

# Christmas Cookies

# Books by Mariska Sliker

## Himura Saga

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Christmas Cookies (a Himura side novella)

# Christmas Cookies

A Himura Saga side novella



**Mariska Sliker**

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# Chapter 1

“Ne, Eclipse? Did you make any plans yet for Christmas?” Silas asked.

Both vampires, or Methuselah as they called themselves, were lazing about in bed, both sated from their lovemaking prior, and Silas thought it to be the perfect time to drop the bomb. He had been thinking it over for a while now and decided to set his plan into motion.

“Not really. I’ll probably be spending the holiday season back home. Less crowded so I can catch up on work. Why?” Eclipse answered, surprised his fledgling had brought up the subject.

“Well, you see I was thinking...”

Eclipse patted him on this head. “Aw poor thing, that must’ve hurt.”

Silas punched him. “I thought, now that Remy is here as well... we could celebrate Christmas this year...” He traced invisible patterns on his Master’s tight abs, loving the way it made the powerful vampire purr like a large cat.

“Sure, have your Christmas party or whatever it is you want. You don’t need my permission.”

“Argg, you can be so thick-headed sometimes!” Silas growled. “It’s not just for Remy and me, we should celebrate it with all of us. Why can’t we celebrate Christmas like every other family does!”

“Every *American* family perhaps. We’re not American, we’re Japanese, and guess what? We don’t have that silly commercial tradition.”

“Bullshit! You’ve been living in the States longer than most Americans, and you’re well familiar with our traditions by now!” Silas accused.

“Maybe, but Christmas is not one of them. We hardly ever spend that time of year here in the States, and we never celebrated Christmas. I see no reason to start now,” Eclipse said, already tiring of the discussion. He didn’t understand why Silas was making such a fuss about it now. His fledgling had never even mentioned Christmas, even after Remy had joined their family.

“Then *s’il vous plaît*, do it for me?” Silas all but begged, giving Eclipse the full force of his puppy-dog eyes, knowing it would weaken the powerful vampire’s resolve. *If only his enemies knew how to get to him*, he thought amused.

Eclipse sighed. He definitely didn’t look forward to spending Christmas time in New York; Everywhere would be swamped with people, and he would be forced to accept the many business invitations to all sorts of social functions; Activities that were in the top ten list of things he hated. No, Christmas was not something he wanted to stay around for. He’d much rather enjoy the relative quiet of the Japanese countryside.

“What’s really going on? You’ve never wanted to celebrate it before, why now? And why is this so important to you?” Eclipse asked seriously, drawing his fledgling closer to him. The mercurial boy had lots of spontaneous ideas, not all of them bad—Eclipse was especially fond of the ones that involved both of them naked—but he seldom was this serious about them.

Silas took a deep breath to steady himself, sitting up against the headboard, knees pulled up close to his chest. He knew he had to be honest with his Master and steeled himself for the painful memories that would undoubtedly surface.

“It’s— When Remy and I were still living on the streets, we could feel the thrill of the holiday season; Malls crowded with people shopping for presents, people warming themselves at their fireplaces, Christmas trees full of twinkling lights, presents wrapped in colorful paper underneath it, tons of delicious food, singing carols.” Silas shrugged. “But we never had that. All we could do was look through the windows of the houses; Watching how everyone else was celebrating Christmas; How everyone else was warm and happy while we were freezing our asses off. And don’t get me wrong, it wasn’t all bad—at least not much worse than our usual days. But it... it stung, you understand? Well, a Rich Bastard like you wouldn’t understand, so you simply have to take my word for it,” Silas joked, but Eclipse saw through the jibe. “Every year, we’d sit around a candle fantasizing that someday things will be different and we’d be in a warm house as well. By a cozy fireplace, with a huge Christmas tree filled with twinkling lights. With loads of presents and food. That we’d be surrounded by people we love and who’d love us in return, and we’d all sing Christmas carols together. Everything we didn’t have... Silly, hm?”

Eclipse pulled him against him tighter, stroking Silas’ hair comfortingly. Methuselah were highly sensitive beings, physical contact almost as important as breathing. Not for the first time guilt tore at his heart for running into Silas late.

Though he knew there was nothing he could have done to prevent him from getting killed by a group of thugs—hell he didn't even know the brat before he ran into him that fateful evening—he still wished he had found him sooner. No child deserved to live a life on the streets, especially not at such a young age as they had been. He had even set up a foundation in Silas' name that helped street kids with shelter and food.

“Oy, what are *you* feeling sad for?!” Silas joked when he sensed Eclipse's sorrow rising over their Bond, poking the older in his chest for good measure.

Every Methuselah shared a Bond with his or her Master; An invisible Bond that allowed the slave to feel their Master's feelings amongst other things.

“Who's sad here?!” Eclipse scowled. “I still don't get it though. You've been with us for what, over ten years by now? And you never cared for Christmas any more than we do. Why now all of a sudden?” Eclipse asked.

“Because it wouldn't have been right if Remy wasn't there with us to celebrate,” Silas explained, his smile fading.

Eclipse looked at him pointedly. “Remy's been with us now for three years.”

“He may have been here, but he wasn't really ‘with’ us, now was he?” Silas shot back.

Eclipse sighed. Silas was right.

Even though it had been a little over three years that Remy had joined their family, the boy had been barely more than a doll. Especially the first year; Remy hadn't spoken any words other than his stoic ‘*Oui Master*’. It was only recently he had thawed a little, up to a point where he answered when someone asked him something and even started talking.

“What about Remy though? Do you honestly think he is ready for this yet? The kid is still pretty uncomfortable when there are too many people around. Perhaps a party is still a bit too much for him? We shouldn’t push him too far too fast,” Eclipse warned. He understood now why Silas wanted to celebrate Christmas, but it was harder picturing Remy around a Christmas tree, singing carols and generally interacting with others.

But Silas was not to be deterred. “*Non*, he’s ready. He can handle this! It’s going to be taxing on him, *mais* he needs to understand that he’s safe with us. That he’s a part of our family.”

Eclipse sighed.

“I know you hate formal parties and all, but it would only be the four of us. And you don’t need to do anything. I’ll take care of everything! All you need to do is to be there! Please, Master,” Silas pleaded, purposefully addressing him as ‘Master’ instead of his regular colorful nicknames, knowing it would hit a sensitive spot in the vampire.

“Argh fine! If that’ll shut you up, I will be there. But you have to convince Raenef first though!” Eclipse warned, putting his hopes on his twin brother. Surely he could talk sense into his fledgling?

“REALLY?! Thank you soooo much! I love you!” Silas cheered while kissing his Master.

“Oy, don’t get too excited yet! You still need to convince Raenef,” Eclipse said gruffly, but a smile crept to the corners of his mouth at seeing the almost childlike happiness in his fledgling’s eyes. There had been plenty of times he’d feared

he'd never see him smile that way again and, sucker that he was, he'd do anything to keep it there.

"I'll convince him somehow. You'll see!" Silas vowed while hugging Eclipse some more.

# Chapter 2

It had been almost two weeks since Silas had sweet-talked Eclipse into celebrating Christmas, and Silas was burning to ask Raenef as well. If he'd had a say in it, he would have asked him right away. But Raenef had been away on a business trip for over a month now, leaving Silas frustrated and waiting for his return.

Now the time was finally there; late last night Raenef had returned.

“Oy, why do I have to come with you? This was your idea in the first place!” Eclipse cursed while Silas was dragging him along by his hand.

“You’re my Master, so you might as well make yourself useful for a change!” Silas said, dragging him all the way to Raenef’s home office. As they rounded the corner they almost bumped into Remy stepping out of his Master’s office.

“Ah, Remy! Is Raenef in?” Silas asked innocently—as if he hadn’t been watching Raenef’s every move since the vampire came home.

Remy nodded “*Oui*, Remy brought Master his tea.”

“Good, ‘cause we need him for a moment.”

“*We?! Don’t just assume I’m in on this! This is your plan entirely!*” Eclipse growled.

Remy raised his brow. He was getting used to their almost constant bantering, but it still amazed him how Eclipse never punished Silas for his lack of respect. He would never dare talk to his Master that way, too afraid of the consequences. He'd learned the hard way never to talk back to his Master. But then again, he'd been taught a lot of things from his previous Master his current Master was displeased by...

Silas had already knocked the door and—before waiting for an answer—barged into the office, dragging a disgruntled Eclipse with him. Raenef looked up from a pile of important looking papers and smiled when he saw Silas and a rather sullen Eclipse.

“Ah Silas, Eclipse, is there something you need? Because I'm swamped with work at the moment...” Raenef said, gesturing to the pile of papers strewn all over his desk.

For a second, Silas wavered when he realized that this probably wasn't the best time to ask Raenef to skip work for a few days to celebrate Christmas.

Before he could retreat to try again at a better suited time, Eclipse spoke up. “Brother, Silas here wanted to ask you something,” he said, smirking at Silas, knowing that Silas had been about to turn tail.

“What is it, Silas?” Raenef asked, curious as to what he might want.

Silas glared at Eclipse before turning to Raenef with an innocent smile on his face. “Say, Raenef you look kinda tired... Aren't you working a little too hard lately?” Silas started.

Eclipse rolled his eyes at the obvious course Silas was taking.

Raenef blinked as a small smile played around his lips. Even he knew Silas wasn't at all worried about his workload, but he was getting more and more curious at what it was Silas was getting at. So he decided to play along.

"Thank you for your concern Silas, and yes, work has been piling up. It always does around this time of year. But please don't worry about me, I can handle it. Besides, since most of the business world will practically come to a stop during the holidays, I can catch up on work then."

Silas inwardly groaned. This was NOT going according to plan. Raenef obviously had already planned to work his way through Christmas, but Silas was determined to convince him otherwise.

"Maa, you work too hard Raenef. You deserve a break too, you know. Coincidentally, I was thinking we could celebrate Christmas this year? I mean it would be a nice break for all of us, and we can all have fun together," Silas said.

Raenef stared at both Silas and Eclipse. "Celebrate Christmas? Hmm... Why would we want to celebrate that? Anyway, I'll be leaving for Japan right after the Christmas concert at the orphanage. I plan to stay there until February, depending on several meetings planned at the beginning of the year," Raenef said.

Silas' face fell. "You can't leave for Japan! I mean, we hardly get to spend time together with all of us. This would be the opportune moment to do so!" Silas pleaded.

"You're right. And we really should plan a family get-together soon. Why don't we pick a place and date in

February?” Raenef offered. “We can even go to the island if you want.”

“*Non, non, non!* You don’t understand! It’s not the same, it’s not Christmas in February, or on a tropical island!” Silas said frustrated.

Raenef was baffled. What on earth was so important about Christmas? Didn’t he say he wanted them all to be together? They were near-immortal, what difference would a month or two make? As much as he liked spending time talking with Silas, he really had more pressing matters at hand at the moment. He was about to gently let Silas know when Eclipse spoke up.

“Hang on Ra’, hear him out,” Eclipse, who’d been silently watching the two of them up till now said. “And you, tell him the real reason why you want to celebrate Christmas and get it over with!” he said to Silas.

“You’re in on this? You realize that if we stay here, there’s no escaping the obligatory festivities? You hate those!” Raenef asked astounded.

“Tsk, hear him out. I don’t care what you decide after that,” Eclipse said gruffly.

Silas looked away under Raenef’s inquiring look. “It’s... it’s just that I—no, we fantasized about having a real Christmas one day,” Silas said.

Raenef looked confused. “Who is ‘we’?”

Silas sighed and told him the same thing he told Eclipse. “That’s why I want to celebrate Christmas this year. And I know

that you're all busy, but you're the CEO's right? Can't you at least take a few days off? Please?" Silas begged.

"It really is a busy season, and I'm already behind on work as it is... A celebration like that takes time to organize, and I don't have that time now..." Raenef tried, grasping for straws.

"—You don't have to do a thing! I'll take care of everything!" Silas said, knowing he was winning ground.

Raenef sighed. He too had been moved by Silas' sorrowful story, and of course, they could technically take days off whenever they pleased. What held him back though, was Remy. Unlike Silas, he wasn't too sure Remy was ready for this yet. Even though his fledgling was starting to heal, he was still very uncomfortable when there were people directly around him.

"I don't know Silas... Remy's wellbeing is my first priority, and I'm afraid it might still be a bit too soon for him. After all, Christmas is a celebration among family members and loved ones, and even though we consider him family, Remy still feels differently about that. He might feel forced into contact and bonds he isn't ready to make just yet," Raenef said with a tinge of sadness to it.

"But that's just it! That's exactly why we *should* celebrate Christmas! Don't you see? What better way to show him how we feel about him? What better way to show him he's part of a family than during Christmas?!" Silas pleaded.

Raenef rested his head on his steepled hands. He didn't know what to do anymore and he doubted his trustworthy pet guidebook would have a chapter on dealing with Christmas

celebrations either. The book had been a gag gift from a friend of his but had actually been rather helpful.

Silas sure made a compelling case, but Remy still seemed so fragile and he could feel the boy only needed a little push in the wrong direction and he would break permanently.

Raenef looked imploringly to Eclipse, but Eclipse merely hauled his shoulder. He glimpsed at Silas' eager face and sighed again.

“Okay fine. But on a few conditions only!” Raenef said warningly when Silas erupted in cheers.

“Anything!”

Eclipse scowled at how Silas always agreed to things without hearing the conditions first, but Silas ignored him.

“At the first signs of this being too much for Remy, this whole idea will be dropped,” Raenef said seriously. “And second, you’ll take care of everything yourself, cause I don’t have time to worry about organizing parties right now.”

“I will, I promise!” Silas agreed, lunging for Raenef and giving him a bear hug. “I loooooveeee you!”

Raenef returned the hug but wasn’t nearly as cheerful as Silas was. As he looked over Silas’ shoulder at Eclipse, he saw his own doubts being mirrored in his twin’s eyes.

“Tsk, and here I thought you were the strongest out of the two of us!” Eclipse teased.

Raenef scowled playfully.

“We’ll leave you to your work now!” Silas said, giving Raenef a kiss before getting up from the vampire’s lap. He dragged Eclipse behind him out of the office, while scolding him for ‘not being a big help in there’.

“Let’s hope we’re doing the right thing here and not making a big mistake instead...” Raenef whispered to his once again quiet office.

# Chapter 3

Remy was reading a book in the window seat of Raenef's home office while his Master worked at his desk when a loud knock on the door had both looking up. Before Raenef could say anything though, Silas' head was already peeking in.

"Ah, there you are!" he said when he spotted Remy. He strode over to the boy he considered his brother, pulling him up by his hand.

"Eh, Silas?" Remy asked surprised.

"You and I are going Christmas shopping, *mon frère!*" Silas declared.

Remy blinked, stunned by Silas' sudden declaration. "Eh?! We are? B... but what about Master?" he said looking panicked at Raenef.

"He doesn't mind. You're not a prisoner you know. Right, Raenef?" Silas said.

Raenef nodded, already having gone back to work.

"Eh... Master really doesn't mind Remy going?" Remy asked Raenef, a tad afraid to even ask for such liberties.

"Of course not. Go have fun for a change. Be sure to bring your credit card with you in case you see something you want."

Remy nodded and bowed before Silas dragged him out of the room, talking about the shops he wanted to visit.

Raenef got up and walked over to the window, watching as Silas and Remy drove out of the driveway. He hoped Remy

would be alright. They'd been to the city a few times, but then he'd always been there with Remy. Now he wasn't, and it made him nervous. What if he got another panic attack? There were loads of people out this time of year...

Then he smiled to himself. "Remy is not a kid anymore, he'll be fine."

But Raenef had to admit he missed his fledgling's presence and was watching the clock ticking away the hours.

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It was past seven o'clock in the evening when Raenef heard Silas' sports car driving up the driveway—not that he'd been listening intently for that particular sound for the past six hours.

He started rounding up his work and straightened his desk to stall a little—no need to show how anxiously he'd been waiting for them to return. After a sufficient time, he left his office in search of the boys.

As soon as he entered the living room, Remy all but jumped up from the cushion he'd been sitting on and bowed respectfully. Raenef sighed and told Remy for the umpteenth time that he didn't need to bow to him. Remy nodded and mumbled a '*Oui Master*'.

"How was your shopping trip? Did you guys have fun?" Raenef asked, settling on the couch across from Remy, who had sat down again on his cushion.

"It was great! We had fun! Didn't we, Remy?" Silas said.

Remy nodded when Raenef looked at him inquiringly. “They were singing carols in the shopping center and we drank hot chocolate,” Remy added when he saw the vampire’s eager expression.

Raenef smiled. Even though Remy was a master at hiding his true emotions, Raenef had learned how to read the smallest of details on his fledgling’s face that would give away how he was feeling; And now he could clearly see that Remy was as happy as he’d ever seen him. Apparently, the little trip had done him good. “Did you succeed in buying presents?” Raenef asked.

“Yup we managed to buy most of our presents,” Silas said.

Remy nodded. Suddenly a thought seemed to hit him and he scrambled to his feet and left the room.

“Remy?” Raenef asked worriedly. But Remy had already closed the door behind him. Raenef looked questioningly at Silas in hopes of an answer, but Silas had been as surprised as Raenef and simply hauled his shoulders. Within a few minutes though, Remy came back with a little red box in his hands. He made his way over to his Master, who was now standing at the bar, and shyly offered him the little red box.

“Eh? This is for me?” Raenef asked surprised.

Remy nodded looking at the floor.

Raenef opened the box to see lots of handmade Christmas chocolates.

“It’s just... ehmm... Silas and Remy had a few today, and Remy thought maybe Master would want some too. B... but if Master doesn’t, it’s—” Remy was sure his Master must think him a cheapskate to bring back mere chocolates bought from

a street vendor, while his Master could very well afford the most expensive chocolates ever made.

The sweets had been an impulse. Not for the first time Remy had realized how little he knew about his Master's likes or dislikes. But based on the little things he'd observed ever since he came to live in Raenef's household, his Master seemed to like sweets. Before he could even finish his sentence—or conveniently die from embarrassment—Raenef interrupted him.

“These look delicious! I love sweets! Did you pick them out yourself?” he asked smiling.

Remy nodded, his embarrassment fading now his Master wasn't angry with his gift. “In the shopping center was this vendor who was making the chocolates himself,” Remy said, still looking at the floor.

He flinched when he felt Raenef's hand gently lifting his head, leaving him no choice but to look at his Master. Remy forced himself to be completely still and not to pull back from his Master's touch. When he looked at Raenef and saw no signs of anger, but merely a serene smile he relaxed again.

“Thank you. I love them. And you have no idea how happy I am you thought of me when you bought them. I'll cherish them.”

Remy backed away a little as soon as Raenef let go. “It's only chocolates...” Remy said, becoming uncomfortable again. He couldn't even remember the last time someone had given him praise for something, and he didn't know how to handle it.

“... too?”

“Remy? Are you okay?” Raenef asked when Remy didn’t answer but was getting paler and paler by the second.

Remy shook up from his confusing thoughts and blinked.

“Hey, are you okay?” Raenef asked again.

“Ah, *Oui*. Remy’s fine,” Remy said quickly.

Raenef raised his brow, not completely convinced by Remy’s words, but whatever had Remy spooked, he relaxed again and slowly the color came back to his skin.

“I asked if you wanted some chocolates too?” Raenef asked, holding up the box of chocolates to Remy.

“But these are Master’s!”

“But they’ll taste even better when we share them, no?” Raenef said smoothly.

Remy took one chocolate from the box, still not sure if it was really okay for him to do so. But when Silas had no qualms about eating the chocolate offered to him, Remy started to eat his own.

“Hmm, these really are good!” Raenef said, picking another one from the box.

Within no time, the three of them had eaten every last chocolate.

# Chapter 4

“Good news,” Eclipse said when he stepped into the kitchen. “Feilon and his family will join us for Christmas. They’ll fly in on Christmas day and will stay for a few days.”

Raenef smiled. That was good news. He loved his older brother and his family. They may not have the same blood, but they couldn’t be any closer and they all loved to have the entire family together. They all had busy lives and it wouldn’t be an exception if they didn’t see each other for months, making the time they did get to spend together extra special. By the look on Remy’s face, he felt the same.

When he’d just made Remy his, the boy had been so terrified of people, Raenef had worried he’d never be able to open up again. A dangerous thing for Methuselah as they generally weren’t solitary beings.

Exceptions there, most thrived better among people they loved. They shared deep bonds, and it helped them to ground themselves to the here and now. When you were close to immortal, it was hard to not lose your humanity over the centuries; Things tended to lose their shine when you had them in spades. It was tempting to retreat from people, and life in general, but it was also dangerous; Their bodies may be near-immortal, their minds weren’t. They could be broken, either by trauma or even boredom. When one lost the will to live, they would waste away into a doll-like state; Nothing more than a shell of a being, devoid of conscious thought.

Remy had been on the very edge of that state, and only with lots of patience and care did they manage to bring him back from that precipice. It was hard on them to watch how Remy had been so terrified of others, knowing it was the one thing his Methuselan soul craved; The one thing that could help save him.

But no matter how bleak things looked, Remy adapted. At least a little. He still didn't do well with physical contact, another thing his Methuselan side hungered for, but he was opening up.

And though Remy didn't see the Fujiwara's that often, he must have sensed their honest interest in him, and had taken to both Feilon and Toshiro from the get-go. Especially Toshiro had pierced through his defenses and they'd gotten pretty close. Closer probably than Toshiro realized.

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"I still need to do some Christmas shopping, would you boys like to come with me?" Raenef asked after breakfast. Eclipse had left on a business trip to Europe and wasn't due to return until a few days before Christmas, so it was only Raenef, Silas and Remy at home.

"Sure, when?" Silas said.

Raenef smiled at his eagerness. "Well I have a few meetings tomorrow morning, but I suppose I can take the rest of the day off..." Raenef said looking through his agenda.

"It's a date, then!" Silas said.

"What about you, Remy?" Raenef asked hopefully.

Remy nodded "If Master doesn't mind, Remy will come too."

“Great, that’s settled then.”

# Chapter 5

“OHIYOU MINNA!” a loud voice resounded through the hall.

“Shinta?! Is that really you?!” Silas said when he came down the stairs.

Remy too had come to the hallway at hearing the noise.

“Silas! Remy!” Shinta said.

“What in the world are you doing here?!” Silas asked, giving his long-time friend a hug and a kiss that made Remy more than a little uncomfortable.

“I had a stop-over and decided to drop by for a few hours before my plane leaves again tonight,” Shinta answered smiling. “Remy! How have you’ve been? Gods, you’re getting prettier every time I see you!” Shinta said to Remy. He was straining not to hug and kiss Remy as well, but he knew it would only scare the other boy thus he tried hard not to.

“Ah, Remy’s fine. He hopes you are too? And the rest of your family?” Remy said. He’d only seen Shinta a few times over the years but had seen his ‘brother’ Toshiro and his Master Feilon more, and they had always been nice to him.

“They’re all well. You also have their regards,” Shinta said smiling while Silas was already dragging him to the living room.

Remy left them alone and kept himself occupied in the kitchen with his chores. When Remy was about to finish doing the dishes, Silas and Shinta stepped in.

“Shinta and I will go and get some drinks and shoot pool, wanna come with us?” Silas asked.

“Eh? Weren’t we supposed to go shopping with Master today?”

“It’s okay, we’ll call him and let him know. He won’t mind.”

But it didn’t sit well with Remy. He was used to following through on his promises. He wasn’t as comfortable around Shinta as he was with the boy’s brother and Master. And the idea of spending the rest of the day with him and Silas getting drunk in a crowded bar made him even more anxious.

“It’s okay, Remy’ll go with Master, you two have fun,” he said on impulse.

“Eh, you’re sure? Maybe I should go with you...” Silas said slightly worried. Sure his brother could take care of himself, but the slightest touches of people still gave him anxiety attacks and he would hate for that to happen again—especially when he was alone.

“*C’est bien*. Remy’ll take the train and subway to the city,” Remy said more resolute than he felt. Scared or not, he wouldn’t show it to his little brother.

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Two hours later, Remy found himself in front of one of the tallest buildings in the city. There was no mistaking the building as the Himura Clan crest was engraved in gold on the windows, and ‘Himura Inc’ was written on the doors. He sighed. The train and subway ride had his anxiety level already up through the roof. That he was here to spend the rest of the day alone with his Master didn’t make it much better either. Sure he spent time with the vampire at home as well. But at

least there the surroundings were familiar to him, and he could busy himself with his own things. Now he was supposed to 'have fun' with his Master. Surely he would be expected to make conversation and such. Something he was still uncomfortable with, especially with his Master. He'd been taught that a Master never involves himself with a mere slave, but his new Master didn't seem to share that notion. Which left him confused. If he wasn't to act as a slave around the vampire, how was he supposed to act?

Remy took another deep breath and steeled himself to step through the doors. The door gave way to a large, busy lobby. Everyone was dressed in expensive business suits, and Remy felt out of place in his worn jeans and trench-coat. From the corner of his eyes, he already saw a security officer looking his way with a frown. Everyone else knew exactly where to go and were doing so in refined, but quick steps, making Remy stand out even more by standing as still as he did. Bracing himself, he glanced around to the right side of the lobby, to find the elevators exactly where Silas had told them they'd be. He made his way over, hastening his steps as the security officer came his way. Slipping into the elevator right before the doors closed, he pressed the button for the 35th floor, as per Silas' instructions. Unfortunately, there were more people in the elevator and Remy could sense their imploring looks burning in his back, making him even more uncomfortable. To his relief, everyone had left the elevator by the time they had reached the 30th floor, leaving him behind alone for the last floors. He

stuffed his hands deep in the pockets of his coat when he felt them shaking uncontrollably.

“Take a deep breath. Master can’t see you this way, or he’ll get worried again!” Remy mumbled to himself. He watched the numbers of the floors rising with dread, knowing he would reach his destination any second now. When the elevator doors opened again, he found himself in a luxurious lobby. It was quieter than the one downstairs, but it also meant he stood out more. Remy headed to the small reception desk, feet sinking into the expensive carpet as he went. Before he reached the secretary at the desk, someone grabbed his arm, making him instinctively flinch away from the blow he was sure to follow.

“What on earth do you think you’re doing here young man! And how did you even get this far?!” a woman in a neat lady’s suit demanded.

“Ah,... Remy’s only— he—” Remy stuttered. Panic was rising quickly and as more and more people gathered around him and the woman, his anxiety level reached critical heights. He tried to loosen his arm from the woman’s firm grasp, but she refused to let him go.

“Who are you?! And how did you get past security?!” another person demanded of him.

“Ah... Remy is here to see... um...” Remy tried but didn’t even know how to call his Master in front of these people.

“Sure you are, that’s what they all say!” someone sneered.

Remy’s head was spinning. People were closing in on him from all sides, and he could barely breathe anymore as panic was weighing him down. When two security guards roughly

grabbed his arms, he started thrashing around in a desperate attempt to free himself.

“Don’t worry people, we’ll take care of this one,” one of the guards said.

“*S’il vous plait...* Remy didn’t do anything wrong... he—” Remy whispered between heaving breaths. Black spots were swimming in his line of vision and he tried hard not to pass out. Suddenly the guards let go of him and he was vaguely aware someone was calling his name.

“Remy? It’s okay, it’s me,” a voice said from right in front of him.

“Eh?! You know him?!” people asked the newcomer surprised.

“Of course I do, he is Remy Himura!” the newcomer sneered to the surrounding people. Lots of shocked little squeals and suddenly everyone was apologizing profusely to Remy. They stepped back, giving Remy and the newcomer more space.

Remy looked up to his savior.

“*M.. Monsieur* Griffin?” Remy said hoarsely, still trying hard to get oxygen into his burning lungs.

He’d seen the man, his Master’s personal assistant, several times when he had visited his Master at home.

The young man smiled. “Didn’t I ask you to please call me Jasper?”

Remy nodded.

“I’m sorry about this,” Jasper said motioning to the still gathered people. “They don’t mean wrong, they are simply a tad too protective of the director.”

“He’s right, we’re sorry! We had no idea who you were!”

Remy nodded, still trying to quell his panic and get some resemblance of calm back.

“What’s all this noise about?” an authoritative voice interrupted.

Remy’s head snapped up to attention though at hearing the familiar voice.

“Remy?!” Raenef said surprised at seeing his fledgling amidst most of his secretaries and staff, whom by now were making a hasty retreat to their daily tasks. “Are you okay?” he asked.

Remy only nodded, not wanting to give his true condition away by his strangled voice.

Raenef saw the panic in Remy’s eyes though, and even though Remy had quickly hid his hands behind him, he’d seen them shaking.

“Remy ran into a little trouble with your overprotective staff,” Jasper explained.

Raenef sighed. “Why don’t we go to my office, hm? I’ll finish up and then we can go, okay?”

Remy followed his Master to his office, no longer interested in the lush surroundings. When Raenef had closed the door behind them, he offered Remy to take a seat when Remy didn’t make any move. Instead of sitting down on the comfortable couch, Remy huddled on the floor in the far corner of the office. His knees drawn up to his chest, his arms tightly around them as if to protect himself from any harm. It broke Raenef’s heart to see his fledgling this way, but he knew Remy would only get more anxious if he’d ask him to sit with him on the couch, so he let him be for now.

“Where is Silas? Wasn’t he supposed to come with you?” Raenef asked.

Finally Remy looked up at him. “Shinta came by this morning. He had a few hours to spend... Silas went to shoot pool with him instead... He.. he said Master wouldn’t mind...” Remy said softly, voice still hoarse.

“Why didn’t you go with them? Didn’t you rather wanted that?” Raenef asked.

Remy’s eyes widened in shock. “But Remy promised he would go shopping with Master! Remy doesn’t break his promises.”

Raenef smiled at Remy’s firm statement. “It’s okay to break little promises like this sometimes. You could have called me to let me know. You have my number, right?”

At that moment they heard a soft knock on the door before it opened. An elderly woman came in carrying a tray with drinks, and an envelope.

Remy shot up from the floor as if stung by a bee, startling both Raenef and the woman. Although the woman must have found it strange Remy had sat on the floor rather than the couch, she didn’t say anything about it. Raenef had talked often about the boy and even though he had never told her directly, she had understood the boy had a traumatic past, and was still having trouble adjusting to his new life.

“I brought you tea and cookies director. Do you want something to drink as well, Mr. Himura?” the woman asked Remy, while putting the tray down on the small coffee table.

Remy looked unsure at his Master, but when he was looking at him as expectantly as the woman was, he shook his head.

“Thank you Beth, anything else?” Raenef asked his oldest and most trusted secretary.

“Yes, you have a message,” she said, handing him the envelope from the tray. “If that is all, I’ll leave you two alone. Oh, and it was a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Himura.” Beth said, smiling gently at Remy.

“Remy,” Remy said softly. “This one’s name... It’s Remy...” he explained when she looked at him questioningly.

She gave him a warm smile. “Remy it is. But only if you will call me Beth.”

Remy nodded.

Raenef smiled at their interaction, glad to see Remy enough at ease again to at least talk, if only a little. When Beth had left the office again, Raenef opened the envelope and groaned at reading the message enclosed.

Hiya!

Shinta came to visit, so we kinda decided to shoot pool and have a few drinks instead.

Hope you don’t mind ;)

Aniwayz, Remy rather wanted to go with you, so by now he’s on his way alone. I explained him how to get to your office, so everything should work out. He should arrive at about 1 o’clock, please be on the lookout for him!

Have fun you two and don’t do anything I wouldn’t do ;)

~ Silas

PS: Don't forget to buy me a huge present!

If only he had gotten the message earlier; he would have send the car for Remy, or would have at the very least picked him up at the subway station. But alas, nothing could be done about that anymore. And Remy had made it to his office. Raenef fixed the papers on his desk, but on seeing the restless look on Remy's face he put everything aside and got up, catching the boy's attention.

"You think I should wear my scarf?"

Remy looked uncertain. Was he supposed to tell his Master what to wear or not to wear? Or was it a trick question? "Uhhh, it's rather cold outside..." Remy said at last, leaving the actual decision to his Master.

Raenef smiled, knowing this was a close of a direct answer as he would get from Remy. "Scarf it is then. Are you sure you want to go shopping with me? I can have you brought home as well..." Raenef offered again.

"Remy'll go with Master."

As soon as they stepped out of Raenef's office, several members of his staff came up to him, wanting him to sign more papers, read more messages, asking his opinion on important matters etc.. Raenef could sense Remy tense up again and quickly waved everyone away, telling them to leave everything to his PA. "Jasper, please take care of everything for me, we'll be leaving now," Raenef said when Jasper came up to him.

"Of course. Will you be available by cell phone?" Jasper asked.

“No, I don’t want to be disturbed by anything today. If you really can’t take care of it yourself, tell them I’ll contact them tomorrow,” Raenef said resolutely.

“Will do. Do you want me to have the car ready for you downstairs?”

Raenef looked at Remy, who was still shaking a little. The boy was in no condition to go shopping in the crowded shopping mall yet, and he needed to calm him down somewhat first. “No, we’ll be fine on our own, thanks.”

# Chapter 6

Once they left the building, Raenef led Remy a few blocks down and into a small street away from the crowded main street. “Why don’t we get lunch first?” Raenef suggested.

They entered a coffee shop Raenef was sure would be quiet at this time of day. He discovered it by accident, and now often came here for tea and sandwiches. The place had a comfortable atmosphere and he hoped it would calm Remy down.

“Ah, Mr. Himura, welcome back. How unusual for you to bring company though,” a young waiter said once they sat down near the window.

“Thank you, Trevor. Please allow me to introduce you to my eh... cousin Remy. Remy meet Trevor, who makes the best sandwiches of the State,” Raenef said.

“He’s exaggerating a little, but they sure are the best of the city,” Trevor said, winking to Remy. “What can I get you two today?” Trevor asked, getting a small notebook from his pocket.

“I’ll have the same as always, with jasmine tea please.”

“And you? You seem more a coffee kinda type...” Trevor asked when Remy didn’t order anything.

“Ah..*oui*, Remy’ll have what he’s having, only with coffee please,” Remy said.

“Coming right up!” Trevor said returning to the bar and kitchen.

Christmas songs were playing softly throughout the small coffee shop and there were Christmas lights wrapped around the bar. Even the windows had strings of twinkling lights around them, giving the place a cozy touch. Slowly Remy started to relax. Within no time, Trevor came back with their drinks and sandwiches, which Remy had to admit was the best he'd ever tasted.

"I told you they were good!" Raenef said chuckling when Remy almost wolfed down the rest of his sandwich.

Remy nodded while swallowing the last of his sandwich.

"Do you need anything in particular in the city?" Raenef asked once they were enjoying their tea and coffee.

"*Non*, Remy already got all he needed," Remy said. "What about Master?"

"I got most of the presents, but I still need several for the staff at home, and I wanted something for Feilon and his family," Raenef answered. "If you're ready, we'd better get going."

Remy nodded and even seemed enthusiastic to go shopping. Raenef paid the check, leaving a large tip for Trevor, and wished him a merry Christmas.

From the coffee shop, it was a two-block walk to the city center where all the large shopping centers were. It looked as if the whole of New York City was on the streets this afternoon. Much to Raenef's surprise, Remy stayed as close to him as he could get without actually touching him. A first.

They went into shop after shop until they bought almost everything they needed. They were walking past one of the most expensive jewelry shops in the city when Raenef stopped to look at the window.

“Do you think Mrs. Emmerson will love this?” Raenef asked, pointing at a crystal angel dusted with glittery sparkles. It was hanging with other crystal ornaments in a Christmas tree and was very detailed for such a small size.

Remy looked at his Master uncomfortable. Sure the ornament was beautiful, and he was sure she would love it, but didn't his Master see the price tags? Before Remy could actually think up a fitting answer, his Master already stepped inside the shop, motioning Remy to follow him in.

“How can I help you today?” a stern-looking lady asked, bowing politely.

Remy saw right through her fake smile and disliked the woman almost immediately. Unlike the waiter in the coffee shop who was truly friendly, this woman only took his Master as a wealthy customer she could make money off. It didn't sit well with Remy at all.

“Can we have a closer look at the angel from the window?” Raenef asked.

The lady nodded and walked to the back, returning with several small black boxes. She set them down on the counter and opened them all. Inside were the little angels. “We have several different ones. Each with their own theme. And they are all made from the finest crystal as you can expect from our shop, of course,” she explained.

“Which one do you think she will like best?” Raenef asked Remy.

Remy hauled his shoulders. “Remy think she’ll love all of them.”

“Is it for a special lady?” the woman asked inquisitively.

“Yes, she’s very special to me. She’s my housekeeper and has served me well for many years, and I know she will love this.”

The woman looked shocked but smiled that fake smile again to cover it up. Apparently, Remy wasn’t the only one surprised his Master spending this much money on a servant.

Raenef gave them all a once over and decided on the ornament that had caught his attention in the first place. “This one it is then.”

“A very good choice, sir. I’m sure your eh... friend will be very happy with it,” the woman said, carefully putting the angel back in its velvet box.

Once they stepped out again, Remy was slightly nauseous from the astronomical price his Master had just paid without even blinking. And this was a gift for a servant! He didn’t dare to think what he would buy to someone his own stature. Again, he felt a complete cheapskate, for the presents he’d gotten for everyone weren’t even one percent of what his Master had just spent.

Even though it was getting dark outside, the streets were still crowded with people and well lit by twinkling lights in every

color possible, creating an almost fairytale atmosphere, brightening Remy's mood.

"Want to go to the market?" Raenef asked.

Remy nodded. Silas had taken him there the last time too, and he'd liked it there. And at least the shops and stalls there weren't as expensive as the ones they had visited thus far. They sauntered through the small streets filled with little stalls, selling everything from herbs, to Christmas toys and decorations. One salesman offering his goods even louder than the next.

Again it struck Raenef how Remy never left his side for even a moment, and he couldn't help but be happy. At home, Remy preferred to keep as much distance between them as he could, but apparently, now he deemed him safer as their surroundings. To most that wouldn't mean much, but to him it did; He was sure it was a sign Remy started to trust him, if only a little. "It looks nice with all the lights, doesn't it?" Raenef said when they walked back to the shopping mall.

"*Oui*, almost like a fun-fair," Remy agreed. "Silas and Remy used to visit markets such as this all the time when we were young," Remy said, eating the roasted chestnuts, Raenef had bought them.

"You did?" Raenef asked, surprised about the fact that Remy started talking about his past by his own volition.

Remy nodded. "*Oui*, no security to chase us out there. And it was nice with all the sparkling lights and to listen to the carol singers on the streets. It was also warmer on the market with

all its campfires than it was in our hideout. Thus we stayed as long as we could.”

Raenef smiled “I can picture that. Was it only the two of you, or were there more children out there?” Raenef asked carefully, not wanting Remy to close up again.

“There were lots more. But on the street, you can trust no one, most fend for themselves or join one of the gangs but that wasn’t much safer. Besides, it’s not smart to move in groups, makes it easier for the cops to catch you,” Remy explained.

Raenef smiled sadly. “Why did you take care of Silas then? Wasn’t that a high risk for you? It must have been hard enough to keep your own head above water,” Raenef asked. He hoped he wasn’t pushing him too far, but he had wondered about this ever since Silas had joined their family. Silas had told them time and time again how Remy had found him under a bridge and how he’d taken care of him ever since.

Remy shrugged. “Silas was too young and innocent when Remy found him. He would have died within a week if left to his own devices. The least Remy could do was help him out a little,” Remy said as if it had been nothing.

But Raenef knew better. At the time, Remy had barely been old enough to take care of himself, let alone taking care of another child. “Where did the two of you sleep?” Raenef asked.

“Different places. We had to move around a lot. With Silas there, Remy couldn’t risk getting into territory fights, so at the first signs of a takeover, we fled. Sometimes we got lucky though and a shelter would let Silas stay for the night, especially on particularly cold nights,” Remy said.

“Only Silas? Why didn’t you stay there as well?” Raenef asked surprised. This seemed to make Remy uncomfortable and Raenef was already regretting having pushed it too far when Remy started talking again.

“*Oui*,...they uhm... they wouldn’t let Remy in...” he said so softly that Raenef had strain to actually hear him.

Raenef frowned. “Why would they let Silas in, but not you?” he asked confused. Too late to notice Remy’s unease grow even more. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to push you, it’s...” Raenef started.

“*C’est bien*. They didn’t want to shelter a devil child. He guess’ they hoped Remy would freeze to death outside” Remy added matter of fact.

“Devil child?! Why wou—Ah... let me guess, your eyes?” Raenef answered his own question. “That’s absurd! Lord, you must have been so angry!” Raenef said feeling angry on his fledgling’s behalf. When he saw Remy flinch away, he rained in his anger, knowing Remy must have sensed it, and knowing him, would probably think he was angry with him instead.

“Remy didn’t mind, in fact, he was happy. At least he was sure Silas was safe and warm, if only for a night or two. That was all Remy wanted. Remy can take care of himself.”

“Yes, I know you can,” Raenef said sure of that. Not long after Remy had become his fledgling, he’d realized just how strong the boy was to have survived as long as he had.

And a strong sense of proudness came over him for his young fledgling.

Remy felt it though and looked up at his Master from the corner of his eyes as to gauge why his Master would be this

proud suddenly. But he saw nothing but a vague smile on his Master's face, so he discarded it.

“Oh, I almost forgot to pick something up!” Raenef said once they had reached the shopping mall again. “Can you please wait here for me? I won't take long,” Raenef asked when they were in the shopping mall.

Remy nodded, and Raenef hurried off and disappeared within the crowd.

Singing caught Remy's attention and he looked around the large hall to find where it was coming from. In the far corner, right next to the huge Christmas tree, was a small choir singing Christmas carols. Remy looked into the direction his Master had left in, and when he didn't see him coming back yet, he made his way over to the choir. Pulled in by an invisible string. More people had been attracted by the choir and by now a fair crowd had gathered around them. Remy's discomfort grew, but he still wanted to watch and listen. Living on the streets and in his previous Master's household had taught him how to practically make himself invisible to others. He had found a little spot close to a pillar from where he couldn't see the choir anymore, but at least he could still hear them.

# Chapter 7

When Raenef hurried back to the spot where he had left Remy, he was more than a little surprised to find Remy no longer there. He looked around but couldn't find the boy anywhere at first glance. Since he couldn't sense any strong fear from Remy either, he figured that wherever he'd wandered off to; he was probably okay. Raenef walked around a little hoping to find his fledgling when a sudden flash of white caught his peripheral vision. He glanced to where he thought he'd seen it, but it was gone when he looked more closely. When he got closer to the crowd gathered around the choir, he was sure he saw it again, this time more to his left. When he looked around—and his eyesight was a lot sharper than a human's—he finally spotted Remy right behind one of the large pillars. Raenef smiled. His fledgling could sure make himself invisible when he wanted to. He could see Remy entranced by the choir, probably amplified by his Methuselan attraction to music. But he could also see the surrounding crowd was making him nervous. He pushed his way through the crowd until he was next to Remy.

“Here you are!” he said in Remy's ear, making the boy jump. Raenef laughed. “Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you.”

Remy blushed and suddenly realized he probably had Raenef search all over the place for him. “Ah! Remy's sorry for wandering off! Please forgive him!” he choked out.

“Remy, it's okay! I'm not angry. Besides, you're not a dog that needs to sit still and wag your tail.”

Someone bumped into them rather harshly, and Remy flinched away, fear growing in his eyes.

“Let’s get out of here, hm? I know a better place,” Raenef said, leading Remy away from the crowd.

Remy followed his Master blindly, suddenly feeling claustrophobic being surrounded by this many people. Although he wished he could have listened to the choir a little longer. Raenef guided him to the escalators going to the first floor. From there, he led Remy around to the other side and leaned against the glass balustrade looking down on the ground floor. Remy did the same, surprised to see they were almost right above the choir, giving them a first-row spot. Even better, up here they were almost alone. Sure people walked behind them, but they were focused on the shops, not giving the two of them as much as a second glance.

Raenef’s attention though was more focused on Remy’s face, than on the choir downstairs. The boy was positively glowing, and he had never seen him this relaxed, and dare he say, happy since he’d taken him in.

“Here,” Raenef said, handing Remy a cup of hot chocolate he had bought at a vendor a few feet to their left.

Remy looked up startled. He hadn’t even realized his Master had left. “Ah... *merci*,” Remy said, accepting the cup, and sipping the warm drink.

“They are really good!” Raenef said, motioning to the choir.

Remy nodded. “*Oui*, and they know many songs too.” he added.

They stood there listening until the choir retired for the day. “I only need to pick up Eclipse’s order in a shop nearby, but how about we grab something to eat afterward since we’re still in town?” Raenef offered.

As always, Remy nodded.

They walked the few blocks in companionable silence, both enjoying the still twinkling lights. Once they turned another corner, a huge red gate greeted them, lit with red lanterns and colorful flags. Remy felt as if it was a portal into another world; The streets were filled with almost exclusively Asian people and a few tourists, and the shops sold things he’d never seen. Exotic smells hit his nose, one even nicer than the other, and there were small restaurants every other shop. Though there were no Christmas decorations to be found anywhere, the streets still were lit festively by the same red lanterns that Remy had seen at the mysterious gate. Remy stared his eyes out, having trouble to keep up with his Master’s pace.

Raenef looked over his shoulder and smiled at Remy’s sudden fascination with his surroundings. “You’ve never been here before?” Raenef asked surprised.

Remy shook his head. “Where are we?” he asked.

“It’s called Chinatown, but it’s nothing more than a part of the city where Asian people have settled down and opened their businesses. I guess they wanted to recreate a piece of their home countries. Even though it’s called ‘Chinatown’, there are lots of Asian nationalities to be found here,” Raenef explained.

Remy's fascination only grew. "Also people from Master's home country?" Remy asked.

Raenef smiled at Remy's eagerness "Yes, some Japanese as well, although most are from China and Korea. But the shop we're going to is a Japanese one."

Remy's eyes brightened. Even though his Master was never secretive about his background or past, Remy simply didn't have the nerve to ask him about it. It wasn't a slave's place to get on a personal level with his Master. With his previous Master, Remy had no problem with that rule. In fact, he hadn't wanted to know anything personal about the vampire at all, making it easier for him to keep his distance. But with his current Master, it was different. First of all, he seemed to actually want to build an emotional band with him instead of forbidding him to. And secondly, and this was what worried him most, Remy started to actually want to know more about his current Master. Not only his rules but personal things. Such as his past, his likes and dislikes, his favorite color. Walking through Chinatown with his Master, he couldn't shake the sensation he was granted a glimpse into his Master's world. And he liked it.

The vampire reminded him of a chameleon; When at his office, he looked every bit the suave businessman, at home he was as much at ease in casual clothing and having fun with family and staff, and even here, in this almost foreign world of Chinatown he looked as if he belonged.

"Master?" Remy asked after they had walked through yet another colorful street.

Raenef looked at him, urging him to go on.

“May Remy ask a question?” Remy asked, careful not to overstep his boundaries.

Raenef chuckled. “Of course! Ask me anything.”

“Why are there no Christmas decorations here? Nor Christmas songs played in the shops and restaurants?” Remy asked.

“Ah, you noticed? It’s because Asians generally don’t celebrate Christmas,” Raenef explained.

Remy frowned.

“What? You thought we simply didn’t fancy celebrating it the last few years?!” Raenef said laughing. “It’s a cultural thing, really. Historically, most parts of Asia didn’t celebrate Christmas; It’s a Christian tradition, and only a small percentage of Asians consider themselves Christians. Nowadays most larger cities have adopted the tradition, but it’s more a commercial thing than anything else. It’s mostly celebrated by young couples, not unlike Valentine’s Day,” Raenef explained.

“What about Master and Monsieur?”

“We didn’t grow up with Christmas, and even though we have become accustomed to the American customs by now, we never quite got into Christmas as much as Americans do. We usually go back home to avoid the crowds here. But we have other holidays that are similar to your Christmas. For instance, our New Year’s celebration is a lot bigger and more festive than your American one is,” he added.

Remy was listening intently, not wanting to miss a single word, but frowned at his Master’s words. “If Master doesn’t like celebrating Christmas, why are we?”

“Silas wanted to celebrate it this year.”

Remy stopped walking, looking at his Master in shock. “Master and *Monsieur* dropped their plans because Silas wanted to celebrate Christmas?!”

Raenef chuckled. “We don’t give in to all his whims—otherwise we’d probably be playing video games all day—but this was important to him. So, yes, that’s why. Silas, like you, is part of our family. If something is important to him, it’s important to us. And if it’s something we can accommodate, then why not? It’s a small sacrifice to make.”

Remy couldn’t believe his ears. His Master made it sound logical, normal. But he knew it wasn’t. He didn’t know of any Master who’d listen to their slave’s wishes, let alone change their own plans for them. He didn’t know what jujū Silas had over them, but once they got back, he’d have a stern word with his little brother.

“Ah, here it is. Want to come in with me?” Raenef said when they had entered one of the smallest alleys they had passed thus far.

Remy nodded.

Once they entered the small shop, the first thing Remy noticed was the heavy smell of incense. The shop owner—the oldest man Remy had ever seen—shuffled in from the back of the shop and greeted his Master in what Remy assumed was Japanese. Even though Remy couldn’t understand a word they were saying, it was obvious that they knew each other pretty well, and that his Master respected the old man.

Raenef introduced him to the old man and explained that he was one of the greatest sword forgers in the world. His family has been the sword forger for their Clan for two generations

now, and his grandson had now taken over the tradition. The shop owner waved it away as if it was nothing. He brought out a large sword and handed it to his Master while talking in rapid Japanese.

Remy wandered through the shop, packed to the brim with Asian artifacts and antiquities. He was about to return to his Master when something caught his attention. It was a glass case with several swords. Even though he wasn't an expert on swords like his Master or Eclipse were, he had learned enough by now from Eclipse to recognize the swords shown were katana; Also called 'longswords' or 'samurai swords'. Eclipse had explained to him that in their culture, swords were treated as holy objects, as it had undoubtedly saved its wielder's life many times. He had seen Eclipse's and his Master's swords; twin katana which together represented yin and yang, and they too were masterfully crafted and decorated. They even had names; His Master's sword was called Amaterasu, and Eclipse's sword Tsukuyomi.

The very bottom one in the case was the katana that had caught his attention and he kneeled down to take a better look at it. The scabbard was black and inlaid with the finest silver, forming a dragon and the famous Japanese sakura flowers. He'd never seen a more beautiful sword and he could barely keep his eyes from it. He wondered how the sword would feel in his hands, would it be heavy?

"A beautiful sword indeed."

Remy jumped at the sudden voice and nearness of his Master.

“Ah.. ah R.. Remy was only...” he stuttered. He’d been so intrigued by the sword, he hadn’t even sensed or heard his Master approach. And he wasn’t used to being taken off guard.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you,” Raenef said. “I was only curious to see what had caught your interest. But I can see why it did. She looks exquisite,” he added, also looking at the sword.

“Her name is ‘Shizuko’. It’s the last sword I made,” the shop owner said in broken English, opening the glass case and picking the sword from its display stand. He handed the sword to Remy.

“Ah! *Non!* Remy was only looking... he didn’t mean to...” he started, waving his hands.

“Hold it, see how it feels,” Raenef said.

Remy took it, holding the beautiful sword carefully with both hands. Much to his surprise the sword actually was warm in his hands, not the cold of steel one might expect.

“Draw her from her scabbard,” Raenef encouraged.

Slowly, Remy did, and warmth and tranquility came over him when he held the handle in both hands.

The shop owner mumbled something in Japanese to which his Master only nodded in awe. “How does she feel?” Raenef asked.

“Hmm warm,” Remy answered automatically. He shook himself out of the trancelike state he’d been in ever since he had the sword in his hands. Quickly he resheathed the sword in its scabbard and gave it back to the shop owner, who next gave it to Raenef. Raenef drew the sword expertly and looked around the blade to look for any flaws or roughness on the

blade, but as he expected of the forger, the blade was immaculate.

“Remy is right, she really is something special,” Raenef said, sheathing the blade and giving it back to the shop owner.

“She’s a bit on the light side, but she’s strong,” the shop owner mumbled while setting the sword back on its display stand.

Raenef picked up the wrapped sword he’d come to pick up for Eclipse, and after saying goodbye to the shop owner, they left the shop.

“Where do you want to get something to eat? We can go back to the shopping streets, or we can get something to eat here. Although they won’t serve western food, I’m afraid,” Raenef asked.

“Remy doesn’t mind, here is fine. Eh... could we.. uhm.. eat something Master loves? He means, if Master wants to!” Remy added quickly, already feeling guilty for suggesting.

Raenef frowned a little at Remy’s suggestion, thinking it was another way for Remy to please him. But there was something about the boy’s posture that made him think it was more than that. “Sure. Actually, there’s a nice Japanese restaurant close by. You like Japanese food?” Raenef asked while guiding Remy even deeper into Chinatown.

Remy looked uncomfortable again and bit his lip while looking at the floor. “Remy never tried it...” he almost whispered, sure his Master would think him a fool now. “But he will eat it.”

Raenef smiled. "I bet you'll love it, especially the wasabi," he added, knowing his fledgling's appreciation of spicy food.

They entered a small family restaurant, and they got a table near the window. Even though Raenef had translated the menu for him, Remy still had no clue what to pick, thus he ordered the same as his Master.

"Be careful of the green paste. It's called wasabi and is extremely hot, maybe even more than your chili's," Raenef warned when the food arrived. Remy carefully tried the wasabi and found he actually liked it very much. Being raised in Louisiana he was used to spicy food and had a real liking for it. His Master knew he did, and most of the time spiced up his food more than that of the others.

"You like it? Not too hot for you?" Raenef asked in amusement.

"*Non*, Remy really likes it!" Remy said, putting even more wasabi on his noodles. "What's it called?"

"It's called 'yakisoba', or 'stir-fried noodles'. It's a traditional dish, and comes in lots of variations," Raenef explained.

Remy nodded and pushed the uneasy notion he shouldn't be this interested in his Master's background away for the time being. "Is it Master's favorite?" Remy asked. Too shy to look the vampire in the eyes.

"I enjoy many things, but I guess of the Japanese cuisine this is one of my favorites yes," Raenef said. "What's your favorite food?" Raenef shot right back.

Remy blinked, not expecting the question.

“Remy don’t know... He never had much choice in what he got to eat. Most of the time he was lucky to get any food at all, so he’s not too picky.”

Raenef nodded. “But there must be something you love. Apart from tart that is,” he added. Ever since Remy had come to live with them, the boy was smitten with tart. Something he’d eaten once on the street by chance and had loved ever since.

Remy looked up in fright at Raenef, afraid his fondness of the dairy displeased his Master but when he saw Raenef smiling teasingly at him, he relaxed again.

“Remy likes spicy food he guess’. Back in Louisiana Tante Marie would sometimes give us her leftover gumbo. Remy always liked it a lot...” Remy said.

“Gumbo, eh? I don’t think I ever ate that before. Next time we go out for dinner, let’s try it, okay?” Raenef said. “Surely there are good Cajun restaurants around.”

Remy nodded, not sure what to make of it. Could it be his Master was as interested in his likes and dislikes as he was in his Master’s?

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When Evan, their driver, drove up to the front door, Silas was getting out of his own car.

“Great timing!” he called out when he saw Raenef and Remy getting out of the car.

“Did you two have fun?” Silas asked Remy once they were sitting in the living room.

“*Oui*, we listened to the Christmas Carolers and went to the market place again. Oh, and Master took Remy to see

Chinatown. We even ate Japanese there,” Remy told him with more enthusiasm than he normally did, causing both Raenef and Silas to smile.

“He did? Good! He should spoil you more often!” Silas declared.

“Master takes really good care of Remy already... he really doesn't have to...” Remy started shocked. What if his Master would think Remy was ungrateful?

“Hold your horses Rem', I'm only teasing,” Silas said laughing.

“He's right though, we should go out more often,” Raenef said.

“But Master is already spoiling Remy!” Remy said, getting worked up.

“Nonsense, didn't I tell you before, it's a Master's duty to protect and spoil his fledgling. Besides, you hardly let me buy you anything at all!” Raenef complained. Even though he'd told Remy dozens of times before, it still was a touchy subject for Remy. One he had a hard time with in letting go.

“What about you? Remy said Shinta dropped by and you went out, did you two had fun as well?” Raenef asked, easily changing the subject before Remy could get even more anxious.

“You bet! I kicked his ass twice at pool!” Silas boasted.

# Chapter 8

“Ah Remy, before I forget, Anne invited us to their yearly Christmas concert this Saturday. She specifically asked me to pass it on to you as well. Would you like to come with me?”

Mother Mary Anne was a dear friend of his Master. She ran an orphanage, community center, and school in one of the worst parts of the city as well as the local church. Raenef had taken him to meet her, and he'd loved their visits.

Remy nodded but found it wasn't acquiescence; He really wanted to go. As a Methuselah, he loved music. Growing up in New Orleans he'd been around music all the time, even living on the streets. His previous Master though had never allowed him to listen to music. After all, music was entertainment; not something to be enjoyed by slaves. His new Master had no such rules though and the house was usually filled with music.

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“Ah, our sexy Leader, and my darling hummingbird, welcome, welcome!” Pierre squealed while snapping his fingers at his staff. Two humans rushed to take their coats and guide them to gold comfortable barber chairs, where they were offered champagne and hors d'oeuvres.

Remy was a little overwhelmed with the royal treatment and the decor. Everything sparkled, and if the framed and signed photo's on the walls were any indication, every famous actor, singer, or other VIP had been a customer here. He'd met Pierre a few times when he and Silas had gone out for drinks, or when

the sparkly vampire had visited them at the mansion, but he'd never seen his salon. Remy had to admit the place was an extension of its owner; It was over the top, yet in a stylish way. And though his flamboyant nature and cocky attitude came across as a king parading in his castle, he actually made the customers feel like royalty as well. Though Remy could have done without all the attention, he still was at ease in the place.

Raenef too seemed to have a fondness for the sparkly and more than flirty slave.

Once they were seated, he got to work. Remy was awed with the ease with which Pierre socialized with their Master; It were two good friends together rather than Master and slave. A tinge of jealousy stung Remy as he watched the two men flirt and tease. He too wanted to talk the way his 'brother' did. Maybe not as flashy or flirty, but the way he made socializing look effortless; As if he didn't have a care in the world over the consequences of his words. Would there ever be a time when he too would think that way? Would that make his Master happy? He sure looked to be enjoying Pierre's talking.

"Your turn, my handsome devil," Pierre purred in his ear, his hands already combing through Remy's hair.

Remy almost jumped as he was shaken out of his thoughts.

"Did you have something in mind, or can I work my magic on you?" Pierre asked, looking leeringly at Remy in the mirror.

Remy swallowed, not too sure Pierre was still talking about his hair. He glanced over at his Master, but the vampire merely rolled his eyes and chuckled. "Let him do his thing. He knows best."

“Oh Honey, of course I know best. They don’t pay me the big bucks just for my good looks, you know.” Pierre said, waving at the many photographs on the walls.

Striking a thinking pose for a few seconds, he burst out in an energetic whirlwind.

Less than an hour later, Pierre turned Remy’s chair around, offering him the first look in the mirror of his new hair cut.

Remy’s eyes widened at the face that greeted him. He never had his hair cut in a salon before. Usually, a pair of scissors or a tie rip to keep it out of the way did the trick when it got too long. But now he could see why people paid the sparkly vampire ‘the big bucks’; He truly had done wonders with his hair. He had always been uncomfortable with his albino looks. His red eyes were relatively easy to hide, but his white hair? Not so much. And it had drawn quite a lot of negative attention to him, especially in a city buzzing with superstitions.

But now, Pierre had turned them into a fashion statement—not unlike his Master’s own white hair. He was sure it would still draw lots of attention, but at least this time it would be positive attention and his Master wouldn’t be embarrassed by his shabby-looking fledgling.

“*Merci, Monsieur,*” Remy said.

“Oh Darling, do call me by my name. I love how it rolls off those sensuous lips of yours with that delicious accent. Or you can call me ‘lover’ if you insist,” he added with a wink. “We are brothers after all, aren’t we?”

Remy’s eyes widened in horror. No way could he go around calling him ‘lover’!

His fear faded when he heard Raenef chuckling next to him. “Don’t mind him, Remy. He’s only teasing you.”

Pierre looked mock affronted. “Are you calling me a tease?! I’ll have you know, I have never left a partner hanging.”

Before he could add anything else, he was called away for a phone call.

“You look beautiful. Do you like it?” Raenef said, looking at his fledgling in the mirror while resting his hand on his shoulder.

Remy felt the heat rising to his face at his Master’s praise. He’d been called beautiful before, by many men and women, but it never had this sincerity behind it, nor did it evoke the feelings it did now.

“*Merci*, Master. Pierre did a really good job.”

Raenef chuckled. “Yes, your hair looks nice too,” he said while looking straight at Remy in the mirror, leaving no doubt as to the true meaning of his words.

Remy blushed and was relieved to see the sparkly vampire return.

After receiving a list of instructions for him to follow on how to style his hair, and what products to use—Remy didn’t even know there were more things to put in your hair other than shampoo—they returned home.

# Chapter 9

Standing before the mirror in his dressing room, Remy stared amazed at his reflection. There were no more traces of the filthy street kid he'd once been in a previous life, nor the gaunt-looking slave scared of his own shadow. Instead, he looked every part the rich heir in his formal black suit, white dress shirt, and black cumberbund. Having followed Pierre's styling advice, his hair looked healthier than it ever did, and complemented his face. Unfortunately, it also was away from his face, leaving his red eyes unobscured. Not something he was overly confident of, especially not in a church. But alas, there wasn't much he could do about that.

As he came down the grand stairs, double-checking his cufflinks were in place, a low whistling sound alerted him to his Master's presence. He almost stumbled when he noticed the intense way the vampire was looking at him. A wave of appreciation washed over him through the Bond. He wasn't sure how he felt about that, but further thinking became impossible as his eyes took in his Master. The man looked absolutely gorgeous. The black tuxedo looked as if it was made for his tall frame and seemed happy to envelop the man's physique. The bow tie and cumberbund matched the blue streaks in his hair and made his electric blue eyes stand out even more. But what made the look complete was the way he wore it; The confidence he exuded. This was a man who felt good in his own skin.

Remy blushed when he saw the vampire's lips curl into a soft smile. Realizing he'd been caught red-handed at gawking at his Master, he quickly looked away. "Remy's sorry for keeping Master waiting."

"It was well worth the wait. If you look like this every time we go out, I must take you out more often."

Raenef chuckled at his discomfort. "Come on, let's go. Anne has seats reserved for us, but I don't want to be late."

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Remy stayed close to Raenef when they entered the church. A place Remy still had mixed feelings about. When he had been a child living on the streets, the nuns and priests at the local church in new Orleans had shunned him; Telling him he was the spawn of the Devil because of his red eyes. He hadn't understood, but having been told by a representative of God, he had taken it for the truth. Both Anne and his Master had insisted he wasn't a demon, and wouldn't burn to a crisp for entering a church, but he still felt nervous in the pit of his stomach every time he stepped over the threshold.

Remy and Raenef had visited Mother Mary Anne many times, but never had it been this crowded.

It was a few days before Christmas and the night of the annual Christmas performance of the children's choir.

"You will love it," Raenef had said when he asked Remy to come with him. Remy wasn't too sure now; The church was packed with people, making Remy more than a little nervous. He never thought he'd ever come to think of anyone as a

comforting presence, but now, his Master did. Sitting next to him, Remy knew he would keep him safe.

When the lights dimmed, the entire church became quiet. Mother Mary Anne stepped on the makeshift stage, welcoming everyone and thanking several people for their contributions over the past year—giving Raenef an almost imperceptible nod—before announcing the choir.

And then, Remy forgot all about his anxiety; Angels were singing at them from all sides. Their voices echoing in the spacious church, making it even more impressive. Entranced by the music, Remy had never felt as alive as he did right then and there. Everything came into sharp focus; Smells, sounds, even his vision became sharper. His skin itched with sensations running up and down his arms and back. When his Master gently laid his arms around his shoulder, the sensation intensified until Remy felt like imploding. It was like he was drunk on music. Alarm-bells were ringing in the back of his mind, warning him to keep his mind focused, but they were ignored and overridden with the far more beautiful sounds of the angels. The unsuspecting choir sang a mixture of Christmas carols as well as other songs, and the whole crowd was enchanted by their singing.

All too soon the performance was over, and Raenef guided them outside. “Did you like it?”

“*Oui*, Master. That was beautiful,” he added, still a little breathless from the mind-blowing experience.

Raenef smiled and handed him a bottle of water. “Is this the first time you’ve attended a music recital of sorts? It can be quite an overpowering sensation to us. And they may not be

professional singers, they are pretty good,” Raenef explained. “If you wish, we can go to other musical recitals and performances as well. Have you ever seen an opera or ballet performance?”

Remy shook his head. “Remy would love that.”

“It’s a date then—Ah, there’s Anne, let’s say hi, before we go home.”

# Chapter 10

“Eh?! This must be some kind of mistake, sir!” Emmerson said to the delivery man standing on the porch, unloading a truckload of pine trees. Literally.

“Yeah, yeah, save it for the people who care! It says right here ‘thirty pine trees delivered at above-mentioned address’,” the delivery man quoted, showing the butler the order. “And it’s already paid for, so there’s no way I’m going to haul them back!” he added.

“B.. but sir, surely there must have been made a mistake somewhere, why would we..—“ Emmerson tried.

“What’s all the ruckus about?” Raenef asked entering the hallway.

“Milord, I’m sorry for the trouble, but there seems to be a misunderstanding,” Emmerson said apologetically. “But I’ll take care of it, milord.”

“You’re the master of the house?” the deliveryman asked Raenef, ignoring the butler.

Raenef nodded. “What seems to be the problem here?” he asked.

“No problems here, man. All you need to do is sign here and they’re all yours,” the delivery man said shoving a clipboard into Raenef’s hands.

Raenef’s eyes widened when he read the papers. He sighed deeply and signed the papers.

“OY, SILAS!!!” he growled loudly as the delivery truck drove off.

Silas poked his head from around the hallway on the first floor.

“Care to tell me why there are thirty pine trees standing on my porch?!” Raenef asked dangerously calm.

“They arrived? Cool!” Silas said, calling for Remy and skipping down the stairs.

“Please tell me there has been a mistake; That you didn’t really order thirty pine trees,” Raenef asked still dangerously calm, already feeling the beginnings of a pounding headache.

“Nope, no mistake,” Silas said happily. Not even noticing Raenef’s warning undertone.

“There are *thirty* pine trees Silas, THIRTY!” Raenef growled, for once on the verge of losing his usual patience.

“Well, yeah, we have a big house,” Silas pointed out as if it was the understatement of the century. “One tree would simply disappear into nothingness. So I got one for the hall, one for in the private living room, the hallways upstairs, the staff living room, the main bedrooms, not to mention the—.”

“—Argg! Shut up already, I don’t want to know any more!” Raenef growled. “Get them out of my sight, and clean the porch,” he added while rubbing his face and fleeing to his office. Remy, who had only heard his Master yell and storm off towards his office in a bad mood, made his way over to Silas wondering what had gotten his usually calm Master this upset.

“Ah, there you are. The trees have arrived, time to get to work!” Silas said unfazed.

Remy’s eyes widened when he saw the forest standing on the porch, and he had a suspicious feeling was the reason of what had ticked his Master off. “Why are there this many?” Remy asked.

Silas rolled his eyes, wondering why no one else understood. “Because we have a big house to decorate! Now let’s get these trees inside and up to their proper places!” he added all fired up.

After they had dragged the first huge pine trees into the hall, a sudden screech stopped them right in their tracks.

“What on earth are you doing to my polished floor!” Mrs. Emmerson, head of the household groaned, pointing at the mud smudges all over the floor.

“Ah, sorry! It’s the trees, they are still a bit wet and all...” Silas said placating.

“Remy’s really sorry, we’ll be sure to clean it all up when we’re done, *oui?*” Remy offered.

“You’d better. This floor better be spotless tonight!” she threatened.

Both boys nodded solemnly too scared to against the woman.

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“WHAT THE HELL?!!!! SILAAAAAAAAAS!” a livid Eclipse yelled, stomping down the hallway in search for said fledgling.

When he rounded the corner he ran into Raenef.

“WHERE THE HELL IS HE?! I’M GOING TO BREAK HIS FUCKING NECK!” Eclipse snarled.

Raenef couldn’t help but chuckle. “You’ve noticed too, hm?”

Eclipse was not amused. He had hurried home from an important, but boring business trip to Asia because his fledgling had made him promise to be home in time for

Christmas. He had to be ready in two hours to attend a formal business Christmas party he loathed, and now this!

“It’s kind of hard not to notice! The whole fucking house smells like a fucking pine tree, and if that’s not enough, my own fucking bedroom has a fucking TREE in it! And not a nice looking decorative plant or something tasteful, NO! It’s a fucking huge pine tree, with blinking, BLINKING! lights and freaking ANGELS in it! I swear I’ll kill him this time!” Eclipse ranted.

Raenef laughed. “Yes, they found it necessary to put one up in my bedroom as well. And in pretty much every nook and cranny of the house they could fit one in I’m afraid.”

“You already chewed them out for me? Not that he’s escaping my wrath anyway,” Eclipse said.

“Eh.. about that...” Raenef said, scratching the back of his head in embarrassment.

Eclipse raised his brow at his brother’s evasive answer, but was still too fired up to let himself get deterred from his killing spree. “Where is he?!” Eclipse snarled, cracking his knuckles.

“Private living room,” Raenef answered a small smile playing on his lips as he followed Eclipse downstairs.

Eclipse brusquely crossed the hallway, his mood souring even more after passing yet another Christmas tree. With as much force as he could muster without pulling it right off its hinges, he threw the door to the private living room open, already taking a deep breath to chew his fledgling out.

“....”

He was rooted to the floor at the sight that greeted him inside, his breath escaping in a soft hiss as his anger and bloodlust had instantly left him.

“What? Done killing already?” Raenef asked casually, leaning against the wall next to the door.

Eclipse took a step back and looked away. “Yeah well, you’re the oldest, it’s your job anyway,” he said embarrassed. Then a thought hit him. “You couldn’t do it either, could you?” Eclipse stated, looking pointedly at his twin brother.

Raenef suddenly looked embarrassed as well. “Yes well, I mean look at them,” he said vaguely motioning to the room where both Silas and Remy were sprawled out on the rug in front of the fireplace, sound asleep. From top to bottom covered in dirt and pine tree needles, they had never looked more innocent than they did right then and there.

“Jeez, we sure are getting soft these days,” Eclipse sighed.

Raenef nodded sympathetically.

“What has gotten them this worn out? It’s not like them to fall asleep this early. Especially not Remy,” Eclipse asked.

“The two of them have been dragging thirty huge pine trees around all day, even to the top floors, and decorated most of them as well. Mrs. Emerson had them clean the floors in the hallways,” Raenef listed.

Eclipse chuckled. “Are they crazy or what?!” he said affectionately.

“I guess Silas really went all out with his ‘Perfect Christmas’ project,” Raenef said.

# Chapter 11

“Jingle bells Jingle bells jingle all the way, lalala lalalala in a one-horse open sleigh, HEY!” Silas was singing along with the radio while Remy and he were hanging even more decorations in the hallways.

“What about the living room tree and decorations?” Remy asked.

“We’ll do that one tonight with the entire family. That’s how it should be right?” Silas answered.

“But won’t Master and *Monsieur* be busy? Maybe we should do it ourselves. You did say you would take care of all the decorations, right?” Remy said doubtfully.

“Nonsense, it should be done with the entire family on Christmas Eve!” Silas proclaimed.

They finished up the decorations in the early afternoon and were cleaning up after themselves when Mrs. Emmerson came in.

“Ah, it looks beautiful!” she said, clasping her hands and looking around the decorated hall.

“It does, doesn’t it?!” Silas said.

“It does. The whole house does. And it was nice of you two to even decorate the trees you got us!” she added gratefully, referring to the trees Silas had gotten for the staff.

“No problem! You’re as much a part of this household as we are!” Silas waved away her gratefulness.

“You two worked so hard! Why don’t I make you two some nice hot chocolate,” Mrs. Emmerson offered. They both

followed her to the kitchen where she ushered them to sit down while she began to prepare the chocolate. After they drank their hot chocolate Mary was already preparing Raenef's tea.

"Remy will bring it up to Master," Remy offered.

"Oh, you don't have to, sweetheart. It's my job to wait on him, not yours."

Remy frowned. He didn't understand why the staff never accepted his help. His previous Master had taught him that slaves were lower than the household staff, but here the staff treated him as lord of the house instead.

"It's okay, Remy is going to go see Master anyway," he insisted.

Mary sighed. "Okay, thank you then," she said while handing him the tray.

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"Come in," Raenef said after a soft knock on his door alerted him.

"Ah, Remy!" Raenef said smiling.

"Sorry for being late today as well," Remy said. Usually, he came to his Master's office with the morning tea and spend his day reading in the office. But the past few days, Silas and he had been so busy that it was already well in the afternoon before he had shown his face in his Master's office.

"Nonsense, you're not obliged to come here. You can go wherever you please," he said for the umpteenth time.

"*Oui*, Master," Remy answered automatically.

“How is the decorating going?” Raenef asked, changing the subject.

“We’re almost done. Only the tree in the private living room still needs to be done, but Silas said we will save that one for tonight,” Remy answered.

“How was Master’s day?” Remy asked in return.

“Not as fun as yours, but I finished most of the things that needed to be taken care of before the holidays.”

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“You want us to do WHAT?!” Eclipse almost yelled.

“It’s tradition! On Christmas Eve the whole family decorates the Christmas tree while listening to Christmas carols and drinking eggnog. So quit your yapping and start with the lights!” Silas ordered pushing a huge ball of knotted strings with Christmas lights in his Master’s hands.

Raenef smiled at their banter. “Come on Eclipse, it can’t be that bad. And the sooner we get on with it, the sooner it will be done and we can relax,” he said soothingly.

Eclipse still objected somewhat but started working on unknitting the strings of lights.

“*Non*, Remy, higher and a bit to the left. Up on that branch!” Silas said from below while Remy was balancing on a high ladder trying to hang a little golden ornament on a branch. Remy did as told and reached down for the next ornament which Raenef was already holding up for him. Silas and Eclipse were working on getting the lights in the tree while carefully moving around Raenef and Remy. Silas starting

singing along with a familiar carol and, much to Remy's surprise, Eclipse joined him soon after.

"I told you before, haven't I? He's all bark, no bite," Raenef whispered to Remy.

It never rang as true as it did now though. As much as Eclipse declared to dislike the whole Christmas spirit, he sure seemed to enjoy himself. The vampire was even singing along with Silas and giving the others instructions on how the ornaments should be placed. Raenef too was humming along with a familiar song, and eventually, even Remy started to relax. At first, the closeness of this many people around him in such a tight space unnerved him, and he'd been uncomfortable and tense. But when nothing happened, he started to relax and enjoy himself.

"And now, gentlemen, the moment we have all been waiting for!" Silas declared loudly while presenting the plug of the lights to Raenef and closing all other lights in the room. It was only seconds before midnight. Raenef took the plug from Silas and put it in the socket. Immediately the entire Christmas tree lit up with beautiful little lights. Reflected by the many ornaments, it spread a warm glow throughout the room. They all fell silent for a second in awe only to erupt in cheers and applause seconds later.

"MERRY CHRISTMAS!" they all cheered.

Raenef served everyone a glass of eggnog and they toasted.

"To a wonderful Christmas!" Raenef said. And the rest joined him.



# Chapter 12

“TIME FOR PRESENTS!” Silas declared. He’d been eyeing the ever-growing pile of presents under the tree like a hawk all week, and it looked he’d reached the end of his patience.

Remy wasn’t too sure though if it was for unwrapping his own or handing out the ones he’d gotten the others.

“What about the presents for Feilon and the others?” Raenef said.

“We can open those tomorrow,” Silas was quick to answer.

“You really can’t wait any longer, can you?” Raenef teased.

“You hand everyone their presents,” Eclipse said.

Silas didn’t need to be told twice and before the rest could even blink, Silas grabbed the top present and looked at the attached name card.

“Raenef, you’re the lucky guy!” Silas said, handing the beautifully wrapped present to Raenef.

Raenef unwrapped it and frowned a little when he opened the box. He lifted an ancient-looking leather notebook from the box, careful to not damage the worn and old cover. The cover was bounded by a leather strap and he carefully opened it. When he lifted the cover, his eyes widened when he realized what exactly he was holding.

“Dear Lord....” he whispered while his hands lovingly glided over the worn pages. Remy and Silas frowned, not understanding what was special about this old notebook, but Eclipse had a knowing glint in his eyes.

“What is it, Master?” Remy asked.

“Have you ever heard of Caius Yuan?” Raenef asked.

Silas looked clueless, but Remy nodded. “Isn’t that the poet Master has several books from?” he asked. Remy spent enough time examining the library to know most of the authors his Master had collected over the centuries. If he remembered correctly, his Master even had two of his books in glass cases.

Raenef nodded. “Caius Yuan was one of the very first Methuselah and a fervent poet. His ideas though were way too modern for those times and he was banished from Methuselan society. Most of his books have been lost, and it took me centuries to find the books that survived,” Raenef explained. “This is one of his missing notebooks, and if it’s genuine, this might very well be the proof he has written more poems and books than were initially assumed,” he added.

“Oh, it’s genuine alright,” Eclipse said. “I ran into rumors about the notebook a few years ago during a lecture at the faculty about ancient scriptures that had been found. It took me almost two years to find the source of the rumors and two more to track the damn thing all the way to the South Americas. There, it was hidden in a cellar of a castle home to a weird vampire loving sect that was worshipping it like a bible,” he explained. “When I finally had the notebook in my possession, I brought it back and paid a team of the best scientists to examine the authenticity of the notebook. All tests gave the same results; This is without a doubt written by Caius Yuan. This is the real thing,” Eclipse finished.

Raenef’s eyes widened and he cradled the notebook to his chest before carefully putting it back in its box. “Thank you so much.”

“Okay! Time for the next present!” Silas urged. “Now it’s your turn to pick a present, Raenef,” he instructed.

Raenef looked at the huge pile of presents and picked a present wrapped in shiny blue paper with a golden bow on top of it. “Here you go,” he said while handing the present to a delighted Silas.

Silas all but tore the wrapping paper off only to grin broadly. “OH MY GOD! This one isn’t even officially released yet!” he said, already reading the back of the latest video game. Silas was a true fanatic when it came to video games and had every gaming console he could find stuffed in his city apartment.

“I pulled a few strings to make sure I had it before Christmas,” Eclipse said smiling.

Silas gave him a tight hug and held the game as if it was a holy object.

“Your turn again brat,” Eclipse said.

Silas crawled to the Christmas tree and smiled when his eye fell on a certain present.

“Here ya go, Rem’,” he said, handing Remy the present.

Remy’s eyes widened. He’d never expected to get a present. He’d never received any presents. For a moment, Remy didn’t know what to do with it and only held the present in shaking fingers.

“Go on Rem’, open it!” Silas urged.

Remy looked up from Silas’ eager face to that of his Master, seeking permission. Raenef smiled and nodded encouragingly. With shaking fingers, Remy opened the present. It was a flat box, and when Remy lifted the lid, his eyes widened. He lifted the dark brown clothing inside. To

everyone else it may have appeared a regular trench-coat, nothing special. But to Remy, it couldn't have been more beautiful. When he and Silas were still living on the streets, he had owned a trench-coat exactly like this one. He'd loved the thing, and it had kept him warm and dry through many a cold and rainy night. Over the years on the street though, the coat had been damaged and dirtied, but he refused to go without it; Until one day when Silas had gotten into trouble with one of the many street gangs. Remy had gotten there in the nick of time to save his ass but had gotten badly injured himself, and the coat had been reduced to nothing more than a few straps of fabric. Silas had been sorry and promised to buy him a new one somehow but Remy had waved it all away, saying it was nothing.

And now he had a new one. And it was exactly the same, except this one was a brand new one, minus the holes or dirt.

"It took me a while to make good on that promise, but I hope you still like it..." Silas said when Remy kept quiet. He wasn't sure if Remy even remembered the promise, or worse, that he'd brought back bad memories by buying it.

"You remembered..." Remy whispered hoarsely.

"Of course! It was because of my stupidity your old one got wrecked!" Silas said. "This one is tailor-made, so it should fit you like a glove. You like it?"

Remy nodded. "*Oui*, very much. *Merci*. But you didn't have to get Remy anything though," he added.

"Nonsense! You're part of the family, right?" Eclipse said.

Remy nodded hesitatingly.

“Okay, next present!” Silas said, already digging into the pile of presents.

“For you!” he said smiling cheekily to Eclipse.

Eclipse wriggled his eyebrows “Is it safe to open it here, or later in the bedroom?” he said teasingly.

“PERVERT! Just open it already!” Silas said embarrassed making Eclipse only laugh harder. He stopped laughing though when he’d opened his present. “You—but how—They were sold out within seconds! I couldn’t even get tickets,” Eclipse said at seeing two tickets for ‘Nature’s Enigma’s’ concert. It was Eclipse’s favorite band and he usually managed to get tickets for their concerts. This time though, everything had been sold out, and not even he, with all his connections, had managed to get tickets.

“Remember my sudden urge to see Moscow a few months back?” Silas asked.

Eclipse nodded, not understanding what that had to do with the tickets.

“Well, I stood in minus forty degrees in the queue for well over forty-eight hours to get the damn tickets,” Silas said, a chill running down his spine by the mere memory.

“You did?!” Eclipse said amazed.

“The entire tour in the States was already sold out before the ticket boxes actually opened. Luckily, I too have some connections and they told me the tour would also come to Moscow. Tickets for those concerts would be sold exclusively through the ticket boxes. Since no sane person would stand that long in line under those freezing temperatures, chances were I would at least stand a chance if I got there first in line,” Silas explained.

“You’re crazy! You could have frozen your hands or feet off for a concert ticket?!” Raenef lectured.

“Oy! Not just *any* concert. It’s tickets to *the* concert! And ‘concert’ is not even a good enough word for it, ‘cause it’s such an amazing show,” Eclipse corrected.

“Yes, yes,” Raenef said laughing. “It’s your turn to pick a present now, I believe.”

Eclipse put the tickets back in the box and put it on the table—making sure he could still see them from the corner of his eyes—before reaching out to get a new one from the pile, and after reading the nametag, gave it to Silas.

Silas all but tore the wrapping paper off only to stare in awe. “OH. MY. GOD. Oh, my god Rem’! You’ve really outdone yourself, I mean it’s beautiful!” he added while his throat constricted.

The twins looked at each other wondering what had gotten Silas this emotional. “What is it? Show us!” Eclipse demanded.

Silas lifted a beautifully wood-carved lion from its tissue paper protection and held it up for the others to see. “Wow, you are right; It’s beautiful,” Raenef said, admiring the many tiny details of the lion.

“Damn, I don’t think I’ve ever seen a wood carving this detailed, where did you get it?” Eclipse asked.

Remy was starting to grow uncomfortable under all this admiration, not sure if they would still like it as much when they knew he hadn’t bought it in an expensive shop. Everyone had spent a lot of money on their presents and he was feeling like a cheapskate. For the first time, he wondered if he should’ve used the credit card his Master had given him to buy decent

presents for everyone. But it went against everything he believed in to use money that wasn't his. Especially his Master's money. He'd learned the hard way that nothing came for free in this world, and he'd also learned the price was usually one he'd rather not pay.

"He didn't get it anywhere, did you, Remy?" Silas said, voice thick with emotion.

Remy looked to the ground and shook his head. Eclipse and Raenef didn't understand though.

"He made this himself. Although I'm surprised you still make these," Silas said, smiling at Remy.

"EH?! You made this?!" both Eclipse and Raenef exclaimed, making Remy flinch. "Let me see it," Eclipse said, motioning to Silas. Silas handed him the little statue and Eclipse examined it more closely this time. "Unbelievable. This really is a piece of art," he said in awe.

"Remy always made one for me for Christmas' and birthdays. Most of them got lost or stolen by the time you found me, but you know the little wooden bunny I have in my apartment?" Silas asked. Both Eclipse and Raenef nodded, remembering the small bunny Silas was very attached to. "That's the only one I still have. But this one is even more beautiful. You've outdone yourself Rem'!" Silas said with suspiciously shiny eyes.

Remy shook his head. "He merely had a sharper knife to his disposal and more time on his hands," he said, still not looking up.

"Well, I LOVE it! I swear it's the best present I could have wished for!" Silas said with tears in his eyes.

For the first time, Remy looked up at Silas and saw his friend was truly happy with his present, making him happy in return.

“How on earth did you make it? You have special tools for it?” Raenef asked, holding the little statue carefully.

Remy shook his head. “Only a piece of wood, and a sharp knife. Fanny gave Remy one to use,” he said, not used to this much attention and admiration.

“Amazing,” Raenef said in awe.

“NEXT!” Silas said changing the subject before Remy would really start to get uncomfortable. “Remy, your turn to pick a present!”

Remy crawled over to the Christmas tree and picked a colorfully wrapped gift from under it and gave it to his Master. Raenef smiled at him and opened it, wondering what it was Remy had gotten him. He removed to tissue paper and smiled. It was a crystal aroma-oil burner beautifully decorated with a dragon on its side and Japanese cherry blossoms. “It’s beautiful Remy! And just the thing I was looking for! Thank you,” Raenef said. He loved the gentle smell of incense and aroma-oils and had one in most of the rooms. But the one in his office had broken only a few months ago, and he hadn’t found a nice one to replace it with yet.

Remy nodded, still feeling like a cheapskate, but glad that at least his Master wasn’t angry.

Next, Silas picked out a small present and with a big smile handed it to his Master.

Eclipse opened it, wondering what it could be, and stared in horror once he'd removed the wrapping paper. "What the hell?!" Eclipse growled causing Silas to snigger.

"What is it?" Raenef asked surprised about Eclipse's reaction.

"Yeah, what is it Eclipse? Show us!" Silas added sweetly, making Eclipse scowl even more.

With a menacing look towards Silas, he held up what seemed to be a red woolen hat. That by itself may not be upsetting, but on top of it were two knitted cat ears attached to it, undoubtedly meant to make the wearer look like a cat when wearing it.

"Come on, put it on!" Silas urged, trying hard to hold his giggles.

"Like hell I will!" Eclipse growled.

Silas looked meaningful at Raenef and nodded. "You hold him, while I put it on."

Before Eclipse could see his twin move, his arms were held immobile by Raenef and Silas was crawling up to him with the hat in his hand and a feline grin on his face.

"Do you have any idea how hard it was to find one in your size?!" his fledgling said offended.

"Come any closer, and I swear I kill you!" Eclipse threatened already kicking out at him unsuccessfully. But not even Remy believed him, and Silas only stalked closer. In a flash, Silas was straddling him and with a final struggle, Silas put the hat on Eclipse's head. Raenef released him and quickly stepped back when Eclipse lashed out at him.

When Raenef saw how the hat looked on his fiercely growling brother, he had to actually bite his lip not to laugh out

loud. When he heard the same muffled snickers coming from Silas, he couldn't help but laugh out loud. Within no time both Silas and Raenef were laughing out loud, no longer able to make a sensible sentence.

"Aww, you look cute!" Silas said between hiccups, making Raenef laugh even louder.

When Remy saw the little scene before him even he started to smile a little. By the time Silas was rolling over the floor holding his stomach from laughing, he was smiling a real smile.

When Raenef heard the chuckle from his left, he looked up. Much to his surprise, the thing he'd almost given up on was actually taking place; Remy was smiling. No carefully blank expression that didn't betray his true feelings, but a genuine smile. His eyes widened, and for a moment he forgot everything else around him, only having eyes for the amazing transformation on Remy's face. Had the boy been beautiful before, now he shined like an angel. He suddenly became aware Eclipse and Silas had become silent too and were also staring at Remy. When Remy looked at him, he saw Remy's eyes widen in shock at the sudden realization he'd smiled, and his usual neutral look was quickly back in place. Raenef gave him an encouraging smile and laughed again, soon followed by Silas and Eclipse. Remy relaxed again and when Silas started playing with Eclipse's new cat ears, he was smiling again.

"It suits you so well!" Raenef said teasingly, making the three of them laugh even harder.

Eclipse tried to stay angry, but at seeing the people he loved most laughing like they hadn't in a long time, he couldn't help but laugh with them. As if remembering something he reached

for under the tree, and after shuffling around the presents, he picked out three similar-looking presents and gave them all one. “If I’m committing social suicide, you’ll all go down with me,” he said grinning.

Laughter erupted again when the others unpacked their gifts, finding them to be red Santa Claus hats. Eclipse had crawled over to Silas pulling the hat from his hands and putting it firmly on his head while grinning menacingly. “You two put them up too, or I swear I’ll do it for you!” Eclipse threatened Raenef and Remy.

But they had no problems with it, and merrily put the silly hat on, making Eclipse smile widely. “Good, now we’re even,” Eclipse said. “Somewhat, at least.”

Raenef picked another present from the pile and after reading the attached card, gave it to Eclipse.

Eclipse opened it and his eyes grew wide when he saw what it was. “Remy! It’s—you made one for me as well? It’s beautiful!” he said speechless while lifting the wood-carved eagle from its tissue paper.

Remy nodded, hoping it wouldn’t anger Eclipse he hadn’t spent even one dollar on his present. It was one thing to do so for Silas, but another thing entirely for Eclipse. He was his Master’s brother, and as such deserved his respect. And Remy was afraid Eclipse would see this as a sign of disrespect from his side, even though he hadn’t meant it that way.

But Eclipse couldn’t be further from being angry. Apart from Raenef and Silas, most people bought him expensive, but impersonal presents, thinking it would buy them respect or awe in return. But it only had the opposite effect on him; He far more

appreciated it when people actually tried to make an effort to get him something he might actually like, than getting the most expensive present they could find. For Remy to have spent hours on a present for him, made him feel special.

“Remy didn’t have any mon—“ Remy started panicked when Eclipse kept quiet and staring at the figure.

But Eclipse interrupted him brusquely. “Shut up Remy, I LOVE it. And don’t you dare say otherwise! This is, without doubt, the best present I ever got,” he said gruffly while ruffling Remy’s hair for emphasizes.

“He is right Remy. It is beautiful,” Raenef said, admiring the beautiful handwork.

Remy looked from Eclipse to Raenef and then nodded carefully. He still didn’t understand why Eclipse liked his present this much, but he was glad the vampire wasn’t angry with him.

Raenef picked a present from the pile and handed it with a warm smile to Remy. It was a long, red wooden box. When he untied the bow and lifted the lid of the box, he found a long, slender item safely wrapped in soft leather. Remy looked at his Master, but Raenef only gave him a wink and urged him to open it. With shaking fingers, Remy untied the leather strings and moved the leather back. And there it was. The sword he’d seen in the Japanese shop he’d visited with his Master a few days back. His eyes grew wide, and for a moment he only stared at it. But the urge to touch it grew stronger and his hands were already lovingly stroking the decorated scabbard. Again it struck him how warm the sword was to the touch.

Raenef and Eclipse looked at him smiling. They clearly remembered when they'd gotten their first sword and knew how important the first moments with it were to them. "Her name is 'Shizuko', which means 'quiet child'. Her 'saya' or scabbard is made from 'Honoki' or lacquered wood, as you would call it and is inlaid with silver and white gold filigree," Raenef started to explain.

Remy suddenly seemed to snap out of his trance. "B..but Master, Remy can't accept such a present! It's too much... Remy..." Remy stuttered.

"Nonsense. It makes me happy to do this for you," Raenef said resolute, guessing that Remy couldn't insist if it would go against his Master's happiness. "Besides, it makes me proud to see you interested in swords, after all it's a family tradition. And I hope she may one day save your life," Raenef added. "Don't worry, I don't expect you to actually use it as a weapon. I know, and respect, you'd rather not kill. I hardly ever use Amaterasu, but as you know, she is still my most precious possession," Raenef said.

Remy's attention once again turned to the beautiful katana. He lifted it from its box and was surprised how light it was and how a deep sense of warmth and tranquility flowed through him. And for a moment he swore the sword was alive.

"Draw her," Raenef suggested.

With shaking fingers Remy did, and his eyes widened even more. The blade had been bare in the shop, but now it was engraved with the Clan's symbol, and several Japanese characters Remy didn't recognize. "It means 'a new beginning'," Raenef translated for him.

Remy's throat tightened and he couldn't utter a word. His emotions were fighting to take over, but for the first time in his life they weren't sadness or despair.

Raenef smiled at him. "You like it?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

"*Oui*, Master, very much," he choked out.

"How does she feel?" Eclipse asked.

"Nice... She's warm and light," Remy said softly, making Eclipse smile even more.

"Then Raenef and the shopkeeper were right."

Remy frowned, not understanding what Eclipse meant. "He told me how both he and the shopkeeper had seen how the sword called out to you. That you were meant for each other. At first I thought they must have made a mistake, but seeing you now, I know they are right. Even her name suits you," Eclipse explained.

Remy frowned even more. "What do you mean 'she called out to Remy'? Remy only happened to see her in the shop."

"Really? I've heard the sword was nowhere in plain sight, but almost hidden from view, yet you found it. And not only that, you said the blade feels warm to you, right?" Eclipse asked.

Remy nodded.

"And I bet she feels like she's a part of you? As if she's alive?"

Remy nodded again, awed that Eclipse knew what he felt. "You sensed it too?" Remy asked.

Eclipse smiled. "Nope. It's as cold as steel and as dead as any inanimate object to me."

Remy's enthusiasm faded.

“That’s why I said she was meant for you. And you alone. You see, every good sword has what we call ‘hitokage’ or ‘soul’ and it is said it matches with only one person in this world. When the two connect you feel exactly the way you do when you hold her. And that is what Raenef and the shopkeeper saw,” Eclipse explained.

Remy’s eyes widened even more. “She only feels this way to Remy?”

Both Eclipse and Raenef nodded. “I have the same sensation when I hold Amaterasu and Eclipse has the same with Tsukuyomi,” Raenef said.

“You’ve held Yua before, haven’t you?” Silas said referring to his own sword. Remy nodded. “What did she feel like to you? Did she make you feel the same way Shizuko does?” Silas asked. Remy shook his head. “See! That’s because you don’t match with Yua. And I swear when I hold Toshi’s sword Yonagi she tries to electrocute me! She sends all this little sparks up my arm until I let go of her!” Silas said offended, making the rest laugh.

“But Remy doesn’t even know how to fight with a sword...”

“If you want, we can teach you,” Raenef offered.

“Really?!” Remy asked enthusiastic.

“Sure kid, let us know when you have time,” Eclipse said.

Remy nodded fervently.

The rest of the night was spent unpacking many more presents until all of them had a neat pile of presents next to themselves. They’d eaten lots of snacks Raenef made them and drank plenty of hot chocolate and eggnog.

“That was the last of the presents. Now what do we do?” Eclipse asked after the last present under the Christmas tree had been unpacked.

“Not quite. Hang on,” Raenef said getting up from the cushion on the floor he’d been sitting on. He left the living room, much to the surprise of Silas and Remy. Only Eclipse seemed to know what Raenef was doing, for he had a knowing smile on his lips. Within a few minutes though Raenef had returned, holding a medium-sized box in his arms with a huge red bow around it. He kneeled down on his cushion next to Remy and put the box in front of Remy. “Merry Christmas, Remy,” he said, nudging the box a little closer to Remy.

Remy’s eyes grew wide. Another present?! He’d already gotten lots of wonderful and expensive presents, especially from his Master. Way more than he deserved. But everyone was looking expectantly at him, waiting for him to open the present. Remy untied the bow and before he realized what happened, something leaped out of the box and was licking his face. Remy pulled back in fear and fell back on his arms. As in a reflex he tried to push away whatever was touching his face was the best lollypop it had ever seen, but whatever it was, was persistent. When Remy tried to sit back up though, gravity seemed to win over its persistence, and it plopping down on his lap. With wide eyes, he looked down in his lap to see what on earth it was—this time ready to fight off any attack the creature might have planned.

However, when two bright, ice blue puppy eyes—reminding him of his Master’s peculiar eyes—looked faithfully up in his red ones, he blinked stupidly as if doubting his own eyes. But his eyes hadn’t lied. In his lap was a bouncing puppy with the

brightest blue eyes he'd ever seen, and a comical look in them. It was still very young and looked nothing more than a fluffy little black and white ball with two tiny pointed ears and a nose. He had a dense fur coat that was soft to the touch; It was almost black on his back, with a mixture of grays and whites down his side, to an almost white tummy. Its tiny legs were black again, but the paws itself were white. A little fluffy tail was wagging playfully.

The dog held his head a little to the side as if he was studying Remy as much as Remy was him. When Remy didn't make any move to pet him, the puppy got restless and tried to catch Remy's bangs with its tiny paws. "Oy, that's not a toy, that's Remy's hair!" Remy said to the puppy.

Suddenly, Remy noticed the others laughing, and he looked up in surprise, having completely forgotten about them. The puppy however wasn't too happy to have his attention taken away by the others, and was trying to climb his way up Remy's arm to his shoulder where he gave a tiny bark. Remy flinched again, making the others laugh even harder. Remy looked up at the others but then laughed himself.

"He sure likes you!" Raenef said smiling. "What about you, Remy?"

"Remy likes him too. What kind of dog is it? And what's his name?" Remy asked still playing with the little dog.

"It's a Siberian Husky. They are known for their loyalty and are affectionate to people. This little fellow is only eight weeks old. He doesn't have a name yet. I thought you could name him yourself. If you decide to keep him," Raenef said.

Remy looked at his Master with wide eyes. "Remy can keep him?!"

Raenef laughed. “Of course, what kind of present would it be if you can’t keep him?! But if you’d rather want a different kind of breed, you can pick—”

“—NO WAY!” Remy blurted. “Ah! Remy means—He didn’t mean to—he... uhm he likes this one...” Remy added hoping he hadn’t offended his Master.

Raenef smiled at Remy’s defensive attitude towards the little dog. “I had a hunch you’d fancy this one.”

It had been yet another golden tip he got from the pet book Flamel had gotten him in order to help Remy socializing again. The parallel between his fledgling and a puppy had sounded ridiculous at first, but it turned out to be painfully close; It said that abused dogs fared better in packs, and that it could help to get him a friend; It could give the puppy more confidence and help it get out of his shell. By the looks of it, the book had been spot on.

They all had come closer to Remy to look at the puppy. The little thing loved all the attention it got though but couldn’t be enticed to leave the safety of Remy’s lap. It was attempting to howl in joy, but it sounded more like a strangled guinea-pig than an actual dog, making the others laugh again.

“What are you going to call him Rem’?” Silas asked while scratching the puppy behind its ears.

“Hmm Remy doesn’t know yet,” Remy said.

“How about... uhm.. The Flash! Or Godzilla?... Or no, maybe Rocky?”

“Remy was thinking something more ... uhm.. original...” Remy said tentatively.

“Okay, how about Whiskey? Or.. or Potato?” Silas offered.

“Help me remember to never buy the brat a dog!” Eclipse said to Raenef when hearing the ridiculous names coming from his fledgling.

“Master?” Remy asked Raenef. “Will ‘Ciel’ be alright?” Remy asked looking for Raenef’s approval.

“‘Ciel’ sounds nice, Remy.”

“It means ‘sky’ or ‘heaven’ doesn’t it?” Eclipse asked.

Remy nodded and petted the puppy.

“Seems to fit it him well,” Eclipse said, and the rest nodded.

“Do you like it too?” Remy asked the little puppy, while holding it up. The puppy howled enthusiastically.

“Then Ciel it is,” Remy declared.

# Chapter 13

It was Christmas morning and Remy had woken up early. After taking his shower, he was now looking through his wardrobe. Silas had insisted that everyone dressed formally for the occasion, so Remy was trying to find a certain box he knew would be in there somewhere.

A little while ago his Master had taken Silas and him to a dressmaker that made tailor-made suits. As Remy had been waiting for his turn, he'd looked around the little showroom. He'd come across several changshans, the Chinese, tunic-like dresses he'd seen his Master wear on formal occasions. One of them had caught his attention and a few days later a package had arrived for him; It had been the same dress, tailor-made for him, and embroidered with the clan's symbol and a dragon that looked as if it wrapped around him. The silk fabric was a deep navy, and the embroideries were white. The dress was sleeveless with slits up to his waist, leaving the front and back panel to fall well over his knees. It had the typical Chinese upstanding collar and the opening was also traditional Chinese to the side. Under it, there were wide, silk pants and a blouse with wide, long sleeves in pure white. Matching slippers and socks completed the outfit. His Master had shown him how to wear it, but he never had a chance to wear it yet.

As he opened the gift box that held the dress, he wondered if he should wear it, or go for one of the western suits his Master had bought him. He was worried his Master would dislike him dressing up as if he were a noble.

*Why would he be mad? He bought it himself, didn't he? Doesn't that mean he wants Remy to wear it?* A voice whispered in his head.

Before he would change his mind again, he took the piece of clothing from its box and laid it out on the bed. He put on the pants and blouse first, before putting on the changshan. On a whim he did his hair up in a high ponytail leaving only the longest bangs free, framing his face but for once not hiding his eyes. He usually wore his hair down or in a low ponytail—making sure his long bangs would hide his eyes—but that was too ordinary to go with such a formal outfit. “You can do this, no need to be afraid. A day as any other. You’ll be alright. Breathe!” he whispered to himself.

“Ah Remy! You’re up already? Merry Chris—” Raenef stopped abruptly when he turned around to greet Remy and his eyes went wide.

Remy panicked. Had he been wrong? Was his Master angry with him for wearing such fine clothing?

He was about ready to back out of the kitchen when Raenef found his voice again. “You look beautiful! It suits you perfectly!” he said still a bit breathless.

Remy hardly heard his voice over the loud beating of his heart, and had his eyes closed tightly, waiting for the hit. When he felt Raenef’s hand on his shoulder, he flinched and closed his eyes even tighter.

“Remy?” Raenef asked worried by his fledgling’s reaction. “Remy please, won’t you look at me?” he asked when the boy didn’t react.

Remy opened his eyes, expecting to gaze right into his Master's angry face, but instead he only saw worry in the electric blue eyes.

"Are you alright? Did I say something wrong? Did something happen?" Raenef pushed, getting more worried by the minute when Remy didn't react

"M.. Master's not angry with Remy?"

Raenef frowned. "Why would I be angry with you?" he asked clueless.

Remy's eyes widened. "For wearing such fine clothes?" Remy asked still a bit unsure.

Raenef laughed. "Of course not, silly! Besides, didn't I give you these clothes myself? Why on earth would I give you clothes I don't want you to wear?! Especially not when you look this beautiful in them," Raenef added, making Remy peek up at him. "Most westerners can't pull it off to wear our traditional clothing, but on you it only enhances your exotic features. And the color suits you perfectly," he added. Remy swore he heard pride in his voice.

Remy nodded and released his breath, not even realizing he'd held it all this time. "Merci Master. Oh, and Merry Christmas to Master too," Remy said, happy with the compliment.

Raenef smiled. "Silas told us to all have breakfast together, so we'll have to wait a little until they arrive, but would you like coffee first?"

Remy nodded. Since he started living with his Master, he always had a cup of coffee before starting his day, a habit he enjoyed. While Remy was drinking his coffee at the dinner table, Raenef was preparing all sorts of food, from cinnamon

bread rolls, to pancakes. There was a companionable silence in the cozy kitchen until they heard bantering voices from the hallway.

“You promised! No work or training today!” Silas complained

“It was only morning practice, and you weren’t even awake yet! Besides, I’m here now ar—” Eclipse stopped in mid-sentence when he saw Remy rise from his chair. The vampire was staring with his mouth wide open at the boy until Raenef made his way over to him and closed it for him. “Wow kid... You are delicioso—eh, beautiful,” Eclipse corrected at seeing the panic in the boy’s eyes rise. The boy had always tried his hardest to hide his fine features with the plainest clothes he could find, but clearly he’d forgone that today, and he could barely keep his eyes from the boy.

“He’s right Rem’, you look awesome!” Silas added while whistling appreciatively.

“You told us to dress formal today, didn’t you?” Raenef said, drawing the attention away from Remy, who was getting more uncomfortable by the second.

“True, which reminds me... MERRY CHRISTMAS!” Silas said before giving Raenef a bear hug and kiss.

Remy had frozen up by all the attention and was close to hyperventilating when a hand ruffled his hair.

“Merry Christmas, Remy,” Eclipse said, smiling when large frightened eyes looked up at him.

Remy nodded “You to *Monsi*—Eclipse!” Remy corrected himself quickly when he saw Eclipse starting to frown. Eclipse

had told him many times to call him by his name, but every time Remy got too nervous he fell back into old habits.

“It really is Christmas,” Eclipse said, smiling, before walking over to his brother giving him a kiss and wishing him a Merry Christmas as well.

Remy was still a bit shocked when he was glomped by an enthusiastic Silas, making him freeze up again.

“MERRY CHRISTMAS REM! Ah sorry! I.. I didn’t mean to...” Silas said when he felt Remy tense up. He moved back a few passes. He’d hugged his brother on a whim, forgetting Remy’s fear of physical contact. Now though, he was hitting himself in the head when he saw the fear in Remy’s eyes.

Raenef saw what happened and ushered everyone to sit down. “Remy, can you give me a hand here?”

Remy almost whipped around at the sound of his Master’s voice. “*Oui*, Master.”

Raenef had Remy help him with the last-minute preparations for breakfast, hoping it would buy Remy enough time to calm down somewhat again.

“Where’s the staff today? The house is quiet,” Silas asked.

“They always have the Holidays off. Most have gone to visit their families, but some have stayed here. Fanny makes a grand Christmas dinner for those who stay,” Raenef answered.

“Maybe we should have bought presents for them too,” Silas said, feeling stupid for only thinking about it now.

“Don’t worry, I’m sure Santa found his way to their Christmas tree this year too,” Raenef said.

“Eh?! Did you..?” Silas asked surprised.

“Just because we never celebrated Christmas, doesn’t mean we don’t know about the traditions of sharing gifts. We always make sure they have presents from Santa Claus,” Eclipse explained.

# Chapter 14

After breakfast, they took their coffee in the living room. The fireplace was already burning brightly, spreading a welcome warmth throughout the room. The room smelled of pine and freshly baked cookies, courtesy of Raenef, and they all settled on the couches; Remy as always on a pillow on the floor between the coffee table and the couch, close enough to his Master in case he might need something but far enough to avoid physical contact.

No sooner had they sat down when Seth stormed into the room. The child vampire and his mother had joined the household staff after Eclipse saved the boy from rogues who wanted to kill the child for his Mana. His mother and he had been living on the estate ever since. Even though they lived in a cottage separate from the main house, Seth loved to play in the mansion—much to his mother’s despair. But Eclipse and Raenef didn’t mind. They’d taken a liking to the boy and had pretty much adopted him. Especially Eclipse had grown very attached to the little boy and treated him almost as a son.

“MERRY CHRISTMAS!” he yelled, giving them all a big hug. He was carrying a large box under his arm and proudly showed the Nintendo Switch that was in it.

“I’ve got sooooo many gifts from Santa!” he said with sparkles in his eyes. “Look, it’s a Nintendo Switch! And I also got several games for it, and—oh if you push here, it even plays music!”

Eclipse smiled at the boy’s enthusiasm. Every year it was a fight with Seth’s mother about the presents, as she didn’t want

the twins to spoil the boy, whereas they loved to spoil him rotten. But, as always, he'd won, and when he'd seen the thing in the store, he knew the boy would love it.

Seth was halfway down the list of presents he'd gotten when he noticed Ciel sleeping in Remy's lap. His eyes widening, he crawled over to Remy and gently petted the puppy's ears. "Is he real?" he asked in awe.

The others laughed, and Ciel, awoken by the sounds, yapped happily, before licking Seth's face.

"Seth, what did I tell you?" Luna's voice sounded stern from the doorway where she was carrying in a tray of fresh tea and coffee.

The boy's face fell. "Only wish them a merry Christmas and then go play in the cottage," he repeated his mother's words while getting up and collecting his Switch.

"It's okay. He can stay as long as he likes. We don't mind having him around," Raenef said.

Luna looked uncomfortable but nodded. "If you're sure. But do send him home if he's too much. And you better be on your best behavior!" she added to Seth.

Seth smiled brightly again and plopped himself down in between Eclipse and Raenef, his two favorite vampires in the world.

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Right after a light lunch, Feilon and his family arrived from Japan. Though the living room was now a rather lively place, it

was still homey and truly felt like a family gathering rather than a meeting of the powerful Methuselah they were. It took Remy a while to get comfortable around this many people and find his place among them, but when he finally had, he felt safe. It was great to see and hear the three brothers together, there was a special kind of chemistry between them. And not only the brothers, Feilon's wife, Mei Lin and the fledglings too were all part of this tight-knit family.

*You're a part of this now too.* A voice whispered in his head. He frowned a little. Up till then, he'd been looking at the whole thing as from a distance. But his Master and the others had treated him as an equal; He'd gotten presents, been involved in conversations, ate and drank at the same table. He couldn't wrap his head around the 'why' or 'how', let alone at what he'd done to deserve this, but here he was.

He'd tried hard to keep his distance from them. Told himself it was easier that way for when it would crash around them. Nothing good stayed around. One only got as good as one deserved. But somewhere along the line, he'd failed; He'd been drawn in by their insistence to make him a part of their family. He didn't know what to make of it, but the voice telling him to simply accept and enjoy it for as long as he could, was gaining ground.

Though the giving of presents wasn't a Japanese Christmas tradition, the Fujiwara's brought an entire pile of gifts for all of them, and they spend most of the afternoon unwrapping them.

# Chapter 15

Once all the gifts had been unwrapped and they were relaxing in the living room, enjoying more music and food, Silas looked outside.

“IT’S SNOWING!” he squealed surprised.

Everyone got up from the floor and made their way over to the windows. Silas was right; Thick, fluffy snowflakes merrily whirled around. And by the looks of it, it had been snowing for a while already because the entire landscape was covered with a thin white blanket.

“Let’s go outside!” Silas suggested, halfway to the door.

The rest followed him at a more leisurely pace. By the time Remy and Raenef made it outside, Silas, Shinta, and Eclipse were already throwing snowballs at each other and before long wrestled in the snow. Raenef and Remy looked at them, not at all surprised at their antics. Even Remy had gotten pretty used to them.

“Do you want to take a walk through the garden?” Raenef asked Remy.

Remy nodded and Ciel, who had also followed them outside, barked happily.

For a while, they simply enjoyed the beautiful scenery in silence. In the beginning, it had unnerved Remy to no end when his Master stayed silent, for he had no clue what kind of mood he was in. But over time he’d learned his Master’s silences never meant bad news for him. That he had no need

to be on guard. In fact, he had learned to appreciate these silences between them; His Master only fell silent around people he was comfortable with, and it made him feel special to know he was one of the people the vampire was silent with. Though he didn't dare to even think it out loud, it made him happy they had something in common. He knew it was wrong to consider himself on the same level, but Remy too preferred silence over senseless small talk.

Ciel happily walked around in the garden but never strayed more than a few meters from Remy.

Suddenly Remy sensed something rapidly coming closer, directed straight for his Master. In a reflex, Remy pushed the vampire aside to protect him from the attack, while wildly scanning the area with his empathic ability for any attackers. He reached his Master in time but got hit himself. His entire face was covered in snow, and tiny rivulets of freezing, melting snow streamed down his neck into his coat.

Not sure what had happened, Remy stood there blinking; for a moment too stupefied to do anything else. Strangled noises came from his right. When he turned around, he saw his Master—who thanks to Remy had been saved from the snowball—trying hard to stifle his laughter. But when Remy looked at him, the vampire burst out in laughter.

Raenef couldn't help himself; The boy looked too stupefied and silly, with his face covered in snow. "Uhhh... Thanks for.. eh... saving me I gue—" Raenef was abruptly stopped when he too got hit right in the face by a snowball. Now Raenef was the one blinking stupidly.

When they looked at each other, both their faces covered in snow, they couldn't help but grin at each other.

When Remy realized his Master wasn't getting angry at him for laughing at him, he too started to laugh at his Master.

"Oy, are you laughing at me?! Have you seen yourself?" Raenef tried to say seriously, hoping Remy would see the teasing for what it was.

"Remy's really sorry," Remy said, not meaning a word of it, hoping he'd interpreted his Masters teasing correctly.

Raenef laughed at this. "Lier!"

The snow was cold, and his nose had turned to ice, but Raenef couldn't be happier; Here he was with the one he loved, and for once the boy wasn't scared of him, or as submissive as he usually acted. No, this time his fledgling seemed to truly enjoy himself and his company. He'd pretty much given up the hope he'd see him laugh spontaneously—let alone makes jokes at his expense—but both had happened on this special day.

*Maybe celebrating Christmas wasn't such a waste of time at all...* If Christmas truly was a day for miracles, perhaps they should celebrate it every year, make it a new family tradition.

Before they could say more, multiple snowballs flew in their direction. They both headed for cover behind some nearby trees, but still, several snowballs hit their targets. They could hear Silas and Eclipse yelling and laughing from a little distance away.

"Are we going to let them hit us?" Raenef asked with a straight face.

“*Non*, Master, it would be unjust to not punish the ones who hit Master so easily,” Remy said with the same straight face.

“Oy, I didn’t get hit that easily! I.. I was merely preoccupied. Yeah, that’s it. Besides, I wasn’t the only one who got hit you know!” Raenef said mock offended, but loving Remy’s teasing.

“Remy only got hit while protecting Master,” Remy pointed out.

Raenef growled. “Well, if you’re so concerned about me, get back at them!”

Remy needn’t been told twice. He ducked down to get a good hand full of snow and made it into a sturdy ball. Then, with perfect aim, he threw it straight at Silas, hitting him square on the head.

“BULL’S-EYE!” Raenef cheered while making his own snowball.

They were so focused on Silas, Shinta, and Eclipse, they didn’t even notice Feilon and Toshiro’s snowballs until they got hit several times.

Within no-time, snowballs were flying back and forth and everyone was having a great time.

By the time darkness crept in, they broke up the snowball fight. They were all freezingly cold and had long since lost all sense in their hands and faces. The only one who unfazed by the cold or getting tired was Ciel. He was still wagging his little tail in happiness and trailing and jumping around Remy.

## Chapter 16

“Hiya, Barbie,” Raenef said

“Hi, Ken!” Eclipse replied

“You want to go for a ride?”

“Do the voices, do the voices!” Silas said, laughing loudly

“Sure, Ken,” Eclipse said in a high-pitched voice this time

“Jump in,” Raenef said in a deep voice.

“I’m a Barbie girl in a Barbie world...” Eclipse sang on while even doing a funny dance as if parading around on a stage, making everyone else laugh.

After a delicious dinner—courtesy of Raenef—Silas had prepared his karaoke set, and it didn’t take him long to convince the other’s to sing their hearts out. Toshiro explained to Remy karaoke was a favorite Japanese pastime these days, and Remy had to admit, he liked it. There was just something about seeing two of the most powerful Methuselah in the world making themselves ridiculous that was disarming. And they didn’t hold back either; Soon Eclipse, Raenef, and Feilon were doing a rather poor performance of a Backstreet Boys song. When the boys laughed loudly, their Master’s retaliated by challenging them to do a Spice Girls song. Remy felt a fool, but it was good to relax and have fun for a change. There had never been a time in his life where he could play around as he had today. At first, it had worried him, and he kept looking at his Master to make sure the vampire wouldn’t mind, but the only thing he could detect from his Master was a growing happiness.

Once they sang their vocal cords out, they plopped down on the pillows and couches for some well-deserved snacks and drinks.

Toshiro was about to take the last petit four from the platter when Eclipse stopped him. “Naha, that’s the last one. You better have a damn good reason if you think you can have it.”

Remy frowned a little confused. There were plenty of other snacks left. But Toshiro seemed to know what Eclipse was getting at because he sat back on his pillow.

“Fair point. But I still deserve it; The Makhai we lost in the siege of Quintus’ fort, Daisuke? He was a dear friend of mine. I still miss him every day, and that cake will fill the hole at least a little,” Toshiro said.

Remy’s eyes widened at Toshiro’s heavy words. Though spoken with a lightness that belied the message, everyone could see the pain behind his words. Remy’s heart went out to him, and before he knew it, he’d grasped the boy’s hand in his own. Toshiro looked up at him and smiled gently, accepting the comfort he offered.

“Undeniably painful, yes, but not enough for the cake,” Mei Lin spoke up. “Try being pregnant in a household full of men and a husband who’s more worried about unruly twins than his wife.”

Remy’s discomfort rose as his eyes flashed to Feilon and the twins. Was he witnessing a marital dispute? Or was this a weird form of humor he was missing?

“Relax Rem’ this is not a disaster waiting to happen, this is a centuries-old Himura/Fujiwara tradition,” Silas whispered next to him. “They try to outdo each other by telling sob stories. It may look as if they are attacking each other, but it’s more therapeutic than anything else. I guess it’s their way of venting their feelings before it can fester and causes true friction or grudges. It freaked me out the first few times too, but after

trying it myself, it actually feels really nice to get things off your chest. You should try it.”

Remy was bewildered, but it seemed his younger brother was right, as everyone shared a personal grievance. Even the young Seth had caught on quickly and shared. In the end, it was Eclipse who ‘won’. Breaking the piece of cake in two, he offered the other half to Seth who was sitting in the vampire’s lap.

# Chapter 17

“Was it everything you hoped for?” Eclipse asked Silas when they lied in bed that night, or rather, early in the morning.

“*Non*,” Silas said dreamily, “it was so much better than I hoped for. Did you see him smile?! *Mon Dieu* how I missed that. It’s exactly how I remember him. After everything he went through and seeing how far he was gone, I never expected him to smile again. It was the best Christmas present ever!”

Eclipse smiled. “Yeah, I never thought I’d see the day either. Looks as if Raenef was right all along; there was still a spark of life left in him. It makes me feel ashamed to think I had given up on him,” he added.

Silas stroked his chest. “Don’t be. To be honest, I started to give up on him too, and I know him best. It’s Raenef who never gave up. Who pulled him back from the abyss.”

“He’s good with that. He can be a Pitbull sometimes; When he truly believes in something, he bites into it and doesn’t let go.”

“Kinda like you, hm?” Silas pointed out. It was one of many traits the twins shared.

“Lucky for you, I am. Any sane person would have kicked you to the curb a long time ago,” Eclipse teased.

“*Couillon!*” Silas scolded, elbowing the older vampire in the ribs. “But I am. Lucky that is. I’ve never been this happy. I have everything I ever wished for and more.”

Eclipse looked at him, eyes wide.

“What are you crying about?! Are you okay? Wha—” Silas stated when a lone tear slid down Eclipse’s cheek.

But Eclipse silenced him with a deep kiss. “You have no idea what those words mean to me, therefore I’ll show you instead.”

Another lingering kiss fortified his words. But not the heated ones they usually shared in bed. No, this one was slow and made Silas’ heart skip a beat.

Eclipse took his time exploring his fledgling’s body. Kissing and licking every inch of skin as he slowly made his way down. Worshipping him as if it was their first time together.

Before he even made it halfway down, Silas burned with need and the overwhelming desire to be filled, to be even closer to the vampire he loved with everything he had. “Hnn, Eclipse s’il vous plaît,”

“Patience is a virtue,” Eclipse singsonged from between his legs.

The vision alone made Silas buck up, urging the man to hurry and fill him already.

But Eclipse was determined to take his time and was not to be enticed. He was having far too much fun sampling the boy underneath him.

When Eclipse finally took him in his mouth, it didn’t take long for Silas to come, having already been driven to the brink by Eclipse’s attentions. The vampire sure knew how to play his body like a fine instrument to bring forth the deepest of pleasures. As he slowly came down, he found Eclipse hovering over him, watching every expression on his undoubtedly stupefied face.

“Beautiful,” was all Eclipse said before leaning over and kissing him once more.

As he was once more swept up in the sweet passion of Eclipse' kiss, Eclipse slowly entered him as if he was a precious piece of glass.

Eclipse kept up a slow and deep rhythm bringing them both closer and closer to the edge, only to push them over and start again. A Methuselan trait Silas couldn't get enough of.

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"Did *you* have fun today? Or yesterday I should say," Silas said, eyeing the clock on the nightstand. "I know, celebrating Christmas wasn't exactly your idea of fun."

"I can see this becoming a recurring tradition," Eclipse said nuzzling his fledgling's neck.

"Really? I was afraid you'd hate it."

"True, I didn't look forward to it. But seeing Remy smile, my brother happy and now hearing you say you are happy, makes me happy. I dare say it was even worth having a damn pine tree in my room."

Silas smirked. "Told you so."

"You're not going to let me live this one down, aren't you?"

"Nope."

# Chapter 18

Raenef stepped from the bathroom, brushing his hair in the window seat as he reminisced the past day. He couldn't shake the vision of Remy's smile, and neither did he want to. His only regret had been that he'd forgotten to take a photo of that beautiful smile. He was looking at the beautiful crystal aroma oil burner Remy had given him that was burning brightly, breaking the light of the candle in millions of tiny rainbow-colored specs around the room. A knock on the door shook him up from his peaceful state of mind.

"Come in," he said, half and half expecting it to be Feilon. Much to his surprise, it was Remy who shyly entered his bedroom and a tired-looking Ciel at his feet. He resisted the urge to rub his eyes or pinch his arm to see if he was awake, scared it would make his fledgling more uncomfortable than he already was. About the last he had no doubts; Every fiber in Remy's body was tense, and his whole posture screamed fear and alertness. It slightly dimmed his earlier happiness, but what interested him more at the moment, was the reason Remy was here in the first place, when it was obvious he wished he was someplace else. For a horrifying moment, he was afraid Remy was there to offer himself as a kind of payment he felt he owed but pushed it away. Surely Remy had come to his senses?

Remy awkwardly lingered near the door, ready to bolt at the first sign of his Master's anger. He wondered what the hell he

was doing in his Master's bedroom at this time of night. Surely this was asking for trouble.

*Maybe he should get the hell out of there and hope his Master would forgive him for disturbing him.*

But the slight weight of the box he was holding in his clammy hands behind his back reminded him of why he was here.

"Remy, what a pleasant surprise," Raenef said.

"..."

"Did you need anything?" Raenef asked when Remy kept silent.

Remy shook his head and cleared his throat. "R.. Remy o.. only..." Remy tried speaking past the lump in his throat threatening to choke him.

"Remy? Are you okay?" Raenef asked getting a little worried now. He wanted to walk over but was afraid it would scare him. So he stayed where he was.

"ItsnotmuchbutRemythoughtthatmaybemasterwouldstilllike itifnotthatsokayaswell," Remy choked out, holding out his hands in front of him, presenting Raenef the box he'd been holding.

"Whoa Remy, calm down. I didn't understand a word you were saying," Raenef said.

Remy took a deep breath and tried again, this time a bit more slowly. "It's not much, but Remy thought perhaps Master would still want it," he repeated.

"You have another present? For me?" Raenef asked surprised.

Remy nodded. "It's not much of a present though..." Remy said, looking at the floor.

Raenef slowly walked over to Remy. The boy got more and more nervous the closer Raenef came. But to Raenef's relief, he didn't bolt for the door. He gently took the box from Remy's shaking hands. "Can I open it?" he asked.

This was a question Remy hadn't anticipated and for a second he didn't know what to say, thus he nodded his head, wondering if it would be considered rude of him to leave now.

"Why don't you sit down with me for a moment while I open it? We can have a cup of tea?" Raenef suggested, motioning for the couch and chaise longue. Remy looked almost longingly for the door but sat down for now, not wanting to go against his Master's wishes.

Raenef too sat down on the couch, trying hard to ignore the hurt at seeing the confidence and trust that had been there earlier lost. Raenef opened the box only to stare wide-eyed at the content.

"It's okay, Master can throw it away, it was only an idea Remy had, but Remy knows it's not worthy enough for Master!"

"Remy, I love it!" Raenef said hoarse, lifting the beautifully carved Japanese dragon from its tissue paper.

When warm arms enveloped him, Remy looked up in disbelief.

"This is, without a doubt, the best gift I've ever had in my life. This... this is such a special gift. Do you know why?" Raenef added when the boy looked him cluelessly.

Remy shook his head. There was nothing special about the gift as far as he could see. It had been a mere piece of driftwood.

“You’ve worked on this for many hours, didn’t you?” Raenef asked.

Remy nodded.

“And you gave it thought about what kind of animal to make for what person, didn’t you?”

Another nod.

“And I bet you were thinking of the person you were making it for with every little cut you made didn’t you?”

Another nod.

“And I bet you can’t make this for someone you don’t like, am I right?”

Another nod.

“That’s exactly why this is such a special gift Remy. Don’t you see? You put all your feelings for that person into the wood, making it become alive with it, and leaving a little part of you in it. That’s not something you can buy in a shop, no matter how much you’re willing to pay for it,” Raenef explained.

Remy looked up at him.

“To be honest, I was happy when you gave Silas and Eclipse their sculptures yesterday, cause to me it showed how much you care for them. But it also made me a little sad. Sad that you didn’t feel that way about me.”

“Remy’s sorry. He didn’t mean to make Master sad! Master deserves much more than a piece of wood, therefore when that nice man gave Remy money, he decided to buy a real present for Master instead, not that that was real worthy but at least—” Remy started rambling in panic.

“—What ‘nice’ man?! And why would he give you money?!” Raenef interrupted him abruptly, a cold sense of dread creeping up his spine.

Remy shook up from his rambling, sensing a weird sense of dread coming from his Master he couldn't quite place.

"Remy, what 'nice' man? And why would he give you money? He didn't do anything to you, did he?" Raenef insisted.

Remy shook his head wildly. "*Non* Master! He asked if Silas and Remy could help him unload a truck full of boxes when we passed by. Said he'd pay us fifty dollars each if we did. So we helped him. Remy didn't let him do anything else, he swears!"

Raenef released his breath, not even knowing he'd held it all this time. "Good. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. I guess I'm a bit too distrustful of people nowadays."

Remy said nothing and kept looking at his hands, trying hard to calm his erratic breathing.

"But you didn't have to work for that money, you have your own now, remember?" Raenef said.

Remy looked away. "That's not Remy's. It's Master's," he said softly.

"Nonsense. I told you; What's mine is yours. Besides, you have your own bank account and credit card. You can buy whatever you want with it. I'm not even checking the account."

"Remy don't want to. It's not right to spend money he didn't work for. It would be wrong to buy a present for someone with their own money. That's why Remy made the dragon. But when he saw and heard how the rest of you all bought such expensive gifts, he felt bad for Master. So when that man gave him the money, he thought he should at least get Master a decent present..." Remy explained.

Raenef smiled. Yes, that was exactly what Remy would feel and do, he realized. "Well, please know now, that the value of a present has nothing to do with its price. I will cherish this

dragon for the rest of my life, and to me, it is worth more than money can ever buy. Why didn't you give it to me yesterday though?" Raenef asked suddenly curious.

Remy started fumbling with his hands again. "Eh... well... Remy wasn't planning on giving it to Master at all... He was, but then he got the money to buy Master a real present... He.. thought Master would be offended by such a cheap present, therefore he decided not to give it after all... But when Master liked the ones Remy made for Eclipse and Silas, he felt bad for not giving Master his..."

"Well, I'm glad you did. It makes this Christmas the best days I've ever had," Raenef said, relaxing against the couch, his arm loosely around his fledgling—The only physical contact he allowed himself.

"What about you? Did you have fun?" Raenef asked.

Remy nodded and smiled when Ciel decided he'd been without his master's attention long enough and leaped up into his lap. "*Oui*, Remy thinks this is the best Christmas of Remy's life too..." he said softly. "*Merci* again for the wonderful presents," he added.

Raenef smiled. "You're very welcome. I love buying presents for the people I love. And you, my dear fledgling may not believe that yet, but you are one of them," he said, ruffling Remy's hair.

Much to his surprise though Remy let him and even smiled up at him.

“Oh, here, you can have this as well,” Raenef said, getting up and giving Remy the pet book he’d gotten from Flamel years ago. “I don’t need it anymore.”

# Dinner at Dawn

## Book 1 in the Himura Saga



Immortality sucks.

Eclipse has everything he could wish for, yet when he meets a little street urchin with a big mouth on the verge of death, he can't help but be intrigued.

When street rat Silas finds himself in over his head and in dire need of rescue, he didn't expect it to turn up in the shape of a sexy vampire. Waking up in an unfamiliar room he learns he's dead, far from home and that vampires are very real. As Eclipse's fledgling, he not only needs to acquire a taste for blood, he also needs to navigate his Master's treacherous world of wealth and power. Not to mention his growing attraction for this dangerous vampire.

Forced to choose between his childhood friend and his Master, will his dream of having a family come at too high a price?

If you like M/M paranormal fantasy, witty humor, and steamy vampires, don't miss *Dinner at Dawn*, the first in the Himura Saga by Mariska Slieker!

# Breakfast at Dusk

Book 2 in the Himura Saga



And then, all goes to hell.

Silas accusing Eclipse of his childhood friend's disappearance may not have been his smartest move towards their budding relationship. His Bond with the sexy vampire is further pushed to its limits when harsh words fly, truths come to light about what really happened on a moonlit night, and war is breaking out—Obviously none of it Silas' fault.

Can Silas overcome the obstacles thrown his way? Or will he screw everything up like he normally does?

Breakfast at Dusk is the second novel in the Himura Saga by Mariska Sliker. If you like M/M paranormal romance, witty humor, and sexy vampires, this will have you turning the pages!

# Lunch at Midnight

Book 3 in the Himura Saga



This was quickly turning into a mistake...

The Royal vampire Raenef Himura isn't known for making rash decisions. But when he stumbles upon shy Remy and looks into his captivating red eyes, he can't help but want to take a chance on the boy.

He soon begins to doubt his choice as Remy is severely traumatized. Taking in a fledgling that doesn't belong to him? Probably not the best move. Invoking the wrath of the ruling Vampire government? Also not part of Raenef's plans.

Remy's brother Silas was certain they would never see each other again. But with his reappearance, Silas is elated and eager to make up for lost time. Everything seems perfect. Or not?

Lunch at Midnight is the third novel in the Himura Saga by Mariska Slieker. If you like M/M paranormal romance, witty humor, and sexy vampires, this will have you turning the pages!