable with a baritone call, lifting the words in a dipping aria as he rowed. Falling into a rhythm, the gondolier began to sing passages from an old Italian opera, his deep booming voice carrying over the canals as the boat cut swiftly through the waters.

Boats jostled for the centre of the canals, gliding seamlessly into place. Their punter rowed his passengers over when Ca’ Vendramin Calergi appeared around the bend, ducking as he passed under a low bridge. Yoochun gave Junsu a worried look, fussing with his sleeves until his lover smacked his fingers gently.

“Stop that,” He whispered. “You look fine.”

“I don’t feel fine,” Yoochun grumbled, checking the gift packages again. He was certain he’d left something behind, something important whose absence would surely embarrass Junsu but it seemed as if everything was there, even the small packet of burgundy glass beads and pearls he had strung for Signora di Cremisi. “I feel like I’m going to throw up.”

“Don’t throw up,” Junsu fretted, then found the masques he’d tucked into his cape folds. “Here, lean over so I can tie this on.”

A columbine baroque mask covered Yoochun’s eyes and nose, leaving his kissable mouth free. Junsu straightened the papier-mâché white and gold demi, arranging the gilded piece under Yoochun’s black hair. A fall of jet silk locks covered some of the detailing but overall, Junsu was happy with the effect. His lover’s strong jaw and soulful eyes dominated the mask, despite covering most of his face. He’d already heard a sigh of regret from a woman they’d passed on the canal. Junsu could only imagine how many hearts his quiet, shy lover would break at the gathering merely by walking through the palazzo’s doors.

His own demi was simpler although its diamond pattern of ruby and black provided some contrast to his pale skin and pink mouth. The mask maker matched the hue of his doublet perfectly, even daubing crystals along the trim to mimic the starred gems set into the brocade. Despite his mistress’ objections, he’d grown inordinately fond of the burgundy doublet and black pants, especially for the lover he’d snared while wearing it.

The queue to get to the dock was long, extending far around the building’s exterior. Several of the more impatient party-goers were risking a dunking by stretching over to hook their feet over the small rise of the outer building and hopping over. A scream of horror cut the chatter then bursts of mocking laughter as a drunken courtier bungled the jump, his costume’s robes filling with air and ballooning him up as he bobbed alongside the pier.

“Come along,” Junsu rose, stepping carefully onto the palazzo dock. Holding out his hand, he took the packages from Yoochun, then grumbled when he realized he’d left his hands too full

to get payment for the gondolier. Laughing, Yoochun extended the fare and tipped him, passing over a small tribute of biscotti for the evening custom. "I shall pay next time. I promise."

"Of course," Yoochun's eyes were sharply twinkling behind his mask. Junsu was generous with gifts and trinkets but paying for fares seemed to be something he often missed. "Besides, this frippery's a bit expensive. More than enough to cover the fare."

"That frippery isn't expensive," Junsu sniffed. "Not when you compare it to the pleasure I get in seeing you in it. It's cut very nicely thank you. You don't own anything that actually fits into the curves of your body."

"My body doesn't curve like yours," Yoochun pointed out, sliding up behind his lover and boldly smacking him on the rear. The teasing was unusual, especially in a crowd like the one that clustered about palazzo's entrance. Taking half of the packages from Junsu, he juggled some of the smaller ones in cellophane, nearly dropping a book of historical dramas they'd found in at a merchant's shop.

The press of people tightened and Yoochun panicked, his breath growing short as the air around him heated up with the scent of bodies and warm blood. A touch of Junsu's hand on the small of his back ground him, bringing him back to the present and he smiled, exhaling his anxiety out in a hard whoosh.

Junsu laid a soft whispering kiss on Yoochun's cheek, hugging about the waist with the one arm he had free. "Don't worry, *bacio*. I'm here."

The palazzo brimmed with colour and lights. Chandeliers made of crystal and gold shone, wired with electricity and the soft steady whiteness was nearly blinding against the dazzle of the people gathered in the main salon. Yoochun lost count of the number of Petrucios he saw within a few minutes, their number only rivaled by the Harlequins dancing about the room. Jugglers competed for space next to contortionists and acrobats dressed in spangled leotards tumbled about the room, settling into a pyramid before they were off again. All round them, Venice's monied elite and scandalous legends chattered and drank, their eyes watching for a new tidbit of gossip to be passed about the next morning.

Junsu knew that Yoochun's mysterious, athletic figure would be the most whispered *on dit*, especially when he sincerely bowed deep to an elderly woman inappropriately dressed as a seductress. Lady Leybourne was notorious for her refusal to acknowledge the years she'd put on with the young men she brought to each Carnivale getting closer and closer to short pants each year. And while she wielded a lot of influence in the London *ton*, she felt none paid her the proper respect she was due.

Yoochun's shy, vaguely predatory smile brought a blush Junsu could see even through the powder on her cheeks. Her fan flicked up, waving cooler air over her face and he graciously let her pass, keeping his eyes on her face as she walked by, a simpering entourage following in her wake.

"You flirted with her," Junsu muttered, slapping his lover on the arm. "She's older than me, I think, and you flirted with her."

"You say all women like chocolate," Yoochun reminded him. "I think all women like being thought of as women and no woman is undesirable. It is the man who lacks understanding of her beauty that doesn't see it."

"God helps us," Se7en said dryly, casually draping his arm around his brother's shoulder. "A romantic. That's the last thing we need to have around nuna."

"Se7en!" Junsu exclaimed, trying to hug his older blood-brother. The packages made it

difficult and he unloaded them into Yoochun's waiting arms then tried again.

Returning the embrace, Se7en looked over Junsu's shoulder at the graceful vampire standing patiently besides them. "So this is him?"

"This is he." He grinned, tugging Yoochun forward. "Park Yoochun, this is Choi Dong-Wook. He is our seventh brother and really, the dumbest. We have to call him Se7en so he knows where he belongs in the family. He seems to think that he's the oldest sometimes but we have to correct him."

"Funny, *dongsaeng*," Se7en retorted, giving Yoochun a smile. "It is good to meet you, Park."

"No, call him Yoochun. He doesn't feel comfortable with his last name," Junsu prattled, taking back some of the packages. "Are the rest upstairs? Or down in the lower rooms?"

Junsu was off before Se7en could respond, weaving through the crowd. Yoochun glanced at the tall man standing next to him, slightly intimidated by his genial handsomeness and easy demeanor. Unlike Junsu and Yoochun, Dong-Wook wore no mask, leaving his Korean features bare. The younger vampire looked around, noticing the crowd paid little notice to the man's Asiatic features and several women turned to surreptitiously watch the man's lean form and broad shoulders when Se7en relieved Yoochun of some of his burden.

"I see he hasn't changed," Se7en laughed, nearly dropping a small package from the pile. "Always leaving someone else to clean up or to carry things. I'll bet you even paid for the gondola."

"I didn't mind," Yoochun admitted, smiling with the other's broad grin. "He bought me the costume."

"Hah, our mistress probably paid for it. Our Susu is always reluctant to part with his coins but he's got a sweet heart," The vampire remarked. "Come. Our suites are over this way. We'll have to catch up with the little prince there."

It was dizzying to follow Se7en through the crowd. After a few feet, Yoochun gave up trying to keep track of which way they turned, concentrating solely on keeping his eyes on Se7en's back. The crowd unexpectedly thinned out and they came a wide hallway, its entrance blocked by a red velvet rope. A footman bowed and unhooked the tie from its fastening, pulling the rope aside to let the men pass. Yoochun fell into step beside Se7en, marveling at the art lining the palazzo's walls. They stopped at a wooden door, its white face gilded with baroque emblems and Se7en called out for someone inside to open it to let them in.

A stunning man cracked open the door, his beauty pulling the breath from Yoochun's throat. His dark hair lay against elegant cheekbones, a full wide mouth given to mysterious smiles half open as if he paused in mid-sentence to let them in. Taller than Junsu, his height was mostly leg but the cut of his simple white shirt strained with the press of hidden muscle. The sharpness of his eyes were wary, as if he expected something dangerous to spring up on him but the greeting he gave Yoochun was warm and genuine.

"Hello, you must be Chunnie." The shortening of his name didn't dawn on Yoochun, not under the brightness of the young man's smile. It changed the coldness of his face, infusing it with a wicked humour and grace. "I'm Jaejoong. Come in. Junsu's been telling tales about you."

"Aish, don't get me in trouble," Junsu shouted out, waving Yoochun in. "Come, let me introduce you to the rest of these beggars."

Jaejoong gathered up the packages from their arms, arranging the boxes and bags neatly on a side table. As Yoochun was set in front of two other men, the young man pressed a mug of honeyed beer into Yoochun's hand, whispering into his ear. "Here, it's better to have some of

this in you when listening to them. It helps with the headache.”

Yunho stood dominant in the room, his deep purple and black costume a match for the almost twin Jaejoong wore. Between he and Se7en, the air was dizzy with masculinity, both vampires sure and confident in themselves. They bantered, argued with slight words and pushed at one another, poking at soft bubbles in their language until Yoochun was dizzy from trying to keep up. A sip of beer did help, he thought, especially when trying to follow the two older vampires as they spoke.

A slender young man sat on the arm of a chaise, his long legs encased in soft black suede. Solemnly dressed, his black long coat was severe, nearly militaristic and lacking in any of the gold or silver the others wore. Shiny ebony beads gave him a dash of glitter but the brightest thing about him was his wit as he skewered the older two with a well-placed word or teasing smile. The lace at his throat and cuffs were brilliantly white, offsetting his golden skin. A pair of boots pulled up to his mid thigh made Yoochun long for his own, left abandoned back in his apartment because they did not match the outfit Junsu picked out for him.

Jaejoong hovered between Yoochun and Yunho, the older vampire reaching out to grab his lover’s hand as he passed. At times they would speak, soft whispers in a gutter French that made Yoochun blush when he overheard the suggestions Yunho had for Jaejoong that night in bed. They resonated with a love that spoke of age although Yoochun knew they’d not been together longer than a few years. When one breathed, the other inhaled, taking in the air before giving it back in an unseen kiss. Their passion was evident, a burning firestorm stoked by gentle touches and hot words.

Yoochun grew hard imagining Junsu bent forward on his knees in the position Yunho murmured. A knowing wink from Jaejoong didn’t help matters, especially when the sloe-eyed beauty commented they should include red silken ties and dribbled caramel syrup. It was all Yoochun could do not to drag Junsu out and raid the bakery for sweet liquids to pour over his lover’s body.

Junsu sat near them, bouncing between conversations and Yoochun struggled to follow, thankful when Jaejoong joined him. Pointing to the black-clad young vampire, he made introductions and Changmin’s seriousness faded, a cunning grin wicked on his innocent face.

“Good, someone else to help Jae and I prick them of their arrogance,” Min declared, laughing when the others burst into objections. “Really, they are too sure of themselves. It’s as if they invented how to breathe or bathe. Junsu isn’t bad but these two — they are horrid.”

“And this you say to the man who introduced you to chocolate?” Se7en gasped, pretending to be hurt. He tangled his fingers into Min’s shock of hair, pulling his lover’s head back. Lowering his mouth over the other’s lips, he drank the night from Changmin’s mouth, only stopping when he heard a surrendering moan. Pulling back, he brushed his thumb over the younger man’s swollen lower lip and smiled. “I always thought that was the best way to silence you.”

“Try it on me and I’ll bite you,” Jaejoong remarked, snapping his teeth at Yunho.

The older man laughed, a hearty deep sound. “Any one who knows you would tell you that it’s far better to lure you out of your mood with a present and then try a kiss. Doing anything else usually leads to blood loss or a night in a cold salon.”

“He makes you sleep in the parlour?” Se7en mocked. “Ah, dear brother, how little you know of love when you can’t even get your lover to forgive you.”

“If I recall, dearest brother, you’re the one whose lover locked him outside on a balcony

overlooking Hyde Park during the height of season." Yunho cocked his head. "How many people do you suppose saw that thing you pass off as your manhood? Twenty five? Thirty? And for what? Because you leered at a sales girl?"

"She was a very ripe salesgirl," Se7en defended himself and winced when Min slanted an evil glance his way. "But I've paid for that. Remember, Minku? Paid for it. The devil is that he lies in wait until you are at your most vulnerable and then he strikes. It's like a mongoose preying on a cobra."

"Is that any way to speak of your lover?" A woman stood in the archway connecting the main room to the bedchambers. She was slightly darker than the men, a tone of gold Yoochun had only seen in the folds of a sunrise during the fall and her heart-shaped face shone with a catlike beauty. Dark kohl outlined her brandy-flecked brown eyes and a beauty mark drew attention to her wide mouth, her lips painted a deep red that matched her crimson dress. Reminiscent of a French noblewoman's dress, the gold embroidered silk fit snug against her slim chest, cutting in tight at her waist before filling out into a gathered tiered skirt. The long sleeves brushed her knuckles but her gestures revealed long feminine hands, a few delicate rings gracing her fingers. Gold square toed boots peeked out from under her dress and she lay a demi-masque frilled with matching crimson feathers and gold beads on a side table, its perching stick painted black to blend away from the eye.

"Nuna, you look gorgeous." Jaejoong kissed her cheek first, a genuine affection beaming from his face. She hugged him back, welcoming the embrace.

"As always," Se7en commented loudly, cutting Yunho off before he spoke.

"Asino stupido," The other vampire muttered, jabbing an elbow into Se7en's side.

"That's the best you can come up with?" The older vampire took the blow without flinching. "Maybe I should take Jaejoong off your hands? He seems to be withering your strength. You can't even think."

"Touch Jaejoong..." Yunho cocked his head and smiled threateningly.

"And I'll geld you," Min finished, baring his teeth to his lover. Se7en held up his hands in surrender, walking over to assure his lover he was only joking.

"Looks like *hyung* should keep one eye open while he sleeps," Junsu whispered into Yoochun's ear. "Changmin has a most vicious and jealous temper."

"He looks like fun," Yoochun replied and stopped breathing as their mistress approached. Bowing, he waited for Junsu to introduce him then gasped in surprise when the woman clasped him in a tight hug.

"Welcome, beloved son," She whispered as she held him. The words she spoke were familiar, in a language he'd not heard since he was a child and only recently attempted to speak with Junsu. It came to him haltingly, rusted so tightly that he had to hammer at the inflections to get the pronunciations correctly but he heard her clearly as she spoke. "Saranghae."

His eyes welled, dazzled with tears and Yoochun blinked, trying to clear the room of the fog clouding his vision. Turning his head, he caught a shadow on the column of her throat, a question forming in his mind that resolved into reality as he realized the woman he held and called nuna was in fact a man.

She saw his confusion then the revelation that came to him, canting her head and waiting for his reaction. "Does this matter to you, little one?"

"No," Yoochun shook his head, swallowing the lump in his throat. "Junsu taught me that we are what we chose to be. What we want to be. And that is who is loved. Not what other

people expect or want from us.”

“Our Susu is our angel,” She smiled, wiping away a tear silvering Yoochun’s face.

“I just...” He stumbled, unsure of himself. “I don’t know what to call you.”

“You can call me Scarlet, Chunnie-ah.” The woman donned a coquettish look, the flirtatious flick of her lashes running a heat through him nearly as erotic as the idea of Junsu tied up and wiped clean of caramel. “But, I would rather like it, if you called me nuna. Like the others do.”

“Nuna, then,” Yoochun agreed. Kissing her cheek, he whispered, only loud enough for her to hear. “Thank you, nuna. Thank you for bringing him here for me to love. I would die without him.”

“It’s only fair,” Scarlet replied, cupping Yoochun’s face. “Junsu only has begun to live now that he has you to love.”