

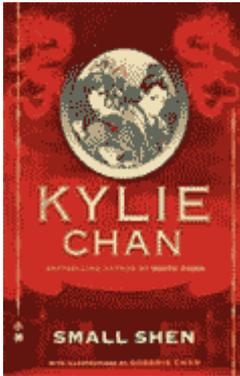
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'Small Shen' was first published in December 2012, by Harper Voyager. It was written by Kylie Chan, and adapted into 'comics-prose' by Queenie Chan. Despite being a prequel to Kylie's best-selling 'White Tiger' series, is a stand-alone novel.

This extract is the prose version of the 'comics-prose' chapters. The story consists of 9 comics-prose chapters, and 10 prose chapters, making 19 chapters in total.

You can purchase the physical book at [Fishpond.com](http://www.fishpond.com) with Free International Shipping, or buy the e-book from Amazon or iBooks.

Read the first 3 chapters adapted in 'comics-prose':  
<http://www.queeniechan.com/manga/smallshen/1/1/>

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## **Extract from: SMALL SHEN**

(23,000 words, out of 75,000 words total)

- Written by Kylie Chan (<http://www.kyliechan.com>)
- Adapted into comics-prose by Queenie Chan (<http://www.queeniechan.com>)

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**1720**

Gold was cross-indexing scrolls in the Hall of Records when she floated past, her two maids following. He quickly shelved the scrolls and raced into the aisle to cut her off.

'Can I help you?' he said, eying her appreciatively.

'I am looking for an English book,' the dragon said. 'It was written about a hundred years ago. I believe it is called Sonnets.'

'Shakespeare?' he said, moving forward.

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The dragon had taken human form to visit the Hall of Records. Her face was round and beautiful, her skin as white as snow. Some of her jade-green hair was tied in elaborate buns and braids on top of her head, adorned with silver and gold butterflies, and flowers of semi-precious stones. The rest of her hair swept in a magnificent smooth ripple down to her knees. Her expression was ice-cold; but then again, she was a reptile. 'I think that is the name of the author.'

'Come with me.' He turned and gestured. 'Leave your handmaids, they can't come into this part of the Hall. I know exactly what you are looking for.'

She motioned for the maids to remain, and they both bowed slightly. Gold ignored them; they were ordinary humans, plain of face and figure. He held his hand out to guide the dragon lady and she settled onto the floor to walk beside him, her green silk robes with gold peonies hissing around her as she moved.

'What is your honoured name, Lady?' he said as he led her through the vast silent aisles of scrolls.

'Princess Jade.'

He bobbed his head. 'I am honoured, Princess.'

She waved him down. 'I am the eighty-second daughter of the Dragon King, very low in precedence. Your name?'

'I am Gold, Lady.' He smiled into her jade-green eyes, then straightened slightly as he walked beside her. 'I am a child of the Jade Building Block of the World.'

'There was a jade Building Block?'

He sagged slightly. Nobody seemed to know of his parent's existence. Gold had not spoken to his parent in nearly six hundred years.

'Yes, Lady,' he said, rallying. 'My parent was worn by the Yellow Emperor's Empress.'

'How interesting,' she said, not hearing. 'How far is it to this room that holds the Sonnets? It seems a long way.'

'We are already here.' He led her to the right through the aisles and into one of the small reading rooms.

The room contained a rosewood couch, carved with phoenixes, plush with silk cushions. The reading table in front of the couch already had a teapot and teacups. A

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pair of priceless Song braziers sat on decorative stands to one side.

'Please sit, Lady, and I will return with your Sonnets.'

She nodded slightly, her oval pale face expressionless, and gracefully lowered herself to sit on the couch. He poured her tea, then turned and raced to find the book.

He quickly dissolved the human form and took True Form, a smooth quartz stone the size of a human fist, gleaming with veins of gold. He floated up to scan the shelves. Shakespeare. Sonnets.

Not there.

Damn, he'd seen the book only a week before, but for the life of him he couldn't find it. His memory was perfect, stored in his quartz lattice, why the hell couldn't he find the damn book?

He floated over the small English section, becoming more and more frantic as the book didn't appear before him. Dragons weren't renowned for their patience. He'd better find the book soon.

Eventually he had no other choice, he had to contact the Archivist. He spoke silently without moving from the English shelves.

Archivist, he said, the Dragon Princess would like a copy of the Sonnets, and it is not on the shelves.

She must have slipped past me when she came in, she wasn't expected until later, the Archivist said. Number Seventeen Son of the White Tiger of the West has it. He knew she'd come looking for it and wanted to have his paws on it first. He's been courting her for nearly eight years. Send her to the Western Palace, he's waiting for her there.

Gold was astonished. You're in on it?

Of course I am, the Archivist said with a touch of amusement. The White Tiger and the Dragon King contacted me, they're tired of these two dithering and want to see them safely wed. Apparently the Lady and the Tiger haven't even been intimate, they are waiting until they are married.

Some son of the Tiger, Gold said. Can't even bed a woman after eight years of chasing her. His father must be horrified.

Completely. Apparently this particular son is a very powerful half-Shen, but

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didn't inherit his father's skills with the Ladies at all.

Gold was hit with a sudden inspiration. Thank you, Archivist, he said, attempting to sound suitably respectful.

Send her off, Gold, and get back to cross indexing those scrolls, the Archivist said. You should have finished that a long time ago.

Gold returned to the reading room to find Jade sitting impatiently clutching the teacup.

He took human form, a young slim Chinese of about twenty. He briefly considered taking a form slightly older to match hers, but settled on the younger form, it would be more of a compliment to her.

'I am so sorry, Princess,' he said, morose. 'I didn't realize it was you. The Archivist gave the Sonnets to that bastard who has been chasing you.'

Jade stiffened. 'That is hardly an acceptable way of referring to him.'

'You didn't hear what he said.' Gold flopped to sit on the couch next to Jade, not looking at her. 'He came in here first, seeking the book as well, and the Archivist gave it to him. But I heard what he said while he was searching, and I cannot believe anybody could be so cruel. But then, he is a son of the White Tiger, and the Bai Hu is notorious for his poor treatment of women.'

Jade sat straighter, suddenly more interested. 'What did he say?'

'He said that if the Sonnets didn't bring you to his bed then nothing would,' Gold said. 'And then he could settle the bet, collect his winnings, and have you thoroughly out of his fur.'

'Bet?'

'Apparently this particular son of the Tiger has a bet with a couple of the others,' Gold said, still not looking at Jade, and doing his best to appear outraged on her behalf. 'All of the Tiger's sons are aware of your ...' he hesitated, searching for the right word. 'Virtue, and there has been a bet among them as to who would be first to break through your defences.'

Jade studied her teacup. 'I do not believe it. He has been nothing but a perfect gentleman to me from the start.' She smiled slightly, still watching the teacup. 'In fact, it is more me that has been trying to break down his defences.'

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'That was part of the bet. The longer he could make you hold out before submitting, the more his brothers will be forced to pay.' Gold moved closer to Jade and guided the teacup out of her hand onto the table. He took her hand in his. She looked up, and he gazed compassionately into her eyes. 'You deserve much better than that furry bastard, my Lady.' He shifted closer, and a delightful delicate flush of colour rose to her cheeks. 'You have waited too long for someone to treat you with the care and respect that you deserve.' He moved his face closer to hers, and she didn't move away. 'Much too long,' he whispered.

He reached gently around the back of her head and held her as he kissed her. She remained rigid for a second, then opened up. He felt her respond and moved closer, putting his arms around her.

It had obviously been a long eight years for her, because she returned his attentions with satisfying enthusiasm. He pushed her backwards on the couch, then hesitated, concentrating, and locked the door without releasing her.

He pulled away slightly. 'I don't think your defences are so great, my Lady,' he whispered. 'I think that he has made a terrible mistake.' He gently pushed the green silk robes down over her shoulders. 'A terrible mistake.'

She smiled up and kissed him again.

\*\*\*

They lay on the couch in each others' arms, her robes a magnificent green disarray around them.

'Let's run away together,' he said. 'I have a fortune on the Earthly Plane, nothing is holding me here. Run away with me.'

She pulled herself onto her elbow to smile down at him, and he admired her snow-white skin. 'Really?'

He nodded. 'I know a place where we can go.' He stopped smiling and mused. 'You go first, I will follow. I will fulfil my honour and my duty to the Archivist, and then join you. Do you know the Garden of Heavenly Delights?'

'Yes,' she said, breathless.

'Go there and wait for me in the Pavilion of Tranquil Contemplation,' he said. 'I will come in about two hours, I need to tender my resignation here. We can go to a

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place I know, and spend the rest of Eternity sharing our love.'

She lowered her beautiful face and kissed him. 'I will be waiting.'

'Go, my darling,' he whispered.

She and her clothes both disappeared.

He shook his head and rose, then concentrated and conjured his gold silk robes.

Now for the real challenge.

Archivist, the son of the Tiger has summoned me. He wishes for me to point out which of the Sonnets would be most suitable for winning the heart of the Lady.

Haven't you sent her on yet? the Archivist said, impatient.

I have sent her to the Western Palace, but he is waiting for some tips before he sees her.

I suppose you are the ideal person for this, Gold, the Archivist said. But be back before dinner, I want you to finish indexing those scrolls.

Archivist.

And no funny business.

Heaven forbid, Archivist, Gold said with a small smile.

\*\*\*

The White Tiger's Palace in the Western Desert was truly magnificent. Blocks of red stone framed arched windows that guided the cool breezes from the mountains across the desert.

Gold concentrated on the book, and found it. The son of the Tiger had taken it into one of the small courtyard gardens in the quarters occupied by the Tiger's army, the Western Horsemen. Gold materialized in the corner furthest from the location of the book, and looked around.

The courtyard was full of flowering trees, an ideal place for a romantic liaison. A blue-tiled fountain splashed in the centre, gold-finned koi carp glittering beneath.

Gold smiled. Perfect.

He wandered into the centre of the courtyard, next to the fountain, and saw the Tiger's son. The young man sat on a bench and studied the small red-bound book of Sonnets, his face wistful.

This particular son was not the usual large, brawny Horseman. His skin was pale

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and delicate, almost transparent, and his hair was shining platinum blond. He was slender and young, graceful and languid as he leaned on the back of the bench and studied the poetry. He appeared to be rapt in the words of the Bard.

Gold approached quietly and sat next to him. 'She's not coming.'

The son didn't move or look up from the book. 'Why not?'

'She wants to make you suffer even more.'

The young man slammed the tiny book shut and pulled himself roughly upright to sit on the bench. 'I think I've had about enough of this.'

'She's been leading you on for eight years, honoured ...?'

'William. My mother is English, the Tiger's Wife Number Forty-five.'

Gold smiled at the irony. '... William. I think it's about time you let this particular one go and moved on.'

William sagged over his knees and sighed. 'I do love her, you know.'

'She's a dragon. Those reptiles are incapable of loving anyone but themselves.'

William stiffened slightly but didn't say anything.

Gold held out his hand, and William passed him the book of Sonnets. 'The love described here, in these poems, is love that is true and would last the test of centuries. All that dragon would give you is suffering.'

William didn't say anything, but his face was full of misery.

Gold opened the book to the notorious Sonnet Number Twenty. He shifted slightly closer to William, just so that their thighs were touching.

'A woman's face with Nature's own hand painted  
Hast thou, the master-mistress of my passion;'

William glanced up at Gold. Gold smiled slightly at William over the top of the book, and continued.

'A woman's gentle heart, but not acquainted  
With shifting change, as is false women's fashion;'

Gold moved slightly closer to William. William didn't move at all.

'An eye more bright than theirs, less false in rolling,  
Gilding the object whereupon it gazeth;'

William dropped his head into his hands. 'That's true,' he said into his hands.

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'It's all pretence. All fallacy. All lies.'

'A man in hue, all "hues" in his controlling,  
Which steals men's eyes and women's souls amazeth.  
And for a woman wert though first created;  
Till Nature, as she wrought thee, fell a-doting,'  
Gold dropped his voice and pressed himself into William.

'And by addition me of thee defeated,'

Gold reached around to turn William's head towards him. He studied William's face for a long time, then pulled William in and kissed him.

William's eyes fluttered closed and he sighed into Gold's mouth. Gold pulled away slightly to admire the delicate blush on the young man's cheeks.

'Yes,' William said under his breath, planted his hands on either side of Gold's head, and kissed him with exhilarating fierceness.

Gold pulled back first. 'Have you ever done this before?'

William didn't say anything, he just studied Gold's features, his eyes roaming over Gold's face.

'Then let's go to your quarters, and I'll show you realms of pleasure that you never knew existed.'

\*\*\*

Gold felt remarkably proud of himself as he returned to cross-indexing the scrolls. He had rescued the two fools from each other, shown young William where his true preferences lay, and had a very enjoyable experience doing it. He quietly wondered if Jade was still searching for the non-existent pavilion. Quite possible, dragons weren't very good at subtlety.

He chuckled quietly as he picked up the next scroll.

Please come into my office, Gold, the Archivist said.

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Gold tapped on the office door.

'Come,' the Archivist said.

Gold went in, and quickly fell to one knee, saluting. The White Tiger of the West, Bai Hu, lounged in a chair across the desk from the Archivist.

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'Lord Bai Hu,' Gold said.

'Rise,' the Tiger said. He was in human form, a tall graceful man in his mid-thirties with golden skin and a shock of snow-white hair with matching sideburns. He wore cotton pants and jacket of white trimmed with gold.

Gold pulled himself to his feet. 'Archivist,' he said, turning to salute.

The Archivist was also in human form, a boy of about twelve years old wearing a black silk robe.

'Sit, Gold,' the Archivist said, waving towards the other chair.

Gold sat next to the Tiger.

'Please tell us in your own words exactly what passed between you, Princess Jade and Prince William,' the Archivist said.

'Jade came in and asked for the Sonnets,' Gold said. 'I told her they weren't here, and she went away. Then William summoned me, and I went to help him find a suitable poem to win the Lady.'

'Did you seduce either of them, stone?' the Tiger said, his voice low and gruff.

Gold hesitated.

Both the Tiger and the Archivist glared at Gold. Then, 'what will we do with it?' the Tiger said.

'Gold is here being punished for a previous similar transgression,' the Archivist said. 'It is obvious that he hasn't learnt his lesson.'

'If I hadn't intervened they would have ended up miserable with each other!' Gold said, interrupting. 'He wasn't even aware of his own nature, and she would have languished neglected for years!'

'Right now she is weeping inconsolably in the Dragon King's Palace Under the Sea,' the Archivist said. 'She attempted suicide, but changed her mind at the last minute,' he added, and then with emphasis, 'because she wants to kill you first.'

'I did both of them a favour,' Gold said.

The Archivist sighed with exasperation, banged his hand on the desk, and turned away.

'I'd like to take him to the Palace and teach him some manners, but a creature like him should not be let anywhere near my harem,' the Tiger said. 'The Dragon King

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just wants to eat him alive —'

Gold squeaked.

'The Dragon King wants to eat him alive,' the Tiger said without looking at Gold. 'What do you suggest, Archivist?'

The Archivist studied Gold expressionlessly. 'I have a solution. Put a charm on him. Make him retain True Form, as a stone. Then set him to work lifting and carrying at the Palace. Even better, put him to work in your harem. He will be close enough to touch your women, but unable to do anything about it while a stone.'

Gold squeaked again.

'Good idea,' the Tiger said, 'but I don't have power over stones, my nature is Metal. We'll need somebody with Wood alignment to do it to him.'

'I'm sure the Dragon King will be happy to oblige.' The Archivist straightened. 'Gold can finish indexing those scrolls, then I'll send him over to the Dragon King to be bound. Then you can have him until your honour is satisfied.'

'Works for me,' the Tiger said. 'How long will it take him to finish the scrolls?'

'Not more than twenty-four hours,' the Archivist said with a small smile.

'Otherwise I will ask the Dragon King to make the binding permanent.'

Gold didn't squeak. He couldn't find his voice at all.

The Tiger looked Gold in the eye. 'This time tomorrow, you will present yourself to the Seraglio Elite Guard for assignment of duties. Serve me well, and I may only hold you bound for a hundred years.'

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**1804**

Gold! the Tiger roared, his voice echoing inside Gold's stone lattice.

My Lord, Gold said.

Come to the pool. I have a job for you.

Gold didn't grumble as he lowered the towels that he had been carrying between the laundry and the Seraglio. The Tiger's wives seemed to use every towel taken there almost immediately. The women spent most of their time bathing, hoping that the Tiger would wander past, see them, and invite one or two of them for a small dalliance.

Unfortunately Gold saw the women all the time, and due to the particular way he'd been bound he couldn't even tell them about their obvious charms. Gold wasn't just frustrated; he was definitely way through frustration and out the other side.

But he had decided to work hard and serve his sentence with good humour. Perhaps when he was released he would be able to return and tell the Tiger's wives exactly what he'd been thinking as he'd carried the towels through the harem.

Gold placed the towels on a side table, and quickly floated in stone form to the gardens and the side of the pool.

The Tiger was in True Form; an enormous white tiger with pale gold stripes, easily half as big again as a natural animal. He lounged beside a deck chair with the half-eaten haunch of an antelope between his front legs. The Tiger saw Gold and flicked one ear.

'There's a snake on the side of the pool, don't know where it came from,' the Tiger said. 'Find a stick or a blade or something and kill it before I bring some of the wives in.'

'Sir,' Gold said, and turned to see. The Tiger was right; a large black snake stretched on the side of the pool, obviously sunning itself. 'I wonder how it came in?'

'No idea,' the Tiger said. 'But if the wives see it they'll panic. Just be a good lad, Gold, and find something to kill it with. Hurry.'

Gold cast around and saw a couple of Horsemen guarding the gates that led through the ten foot high wall that separated the pool deck from the desert plain. One of them carried a large sword, a suitable weapon. He approached the Horsemen, floating at eye level.

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'May I borrow your blade?' he asked Horseman with the sword.

'Certainly,' the Horseman said, pulled the blade from its scabbard at his side, and held it out.

Gold took the blade and the Horseman released it as it floated closer to Gold.

'Thank you,' Gold said. 'I need to kill a snake with it, then I'll give it right back.'

'You do that,' the Horseman said with obvious amusement. The Horseman at the other side of the gate made a strange hissing sound, and Gold glanced at him, but his face was rigid.

Gold couldn't shrug in stone form. He turned and moved towards the edge of the pool, the sword floating behind him.

The Tiger had been right to choose Gold to kill the snake; Gold could move silently in stone form, floating, and still wield the blade with reasonable accuracy. He floated towards the large snake.

The snake was a monster, more than two metres long, stretched out on the gold coloured pavers that edged the pool. It appeared to be a cobra, but was completely shining black from its blunt nose to its pointed tail. It seemed to be sleeping in the sunshine.

Gold approached the snake from behind, moved to the side next to its head, and raised the blade.

Then he couldn't lower the blade, because he couldn't move at all. He was bound. He weakened, dropped the blade, and fell to the ground next to it.

'I hope that wasn't intended for me,' the snake said without moving, its deep masculine voice hissing.

'The Tiger ordered me to kill you,' Gold said, still unable to move. 'I didn't know you were a Shen, I thought you were a natural snake. My apologies. Would you mind leaving the poolside? The Tiger would like to bring some of his wives in, and he is concerned that you would frighten them.'

Something black and enormous that Gold hadn't noticed before stirred at the bottom of the pool. 'The Tiger ordered you to kill me, eh?' the snake said.

'Yes, sir,' Gold said, distracted by the water surging in the pool. The large dark thing in the pool approached the surface; it was oval, and nearly five metres long. Gold

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made another attempt to move but was still bound.

The snake grew. It stretched and widened and lengthened until it was also nearly five metres long and at least thirty centimetres around. It raised its head and studied Gold where he lay on the ground. 'And you were ready to chop my head off, were you?'

'Yes, sir,' Gold squeaked.

The dark thing in the pool surfaced. Its massive black shell sparkled as the water rushed from it. It raised its head above the water and grinned at Gold. It was a huge black turtle, but unlike any natural beast. Its head was like a cross between a lion's and a dragon's, but much darker and uglier. Its shining black shell radiated cold menace.

'Oh, shit,' Gold whispered.

'I think I may have a small chat to the Tiger,' the turtle said. It floated lightly out of the water to land between Gold and the snake. The snake slithered forward and wrapped itself around the turtle's shell, disappearing inside it where they met.

Then the horrifying reptilian combination twisted, darkened, and shrank, and changed into a man wearing a black jacket and pants. His skin was golden, but his long hair and shining eyes were as black as the snake's scales and the turtle's shell. He pulled himself completely upright and turned. 'Come with me, and let's talk to the Tiger. Leave the sword.'

'Lord Xuan Wu,' Gold squeaked.

As Xuan Wu and Gold approached, the Tiger obviously couldn't contain his mirth any more and roared with laughter over the top of the antelope. He laughed so hard he rolled onto his back, his paws in the air, the snow-white fur of his belly rippling as his sides heaved.

Xuan Wu flopped to sit on one of the deck chairs and gestured towards Gold without looking at him. 'Something cold to drink. Non-alcoholic.'

'Sir,' Gold said.

'You've failed me, Gold,' the Tiger wheezed with delight, still on his back with his paws in the air. 'I ordered you to kill that goddamn snake, and instead you're going to serve it drinks.'

'And vegetarian ho fan,' Xuan Wu said.

'Sir,' Gold said.

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'Go,' Xuan Wu said.

'Sir,' Gold squeaked, and floated away as quickly as his stone form could carry him.

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The tame demons in the kitchen had already heard about the joke when Gold arrived. They were hysterical with mirth.

'Cut the laughing and make some vegetarian ho fan for the Dark Lord,' Gold snapped loudly. 'And he wants something cold and non-alcoholic to drink.'

The demons didn't stop laughing as they hurried to prepare the noodles.

One of the demons, in the form of a teenage girl, approached Gold. 'How close did you come to cutting off the Serpent's head?' she said with a huge grin.

'I wish I'd seen that,' one of the other demons shouted from the other side of the kitchen.

'He knew I was coming from a mile off,' Gold said. 'He was just waiting to see what I'd do.'

'It wasn't your fault, Gold,' she said, still smiling. 'It was Lord Bai Hu's idea.'

'I didn't even see the Turtle at the bottom of the pool,' Gold said, miserable.

The demons all laughed again.

'Better be careful what you say near Lord Xuan Wu,' an older demon said as he approached. 'You've already managed to insult him by not recognizing him. No turtle words, Gold. I know what you're like, and if you insult the Dark Lord then the trouble you're in now will be nothing compared to what he could do to you.'

'I've never seen him,' the young female demon said. 'What does he look like?'

'His human form is a tall man with long hair,' Gold said. 'Black eyes.'

'Did you see his True Form?' she said. 'You saw the Serpent? Did you see the Xuan Wu, the whole thing?'

Gold floated slightly higher, enjoying her rapt attention. 'The Serpent was lying on the poolside, then the Turtle came out of the water and I saw them join together. I saw the whole majestic Xuan Wu.'

'How powerful is he?' she said. She turned to the older male demon. 'I've heard he's very powerful. He's the Spirit of the North. How powerful is he?'

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'He is second in power and majesty only to the Celestial One, the Jade Emperor Himself,' the male demon said with deference. 'He is First Celestial General. He commands the Armies of the Thirty-Six. He wields the Blade of Seven Stars. He is the mightiest demon destroyer in existence ...'

The young female demon's eyes were huge.

'He is Sovereign of the Four Winds,' Gold said, grabbing back her attention. 'He commands the other three spirits; the White Tiger of the West, the Red Phoenix of the South, and the Azure Dragon of the East.'

'He's the Tiger's Lord,' the older male demon said.

'You don't get much bigger than him without entering the Celestial Palace itself,' Gold said. 'And he spends most of his time there, anyway. He is Right Hand to the Jade Emperor.'

'He spends a lot of time here, too,' the older male demon said. 'He and the Lord Bai Hu are very good friends.'

'I didn't know that,' Gold said. 'And the Tiger took advantage of my ignorance.'

'Well, from what I've heard, Gold, that would be poetic justice for you.'

Gold stopped at that. Then, 'I suppose you're right,' he said softly.

'Noodles,' one of the demons said, presenting Gold with a tray containing the large noodle bowl, spoon and chopsticks. 'And the drink. It's iced tea, it's hot out there. If he wants something different, suggest he ask the demon in the pool bar.'

'Thanks,' Gold said, and carefully held the tray as he floated back to the poolside.

\*\*\*

Xuan Wu was in Celestial Form when Gold returned. He was nearly twelve feet tall, wearing black silk robes held at his waist by a wide silk belt. His face was square and dark and ugly, with a long thin black beard. The Tiger sprawled on his belly on the warm paving, still in tiger form.

'... And if you do it again, you'll be eating nothing but rat for three days,' Xuan Wu said.

'My Lord,' the Tiger said, bobbing his tiger head. 'It won't happen again.'

'Very well,' Xuan Wu said. He returned to human form and sat on one of the

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chairs next to the table. He gestured to Gold, who floated the noodles and drink to him.

Xuan Wu glanced at Gold as the stone placed the tray on the table. 'Is that the one?'

The Tiger pulled himself up to sit on his haunches. 'Yep.'

'Doesn't look like much.'

Gold floated higher. 'I am a child of the Jade Building Block of the World,' he said with as much dignity as he could muster.

'Is that so,' Xuan Wu said with amusement. 'I've had your father locked away in a jewellery box for nearly five hundred years.'

'I am well aware of that, my Lord,' Gold said, trying to put as much hauteur into his voice as possible. 'And we prefer the term "parent".'

'Learn some humility or you'll join it,' the Tiger growled. 'Wait here, you can bring me some wives later.'

'My Lord.' Gold moved to one side and settled on the ground, resting in the afternoon sun. The sun warmed his golden veins and he nearly sighed with bliss.

'A group of missionaries from the West invaded one of my establishments in Sichuan,' the Tiger said. 'They have some interesting ideas about the nature of the universe. I'm always making plans to spend more time on the Earthly Plane and gather information about this, but then find something better to do here on the Celestial.'

'Don't harm any Westerners if you can avoid it,' Xuan Wu said. 'The increasing conflict between the Qing and the traders from the West is causing us a great deal of concern.'

The Tiger stretched on the paving and curled his tail around his hind legs. 'China has no need for them. We are large and mighty. They are small and divided. They have nothing that we need.'

'They are well aware of that. But they love our tea.'

The Tiger chuckled. 'Good luck to them. So do we.'

'Chinese tea is selling for a small fortune in the West, Ah Bai,' Xuan Wu said, stirring the noodles with his chopsticks. 'The traders see the possibility of great profits and are looking for all possible avenues to tap into this market.'

'They can buy as much tea as they want, provided they pay for it in silver or

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gold.'

'They are. They pay for the tea with silver.'

The Tiger pulled himself slightly more upright. 'And where are they mining this silver from?'

'Southern China,' Xuan Wu said. 'Guangdong. Fukien. Chaozhou Provinces.'

'There's no silver to be had there, Ah Wu,' the Tiger said. 'What are you talking about?'

'They grow opium in India. They sell the opium in Southern China, they sell it for silver. Then they use the silver to buy tea. The streets of Guangdong province are lined with opium houses.'

The Tiger flicked one ear. 'This is very bad news, Ah Wu.'

'The Qing Emperor is planning to outlaw the sale of opium. The Western traders are willing to go to war for the right to sell it.'

'This is extremely bad. Because of the reign of the previous emperor and his corrupt little boyfriend, China's army is almost useless.'

'I am seriously considering intervening,' Xuan Wu said to the noodles.

'You're not the only one,' the Tiger growled. 'I will not see our Middle Kingdom invaded by them.'

'The Jade Emperor will shortly issue an edict.' Xuan Wu leaned back and studied the Tiger intensely. 'No Celestial may intervene in Earthly affairs. We will watch and wait. But we do not like where this is heading.'

'If we sit back and wait then it may be too late,' the Tiger said. 'The Qing empire is becoming more corrupt all the time. The Empire is failing, Ah Wu, it is time for Divine Mandate to be removed from this dynasty. If the Empire is weak then the Westerners may see their chance to move in.'

'We will only intervene as a last resort. Only if it appears that the entire Empire will fall,' Xuan Wu said. 'Even then we will hesitate. It is not our place.'

The Tiger sighed, shook his shaggy head, and flopped back down to lie on the paving.

Xuan Wu placed the chopsticks back onto the table. 'I've been summoned by the Jade Emperor. The Celestial wants to see me. Duty calls.'

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'My Lord,' the Tiger said, bobbing his head.

Xuan Wu disappeared.

'Gold,' the Tiger said.

'My Lord?' Gold said.

'Seventy six. Fifty eight. Sixty. Seventy three. Oh, and what the hell, the new one. Eighty one. She'll have to learn to share eventually, might as well start teaching her now.'

'My Lord,' Gold said, and drifted away to collect the Tiger's five selected wives.

\*\*\*

Gold was once again carrying towels when he noticed young William heading towards the harem. Gold hurried to join him, and floated beside him. William wore the white and gold uniform of the Seraglio Elite Guard, the most respected select unit of the Western Horsemen. The Tiger only entrusted the care of his wives to those who were of the highest standard as warriors, and had also proven that they lacked interest in women and preferred men.

'Go away,' William said.

'You were promoted?' Gold said.

William didn't say anything, he just quickened his pace towards the seraglio.

'Without me you wouldn't be here,' Gold said, floating faster to catch up.

William stopped dead. Gold floated slightly further, then backed so that he was alongside. He moved higher, level with William's eyes.

'You may think you have done me a favour,' William growled, his eyes blazing. 'But both Jade and I have been deeply shamed by your actions. Nothing will undo the fact that we were made a laughing stock, and by you.' He turned away to hide the pain in his face. 'Everybody on the Celestial Plane knows what you did, and knows what we did. Everybody knows. They still laugh when they see me coming.' He glared at Gold. 'Even the wives joke about me, they call me the "little stone's toy".'

Gold dropped slightly in the air. 'I didn't realize it was so bad for you.'

'I've been in constant contact with Jade, trying to talk her out of killing herself,' William said. 'She wants to make a trip through Hell, she wants to suffer. She says that anything she would be subjected to at the hands of Hell's demons would be nothing

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compared to the treatment she receives from the other dragons. Dragons are not renowned for the mercy, and in this case, they ...' His voice trailed off and he glanced away. 'In this case they have been having a great deal of fun.'

Gold dropped even further. 'I never thought of it like that.'

William turned to go. 'Frankly, Gold, I'm not surprised. Thinking is obviously not something you're very good at.' He walked away. 'Particularly thinking about the feelings of others,' he said without looking back.

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Gold was about to settle himself into his niche near the harem for the night when a demon servant approached.

'Go to the Number Two Dining Hall,' the demon said. 'The Tiger wants to see you.'

'This late?' Gold said. 'What is it this time?'

'Just go,' the demon said.

Gold didn't hurry to the dining room. He didn't enjoy the sight of others eating, as he was unable to partake of that pleasure himself. He sincerely missed being able to eat.

Gold floated into the dining room and stopped dead. A group of unpleasantly familiar faces was around the rosewood table.

All of them were in human form. The White Tiger, Bai Hu. William, Number Seventeen Son. Princess Jade of the Dragons. The Archivist, this time appearing as a youth of about eighteen. The Number One Son of the King of the Dragons, his hair, eyes and robe all brilliant shining gold.

Gold floated closer to the table, then dropped six inches in the air. 'This humble stone is present. My Lords. My Ladies.'

'How long have you served me, Golden Boy?' the Tiger said, his voice low and gruff.

Gold stopped and counted, then felt a wild rush of hope. 'Exactly one hundred years, my Lord.'

'Do you wish to be released?'

Gold tried to keep the enthusiasm from his voice. 'I do, my Lord.'

'What have you learnt from your hundred years of serving me?' the Tiger said, his golden eyes blazing.

Gold nearly said, 'how to carry towels,' but swallowed it. 'I have learnt to think twice before meddling in the affairs of others, my Lord,' he said. 'In pursuing my selfish interests I harmed both William,' he bobbed in the air, 'and the Princess Jade.'

'My honour is satisfied,' the Tiger said. 'He has served me well. I have no objection to his release. Princess?' He nodded to Jade.

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Jade glared at Gold, her green eyes flashing. 'I agree to his release on one condition.'

'Anything you wish, my Lady,' Gold said.

'Stay well away from me and mine,' Jade said.

Gold swallowed the retort and made his voice suitably even. 'If you do not request my company then I swear I will not approach.'

Jade placed both pale slender hands on the table, still glaring at Gold. 'I agree.'

'William?' the Tiger said.

'Same for me,' William said. 'Don't come anywhere near me, stone, or I swear I will have your human head.'

Gold flew backwards then moved forward again. 'I thought of you as a friend, William,' he said softly. 'Often when I was alone in my niche during these long hundred years I have thought of you. I was looking forward to seeking you out once I had my freedom and regained my human form. I thought I was your first.'

William leaned forward over the table and glared at Gold. 'Stay well away from me!' he spat. 'You come near me, I will tear you to pieces! My tiger form has never tasted human flesh.' He grinned with menace. 'I would be happy to make you my first.'

'Honour is satisfied,' the Archivist said. 'You have been warned, stone.' He nodded to the Number One Son of the Dragon King. 'Yi Long, you may proceed.'

'I've seen enough,' Jade said. 'Don't come near me, Gold, or I'll have your head in my teeth.' She disappeared.

'I have things to do,' William said, and also disappeared.

The dragon concentrated, and his long golden hair floated around his head. The charm fell away from Gold, but he waited until the dragon's hair had completely fallen back before attempting the human form.

Even after a hundred years the form was simple to take. He took his usual form, a young Chinese wearing gold silk robes. He fell to one knee and saluted the Tiger, the Archivist, and the dragon. 'My Lords, I thank you.' He pulled himself back to his feet. 'You have scrolls for me to index, Archivist?'

'I have no further need for your services, Gold,' the Archivist said with a small smile. 'You'll have to find yourself gainful employment if you want to live as a human.'

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Gold glanced at the Tiger.

'Don't even think I'm giving you a job near my women while you're in that form,' the Tiger said with amusement. 'I still don't trust you. You have ten minutes to get your carcass out of the Palace, and if you ever return I will take off your head.'

'I hear there is plenty of work in Guangdong,' the Archivist said. 'Why not go there? Business is booming, there is much need for Shen with mathematical ability, and you stones are famous for your aptitude with an abacus.'

Gold didn't salute them or say a word. He just disappeared. He had no intention of ever seeing any of them again.

\*\*\*

'And so here I am,' Gold said over the steamers full of dim sum. 'Finally released after a hundred years, and looking for something to do. The Earthly Plane has come a long way. Hong Kong seems a lot of fun.' He waved his chopsticks at one of the steamers. 'I love this idea. Who thought of it?'

'A human,' the demon said, lifting a barbecue pork bun in his own chopsticks, and then carefully removing the rice paper from underneath. 'It's developed from snacks served at the tea houses in Southern China, that's why it's called yum cha, "drink tea" in Cantonese. You need a job? What in Hell for? You're a stone, you don't have to eat.'

'I like to eat,' Gold said, inspecting the delicate vegetarian dumplings. 'I like a soft bed to sleep in.'

'Ah,' the demon said, understanding. 'You need a soft bed.' The demon had taken human form to meet with Gold; he appeared to be a rotund middle-aged Chinese businessman, one of many found in this part of Southern China who dealt with the opium traders from the West.

Gold smiled through a mouthful of dim sum. 'Precisely.'

'I have no need for a book keeper right now,' the demon said, pouring the tea and then putting the lid sideways on the pot to indicate that it needed filling. 'You're out of luck if you want work from me.'

Gold chuckled. 'Who says I want to work?' He inspected the steamer carefully. 'What would you pay for one of the Tiger's wives? To hold for ransom?'

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The demon choked on his tea. He coughed for a while, then took several wheezing breaths and sipped the tea again.

'I can enter the seraglio,' Gold said. 'I served there for a hundred years. Many of the wives know and trust me. What would you give for one of them?'

'It wouldn't be worth it,' the demon said. He took another sip of tea. 'The White Tiger is nearly as formidable a demon destroyer as the Xuan Wu. It would come after me and destroy me.'

Gold thought quickly. 'How about this, then? I take the wife, you hold her. I rescue her, and pretend to destroy you. I return her to the Tiger, and we split the reward.'

The demon paused, studying Gold over the tea. Then he placed his own teacup on the table and put his hands, palms down, on either side of his bowl. 'I like it. But I don't believe that you can break into the harem. That place is like a fortress. The guards are the Tiger's finest sons. There's no way you could get in.'

'I can get in anywhere,' Gold said. 'I could steal the Great Seal of the Jade Emperor if I wanted.'

'Oh, now that's an interesting claim,' the demon said. 'The Hall of Celestial Treasures is damn near impenetrable. You couldn't possibly do it.'

'If I can't get you a wife then I'll get you the Great Seal,' Gold said.

'I have a tea plantation in Fujian Province,' the demon said. 'It produces the finest silver-tipped tea in China. Nearly five qing, the largest tea plantation on Drum Mountain. If you can get me one of the White Tiger's wives, you can have the plantation and half the reward.'

'Does the plantation have a manor?' Gold said.

'Of course,' the demon said. 'Fifty rooms, human servants thrown in. Plenty of lovely soft beds for you to take your pleasure in.'

'If I can't get you a wife then I'll get you the Great Seal,' Gold said.

'A young wife,' the demon said. 'A pretty one.'

'They're all pretty, you know that,' Gold said. 'The Tiger only wants beautiful women.'

The demon raised his teacup. 'It's a bet.'

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Gold raised his own tea. 'Good.'

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Gold quietly floated through the sleeping quarters. He had taken stone form to do this; the women would recognise the stone. They hardly knew what the human form looked like.

He turned into the wife's bedroom. She was asleep in her rosewood four-poster, the gauzy curtains drifting in the soft desert breeze.

Gold lifted the curtain and floated next to her ear. 'Mary. Mary.'

She didn't move.

'Mary Robinson.' He hesitated, then dropped his voice. 'Perdita.'

She smiled in her sleep. 'Florizel?'

'I have come to return you to the King,' Gold whispered. 'He has sent me to bring you.'

Her eyes snapped open and she gasped. 'Gold?'

Gold floated in front of her face. 'Your Florizel wants to see you.'

She pulled herself to sit upright, her useless legs dragging under the covers. 'I am happy here, Gold. The Tiger is more man than Florizel — than George ever was.'

'The King would like to see you, one more time, my Lady,' Gold whispered. 'He discovered that you are not dead after all, he learnt that you are here. He wants to apologize to you, and beg your forgiveness.'

She was silent, her eyes wide.

'He is dying, Mary. If you were to do this for him, he would die with a clear conscience.'

She turned away. 'I am old and ugly now, Gold. I do not wish my Florizel to see me like this.'

'He has seen your portrait and says you are as beautiful as ever, and I agree with him,' Gold said. 'Come with me, and I will take you to see him. I will return you as soon as you wish.' Gold took human form, sat beside her on the bed, and reached to her. 'Take my hand, and I will take you to see your Florizel.'

She turned to him, smiled gently, and took his hand. He dropped his head and concentrated.

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They reappeared in the wrong place. They weren't in the demon's residence in Hong Kong at all; they were in a large room with red stone walls and floor.

The Tiger, William, and another burly son of the Tiger waited for them. Gold dropped Mary and she crumpled.

'Well done, Seventeen,' the Tiger said.

'Thank you, father,' William said. 'I'll return Madam Mary to the seraglio.' He grinned menacingly at Gold. 'Congratulations, Gold, you have truly outdone yourself this time. Permission to return and watch the sentencing, my Lord.'

'Oh, shit,' Gold whispered.

'Granted,' the Tiger growled.

'I just wanted to forgive him,' Mary said from the floor, desperate. 'I would have returned straight away.'

'I know that, my darling,' the Tiger said. 'I know you have a good heart. But this little piece of shit stone was going to take you to a demon, not to your old love. That one has completely forgotten about you, and if he saw you today he would not love you nearly as much as I do.'

'You are my heart, Tiger,' Mary whispered without looking up.

'And you are mine, Mary,' the Tiger said. 'Now return with Seventeen. I am not displeased with you, and to prove it you will grace my bed tomorrow night.'

Mary dropped her head.

'You alone.'

Mary burst into tears, and William gently lifted her from the floor and carried her out.

The Tiger linked his hands behind his back and paced in front of Gold. 'Now. What to do with you.'

Gold couldn't control his trembling.

'Kneel,' the Tiger said.

Gold flopped to his knees without being aware of the movement.

The Tiger held out his hand. 'Blade.'

The other son, who had been standing silently, passed his sword to the Tiger.

'The demons in Hell are going to have a great deal of fun with you, little stone,'

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the Tiger said, hefting the blade.

'Mercy, my Lord,' Gold whispered.

'You may even run into the demon that you were taking Mary to,' the Tiger said. 'I'm sure he has a few words he would like to say to you.'

'Mercy,' Gold choked. 'Lady Kwan Yin, hear my cries.'

'Oh, the Goddess is a long way away right now,' the Tiger said. 'I believe she's in retreat. Feel free to call on her. From. Hell.' He hefted the sword again.

Gold couldn't control his quivering.

'Do it,' William said from the doorway.

The Tiger strode forward and sliced Gold's head from his neck with a single swift stroke.

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Gold finally emerged after three months of torture in the Hell of Trees Full of Swords and the Hell of Red-Hot Grates.

Normally Shen such as he were escorted directly to the Tenth Level of Hell and then released back to the Earthly Plane. But this time the Judges had seen fit to punish him for his misdemeanours.

Gold quickly headed for the hills of western Guilin Province, where the mountains were thick and vertical, clustered around the Li River. He found a cave in a mountainside overlooking the Li and hid.

He was too slow.

He heard the rush of wind and tried to run, but the demon blocked his exit from the cave and sauntered closer. The demon had taken True Form; ten feet tall, black and scaly, with bulging eyes, tusks, and tufts of red hair on its head.

'I believe we had an agreement,' the demon said.

'No idea what you're talking about,' Gold said. 'Are you sure you have the right stone?'

'Oh, definitely the right stone,' the demon said. 'The Golden Boy, child of the Jade Building Block of the World, yes?' The demon gestured and a ceramic table with two stools, suitable for outdoor use, materialized on the damp floor of the cave. 'Sit, Gold, I believe we have things to talk about.'

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'I didn't see you in Hell,' Gold said, sitting on one of the stools as far from the enormous demon as possible. 'I wondered what happened to you.'

'Business is very good,' the demon said. 'We buy their opium with our silver. We sell our tea for even more of their silver. We sell the opium for a great deal of gold. Business is very, very good.'

'Oh, I'm glad for you,' Gold said, relieved. 'So you need someone to keep the accounts, do the sums for you. Well, you've found the right stone. I'll be happy to work for you in return for a soft bed and a bowl of rice every day.'

'Oh, I already have someone to do that for me,' the demon said, leaning back and placing one scaly clawed hand on the table. 'What I don't have, though, is the Great Seal of the Jade Emperor.'

Gold squeaked.

'You have two full moons to bring me the Seal,' the demon said. 'If you do not provide me with the Seal, then you are unable to pay your debt to me. And you are mine.'

Gold couldn't squeak, his voice had completely gone.

'Two moons,' the demon said, and disappeared, taking the table and chairs with him.

Gold curled up where he had fallen on the damp floor of the cave.

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The Seal was heavy, but nothing that Gold couldn't handle. At least twenty centimetres tall and ten on each of its four sides, the rectangular Seal was the finest green Celestial Jade found anywhere.

Gold carried the Seal behind him as he floated in stone form out of the Hall of Celestial Treasures. It was midnight; the Palace was quiet. It looked like he was going to make it.

The Hall was sealed; Shen could only travel in and out through the main door. Gold floated along the final silent corridor to the door.

The lower half of the walls were wood panels; elaborate paintings of birds and flowers adorned the walls above. The wooden floor had been polished to a high silken sheen by centuries of passing feet.

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Gold silently floated closer to the door, full of desperate hope. If he could get the Seal through the door, then he could travel directly out, disappear, and take the Seal to the demon in Hong Kong. Just a few more centimetres ...

Gold stopped at the door and listened. Not a sound. He pulled the Seal slightly closer to him and concentrated. The door wasn't locked. It swung silently open.

There was no light on the other side. There should have been light. It was dark. Black.

The enormous bulk blocking the light moved forward, and Gold dropped the Seal.

It was Xuan Wu, in full majestic Celestial Form, twelve feet tall. His long black hair was wild around his head; his thin black beard fell from his square ugly face. He was garbed as Celestial General in black lacquer armour over his black silk robes.

'Come with me,' Xuan Wu said, turned, and walked away without looking back, the floorboards creaking under his massive weight.

Gold checked behind him; the Seal was gone, leaving a dent in the floor where it had hit. He turned back and followed Xuan Wu.

\*\*\*

Xuan Wu led him through countless corridors in the Celestial Palace. The lamps brightened as they approached, then darkened behind them, a pool of light following them through the silent halls.

'My Lord ...'

'We are going to my audience room, where you will tell me the whole story,' Xuan Wu said softly without looking at Gold, his deep voice rumbling. 'Until then, remain silent.'

Gold did as he was told, and followed Xuan Wu through the corridors. If he was lucky, he would just be executed. If he was unlucky, he would be executed and the demon would be waiting for him again when he emerged from more suffering at the hands of the residents of Hell.

Xuan Wu stopped at a pair of dark wooden doors and they slid silently aside. He led Gold into his audience room. The room was very plain; a cold stone floor, bare wood walls, a slightly raised dais at the end with a large rosewood desk set upon it. A

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large brass plaque with calligraphy of 'Xuan Tian Shang Di' in the Jade Emperor's own hand hung on the wall above the desk — 'Supreme Emperor of the Dark Northern Heavens' — Xuan Wu's full Celestial Title.

The infamous Seven Stars sword hung beneath the calligraphy on the wall — nearly two metres long, as dark and menacing as its owner.

Xuan Wu went around the desk and sat. Gold settled on the cold stone floor in front of the desk, took human form, and fell to his knees, touching his head to the floor.

'Wen sui, Wen sui, wen wen sui,' Gold said. Ten thousand years, ten thousand years, ten thousand ten thousand years.

'Rise,' Xuan Wu said. 'Retain human form, I want to see your eyes. Tell me why you have done this.'

Gold carefully didn't look into the Dark Lord's eyes. 'After I was released from the Tiger's service, I needed to make a living. I did a foolish thing; I made a pact with a demon noble. We arranged to hold one of the White Tiger's wives for ransom.'

'I am aware of your attempted kidnapping of Wife Number Thirty-Nine,' Xuan Wu said. 'At the time I found it difficult to believe that even you could be so stupid.'

'I thought it would work,' Gold said. 'It didn't. I was caught. The Tiger sent me to Hell.'

Xuan Wu shifted in his seat and placed one hand on his desk. 'And you obviously still have not learned your lesson, even after what happened to you in Hell.'

'I made a bet with the demon noble, Celestial Highness,' Gold said. 'I made a foolish boast. I boasted that I could steal the Seal. We made a bet based on that boast. If I could not give the wife to the demon, then I had to give him the Seal.'

'Ah,' Xuan Wu leaned back. 'If you cannot provide the Seal to the demon, then you belong to the demon.'

'Celestial Highness,' Gold said, dropping his head with misery.

'If you had not made the bet with the demon, stone, what would you have done with yourself when you were released from Hell?'

Gold hesitated, then told the truth. 'I don't know, my Lord, truly. I only know that if I had a choice, it would be something legitimate. I would search for somebody who would be in need of my particular skills. Someone who needs my mathematical

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abilities.'

'Look into my eyes,' Xuan Wu said.

Gold hesitated, then looked up from the floor. Xuan Wu's eyes were black as his turtle's shell, shining black from one side to the other, with no whites at all.

Gold froze, looking into the eyes that held the Yin force of the Universe. Xuan Wu was Yin personified; dark, cold, water, winter, death. All of those things were in those eyes.

Gold shivered, and the ice-cold power that held him snapped off.

Xuan Wu rose with the grace of a true Master of the Arts of War. He walked around the desk, and stepped down off the dais.

Gold still felt cold, and shivered on the floor as the Dark Lord approached him. It was all he could do not to run.

Xuan Wu stopped in front of Gold. Gold carefully watched the elaborate silver embroidery of snakes and turtles on the Dark Lord's black robes without looking up.

'Rise,' Xuan Wu said.

Gold pulled himself to his feet and resisted the urge to hug himself against the cold.

'Come with me,' Xuan Wu said, and disappeared.

Gold followed. He had no choice.

\*\*\*

Xuan Wu took human form as they materialized in Spring Garden Lane in Hong Kong. The Lane was bordered on both sides by brothels with large numbers outside; the infamous 'Big Number Brothels'. The street was full of rickshaws carrying wealthy European businessmen and local Chinese entrepreneurs. Young, fresh-faced prostitutes from both China and the West leaned over the second floor balconies, calling to their clients beneath.

'Which one?' Xuan Wu said. He had taken the form of an extremely old Chinese, stooped and grey, wearing a traditional black robe. He wore his snow-white hair shaved in the front and braided into a long queue at the back, as all Han Chinese had been ordered under the Manchurian Qing.

'Eighty-eight,' Gold said, pointing. The brothel was the largest and most well-

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kept on the street, with elaborate white Corinthian columns on either side of the door.

Xuan Wu stopped and studied the building. Gold waited patiently. Rickshaws and coolies hurried by. A sedan chair passed along the centre of the street, its occupant hidden from view by red curtains. Probably a woman; an expensive courtesan on the way to her client.

Xuan Wu glanced at Gold, his dark eyes emotionless. 'The demon is there. Many demons are there. You will have many to serve.'

Gold sighed and dropped his shoulders. 'I don't want to belong to this demon, my Lord, I beg you. Do not give me to it.'

'You should have considered that when you made that foolish bet. Come.' Xuan Wu slid effortlessly through the crowds of people that lined the street, despite his stooped posture.

When they reached Eighty-eight they stopped.

'Don't take your grandpa in there, boy,' a coolie shouted from the other side of the road. The coolie was well over sixty, wearing nothing but a loincloth and a filthy straw hat. A basket of protesting ducks hung suspended from each end of the bamboo pole over his bony shoulder. 'Don't take the old man in there, sonny, he'll use up all his ching and die on you.'

'Not Grandpa using his ching,' a rickshaw driver called as he hurried past. 'Grandpa showing little Number Three Grandson where to put it!'

'Anywhere he likes, in Number Eighty Eight,' the coolie said. He hefted the pole holding the ducks and hurried away into the crowd with the peculiar sliding gait used to avoid upsetting the load. His voice faded. 'They even got Foreign Devil women in there.'

The doorman was a huge Indian; a Sikh, with a white silk turban and a red embroidered jacket. He eyed the two Shen suspiciously through his fierce, bearded face.

Xuan Wu didn't hesitate. He walked up to the door and nodded to the doorman. The doorman opened the door with one hand and collected a one dollar note from Xuan Wu with the other.

The large entry hall was lavishly decorated in red and gold, with rosewood furniture inlaid with mother-of-pearl lining the walls. An altar to Guan Yu, God of

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Justice, guarded the main entrance. To the right a door led to the parlour; to the left curving stairs carried patrons to higher floors and greater delights. Beautiful young Chinese girls in brilliantly coloured silk cheongsams lounged in chairs around the entry, their overly made-up faces full of boredom. They lit up when they saw Gold and Xuan Wu and a couple rose to assist the old man, their faces bright with welcome.

Remain silent, Xuan Wu said directly to Gold. You are only to speak if asked a question. That is an order. Disobey and things will go very bad for you.

Gold nodded, casting around suspiciously. There had been a time when he would have been distracted by the close presence of so many beautiful women, but now his only thought was to where the demon was.

Xuan Wu cackled like an evil old man and glanced from one girl to another as they held his arms and smiled. 'I was only here to provide a birthday present for my Number One Grandson here, but I think I may buy a present for myself.'

One of the girls on his arms leaned to coo into Xuan Wu's face. 'You know you can have anything you like here, Chen Sing San.'

Gold glanced quickly at Xuan Wu. Mr Chen?

'I'd like to speak to dear Mr Wong first, please, ladies. My grandson can come with me, I'd like him to meet Mr Wong. After that, we'll see about presents for all of you.' Xuan Wu reached into his robe and pulled out two small jade ornaments, tiny carved rabbits embellished with gold on solid gold chains. 'For you, because you are so very beautiful.'

The girls took the rabbits. One of them squealed like a schoolgirl and jiggled with delight. 'This is real!'

'Of course it's real,' Xuan Wu said, sounding like a jolly grandfather at New Year with a pocket full of lai see. 'Now where's that Mr Wong? I want to give him a present as well.'

The two girls giggled as they led Xuan Wu through the parlour, one on each arm. Gold followed silently.

The parlour was lavishly decorated in European style. Heavy cream-coloured curtains covered the lace shielding the occupants from the eyes of those in the street. More gorgeous girls lounged on heavy rococo couches picked out with far too much gilt.

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A young African woman in a bright blue cheongsam eyed Gold and Xuan Wu suspiciously as they entered.

Xuan Wu stopped in front of the black girl and grinned down at her. 'How long has this one been here?'

'About two weeks,' the Chinese girl on Xuan Wu's left arm said. She tossed her head with disdain. 'Doesn't speak Chinese. But some of the Gweiloh men like their women black.' She tossed her head again. 'Can't see the attraction. Dirty, smelly, black demon women. Humph.'

'I don't know, I may like to try it, something different,' Xuan Wu said to the girl on his left arm, still jolly.

'I am going to get out of this hell hole if the last thing I do,' the black woman hissed under her breath in English with a strong American accent.

Xuan Wu's head snapped around to her. 'You are American?' he said in English. The Chinese girls' mouths flopped open.

The black girl shot to her feet. She was tall and slender, nearly six feet, her intelligent face fierce with desperation. 'Please, sir, if you can understand me, I took a job to come to Hong Kong to sing and make some money, but I didn't know that I would be doing this. They've held my passport and say I owe them money. Please help me. Call the police. I'm here against my will.'

One of the Chinese girls sitting on the couches quickly rose and disappeared through a door leading to the back of the house.

'Please, help me,' the black girl said, clutching Xuan Wu's sleeve. 'I'm a prisoner here. Tell the police. I don't want to be here.'

Xuan Wu gazed into her eyes and she went rigid. She flopped to sit on the couch, mesmerized.

A burly young Chinese rushed through the back door. He raced up to the black girl and she slowly turned to look at him, her eyes empty.

'She said she's happy to be working here,' Xuan Wu said to the guard in Chinese. 'She wants to give me special attention.'

'I'd like to visit with this lovely old man,' the black girl said in English. 'I hope he chooses me.'

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The young Chinese guard relaxed. 'You want to see Mr Wong?' he asked Xuan Wu.

'I haven't seen my old friend in years,' Xuan Wu said. 'I thought I'd pay him a visit before my grandson enjoys his birthday present. But after seeing this little black rose, I may give myself a present as well.' The Chinese girls on his arms pouted. 'Now, girls, don't worry, one is enough for this old man. I'll give you two to my grandson, and if you entertain him well, I'll have special little gift for both of you.' The two girls giggled again and nodded, sneaking delighted glances at Gold.

Play along, Xuan Wu said.

Gold forced a flush to his face and looked away, making the girls giggle even more. 'He's too old for his first time,' one of them said. 'He looks more than eighteen already.'

'He's been sheltered by his mother. I finally got him out of her clutches, the evil old dragon,' Xuan Wu said with good humour, and the two girls laughed again.

The guard bobbed his head, turned, and gestured towards the back of the house. 'We will prepare the girls for you while you visit with Mr Wong. Please pass me any weapons that you are holding.'

Both Xuan Wu and Gold raised their arms. 'No weapons,' Xuan Wu said.

The guard didn't attempt to search them. 'Come this way, then, sir.'

Gold desperately wanted to ask Xuan Wu what was going on as they followed the guard towards the back of the house, but he remembered his orders and remained silent, wondering.

The guard showed them into a bright and airy office containing an enormous rosewood desk. Small high windows allowed rays of afternoon sun to light up the hardwood parquet floor.

'Please, sit,' the guard said, gesturing towards a rosewood couch against one wall. 'I will serve tea. Which tea would the honoured guest prefer?'

'Tikuanyin,' Xuan Wu said as he and Gold sat on the couches.

The guard bobbed his head, 'the Master will be here shortly,' and went out.

'I think you will enjoy working here, Gold.' Xuan Wu studied the ink paintings on the wall across from them. 'I thought it was this particular demon that made the bet

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with you. I was right.'

Gold remained silent. He couldn't speak unless a question was asked of him, and Xuan Wu knew it.

'We have some time before the demon comes,' Xuan Wu said, still casual. 'He'll make us wait so that he will gain face. Do you think you will like working here?'

'That poor American girl is held here against her will!' Gold cried softly. 'We have to get her out of here!'

'Don't you want to know my connections with the owner of this establishment?'

'No,' Gold said. 'All I want to do is make sure that none of these women are here against their will. And to get that poor black girl out of here.'

'If you worked here, you could do that,' Xuan Wu said, studying the painting.

Gold silently considered his options, then nodded once sharply. 'I can help them if I'm working here. I can use my skills as a Shen to help them.'

'You are a very small Shen, Gold. I doubt if you could carry them very far. How will you get that girl all the way back to America?' Xuan Wu shifted slightly in his seat, making himself more comfortable. 'The owner probably wouldn't care if you took your pleasure with the girls when they're not working. You have the finest young women in Hong Kong here for the taking. This isn't like you at all.'

Gold dropped his head. 'I know.' He raised his head, and turned to see Xuan Wu, who still studied the painting. 'I suppose after being held in the Palace, and then Hell, against my will, I know what it is like to be a prisoner.'

'Silence,' Xuan Wu said softly. The demon approached.

The demon appeared in human form, round and jolly. He stopped dead and went completely white when he saw Xuan Wu and Gold. He spun to escape, but Xuan Wu quickly bound him and held him motionless.

Xuan Wu pulled himself to his feet and changed. He transformed from an old man into his usual human form; mid-forties, sculpted face, long hair, dark eyes. He strolled to the demon and held his hand in front of its face.

The demon's face went from horror to blank.

Xuan Wu moved his hand, and the demon followed, its eyes never moving from Xuan Wu's palm. Xuan Wu turned the demon and then walked towards the desk, his

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hand still in front of the demon's face. The demon followed like an automaton.

'This is the Number Twelve Son of the Demon King himself,' Xuan Wu said conversationally as he led the demon towards the desk. When they reached the desk he moved his hand so that the demon turned to face Gold. He dropped his hand and the demon remained perfectly still. 'How many girls are you holding here against their will, Twelve?'

'Thirteen, here,' the demon said.

'Other places?'

'I don't know.'

'More than twenty?'

'Yes,' the demon said.

'More than fifty?'

'Probably about fifty.'

Xuan Wu glanced at Gold. 'Fifty like that American girl.' He strode around the desk and fell into the large office chair, then placed both hands, palms down, on the desk. Not a single scrap of paper sat on the desk; its only residents were a large brush and ink set and a priceless jade ruyi, a sceptre that granted its owner fulfilment of his will.

'Number Twelve here,' Xuan Wu said, gesturing dismissively towards the hypnotized demon, 'has been planning for years to make an attempt against his father, the King of the Demons. He has amassed an army in the hills above Guangdong Province. Human and demon.'

Gold remained silent, wondering where this was going.

'Normally I let the demons sort this type of thing out among themselves,' Xuan Wu said. 'The current King has been around for a long time, though, and his behaviour has been reasonably honourable. His word is good and he doesn't create half-human demon hybrids to use as weapons against us.' Xuan Wu rose, walked back around the desk, and stood next to the demon still standing motionless in front of the desk. 'This one, however, is not particularly trustworthy and treats humans with contempt. If it were to gain the position of King, many humans would suffer.'

'You cannot interfere directly, my Lord,' Gold said. 'Celestial interference in

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demonic dominions is forbidden unless they attack us first.'

'I am well aware of that,' Xuan Wu said, studying the demon.

Gold blanched as he understood. 'No.'

'You may do your best to free the captive women while you work for the demon. If you require help doing this, I will help you. These women must be freed. But apart from that, all I want is for you to provide information. On the opium trade, on the tea trade, on the prostitution and organized crime, and particularly on the planned bid against the King. You are cunning, Gold, and your intelligence has been going to waste. I think now is a good time to begin using it.'

Gold hesitated, thinking. Then he nodded once. 'If you can help me, I think I can get some of them out.'

'Good.' Xuan Wu held out his hand, and a small black jade turtle appeared in it, hanging from a light gold chain. 'Take this. Connect with this jade, stone to stone. It will allow you to communicate with me. Be aware that if I am on duty to the Jade Emperor, the Celestial takes precedence. Even if the demon is about to take your head.'

'I understand, my Lord.' Gold took the turtle and slipped it around his neck. He had an inspiration; a black turtle around his neck was too obvious a giveaway to his connection with the Dark Lord. He absorbed the turtle and chain into his human form and wrapped them around the stone, deep inside his body where not even a demon could see.

'Good thinking, Gold, I think you will do well at this.' Xuan Wu held his hand in front of the demon's face. 'I am going to walk it back to where it entered the room. Then I am going to give you to it. You know how to behave. Ready?'

Gold returned to his seat. 'Ready.'

Xuan Wu walked the demon back to the door, and concentrated. Then he sat back on the rosewood chairs next to Gold.

The demon jerked to life, and saw them. It spun to run out again.

'Do not move,' Xuan Wu said.

The demon froze.

'I am not here to interfere in your dealings,' Xuan Wu said. He gestured dismissively towards Gold. 'This Shen has an honour debt to you, I believe. I caught

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him trying to steal the Great Seal of the Jade Emperor.'

The demon slowly turned back, its horrified expression changing to cunning.

'You are here to ensure the debt is paid?'

Xuan Wu rose. 'I am. That is all I am here for.' He waved one hand at Gold.

'This worthless stone is yours.'

The demon bent to study Gold, grinning with avarice. 'I will put it to good use, my Lord.'

'You are bound to this demon's servitude until the Celestial judges your debt discharged, stone,' Xuan Wu said. He disappeared.

Gold fell to his knees in front of the demon. 'I am yours. I can only trust that you will treat me well.'

'Can you take female form?' the demon said with barely controlled greed.

'Attractive female form?'

Gold grimaced. 'If I must. But my Lord.' He gazed up at the demon. 'I am sure I would be more useful managing your administrative dealings. As I am bound by the Celestial, I am completely trustworthy, and you can pass me the management of your accounts without concern.'

The demon straightened and studied Gold. 'You have a point. Managing the Little Brothers is a pain.' He gestured dismissively towards the desk. 'Behind the desk is a cabinet full of documents that need to be sorted, and in the basement there are outstanding reports of the activities of the organizations that need to be brought up to date. Can you do that?'

Gold rose and bowed slightly. 'I am more than capable. I can manage the whole operation with minimal supervision, my Lord. And you can trust me.'

'Sounds good, I ate the last manager of this particular House last week, he was skimming takings into a private account,' the demon said. 'You won't do that, will you?'

'I cannot,' Gold said. 'I am bound.'

The demon grinned, jolly. 'I think the Xuan Wu has given me a very useful little toy. You can handle all of this while I deal with more important matters.'

'How big is your operation here, Sir?' Gold said.

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'No idea, I haven't tallied the earnings in a while, it's too much trouble,' the demon said. 'You can tell me when you've worked it out.'

Gold bowed slightly again. 'I will be delighted to.'

The demon slapped Gold on the back. 'Let me show you where the documents are.'

\*\*\*

'Just relax,' Gold whispered.

Anne nodded, her eyes still closed. Her dark face was rigid with a combination of fear and determination. 'Do it.' She snapped open her eyes and grabbed Gold's hand. 'Thank you so much, Gold. For everything. I'll never forget you.'

Gold smiled and squeezed her hand. 'Give your little girl an extra hug for me.'

Anne nodded again and closed her eyes. Gold released her hand, put his own hand in front of her face, and willed her into the near-death state. She exhaled and went limp.

Gold reached into the table next to her and pulled out the opium pipe. The stem of the pipe was decorated with the faces of everyone who had died using it. He put a miniscule amount of opium into the bowl and set it burning. He carefully placed the pipe into her slack hand, then went back downstairs.

He sat at the desk in the demon's office and pulled out the records of the days' takings. He began to add the figures when the noises erupted outside the door.

One of the junior demon guards rapped on the door and charged in. 'We lost another one.'

'Damn,' Gold said, rising. 'Was it bad opium again?'

The demon gestured towards the door. 'No, I think she just took too much. Deliberate overdose.'

'Call the Master,' Gold said. He led the way up the stairs. 'Which one is it?'

'Anne,' the demon said, then disappeared into the back of the house to call the Master.

Gold knelt at Anne's side and held her hand.

The demon Master appeared next to Gold. 'Is she dead?'

'Yes, my Lord,' Gold said. 'Don't worry about it, I will take care of the body.'

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'Dump it in the Harbour or something,' the demon said. 'Damn! This black one was expensive. And popular. Where the hell are we going to get another one?'

Gold rose and turned. 'My Lord, we are losing too many to this. I think it would be better if we only used girls who choose to be here. The ones we hold against their will always end up killing themselves.'

'Deny the opium,' the demon said.

'If you deny the opium then they are too distraught to serve the customers,' Gold said. 'Either way we lose. I think the best option is just to use girls who want to do it. There's plenty over the border who will give anything to come and work in Hong Kong.'

'Very well,' the demon said with resignation.

'Permission to release the rest of the girls as we find replacements for them,' Gold said. 'At the rate we're losing them, the growing pile of corpses will attract the attention of the authorities.'

'I pay the police very well to leave us alone,' the demon said.

'I am not talking about the police.'

The demon was silent as he understood. 'The Celestials won't intervene. It's none of their business.'

'If enough humans are suffering, a Celestial may take it upon himself to do something,' Gold said. 'I recommend that you release the rest of the girls, my Lord.'

'Very well. Take care of it, Gold. I have other, more important things to attend to.'

'My Lord.' Gold bowed slightly. 'Don't worry, it will all be taken care of.' He ventured a question. 'How soon will you make your bid, my Lord?'

The demon straightened and studied Gold intensely.

Gold kept his face carefully blank and harmless.

'Another two, three weeks, that's all,' the demon said. 'Then I may promote you to oversee all of my Earthly establishments.'

Gold bowed. 'I would be profoundly honoured, my Lord.'

The demon chuckled. 'A demon King with a pet Shen. Who would believe it?'

'You will be the most powerful and ruthless King that Hell has ever seen,' Gold

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said.

The demon laughed and slapped Gold on the back. 'You are worth more to me as a slave than any wife of the Tiger.'

Gold bowed again. 'I thank you, my Lord.'

'Now sort this mess out,' the demon said, gesturing towards Anne. 'Get rid of it and the rest of the slaves. You're right, they're more trouble than they're worth.' He hesitated. 'But if you could find another black one that wants to do the job, I'll give you a special bonus.'

Gold grinned. 'I'll see what I can do.'

The demon disappeared. Gold quickly closed the bedroom door. He stood in the centre of the room, lowered his head, and concentrated.

Yes? Xuan Wu said.

I have another one, my Lord, Gold said.

I'm sending somebody right now.

A tall European woman with short brown hair, wearing a long full Western-style dress, appeared next to Gold. Without saying a word, she moved to Anne and took her hand.

'Well done,' the European woman said. She glanced up at Gold. 'My name's Meredith, I'm one of the Dark Lord's lieutenants.'

Gold couldn't hide his amusement.

'Westerners can gain Immortality as well, Gold,' Meredith said, turning back to Anne. She put her hand over Anne's face. 'Good job.' She concentrated, and Anne jerked as if shocked, then took a deep gasping breath. Anne's eyes snapped open and she cast around.

'It's all right, dear,' Meredith said. 'I'm taking you home.'

Meredith and Anne both disappeared.

Gold lifted the opium pipe and returned it to the cupboard, then headed back downstairs. He had a lot of recruiting to do.

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The door flew open and one of the demon guards raced into Gold's office. 'It's on!'

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Gold shot upright and strode around the desk. 'Pull in all the guards. Put them on the doors. Throw out all the customers. Round up all the girls, and put them into the basement.'

'Sir,' the demon said, and raced out again.

My Lord Xuan Wu, Gold said.

I know, Xuan Wu said. Keep your head down.

Gold went out of the office to a scene of chaos. The demon guards roughly escorted the protesting customers out the door. Some of the men were still only half dressed.

'What the hell do you think you're doing!' the Chief of Police shouted, pulling at his trousers. 'I'll see you shut down for this!'

'Get them out,' Gold said, then rushed to help the guards escort the girls downstairs.

He counted the screaming girls as they passed him. Damn; three short. He raced up the stairs.

'Get into the basement with the girls and guard them!' he shouted to a confused demon.

He went through the upper storey, door by door. He had to manhandle a couple of European traders, lift them by the scruff of the neck, and throw them down the stairs. He ignored their shouts of abuse as he found two of the remaining girls and ordered them into the basement.

He went through every room on the level, searching, and still couldn't find the last one. Eventually he stopped and concentrated, sending out tendrils of awareness.

He could sense the demons coming, and felt a bolt of shock. None of the approaching demons was the Master of the House. Looked like the existing King had successfully fought off the coup.

Gold didn't have time to consider his newfound freedom. He just cast around for the girl, and found her hiding under one of the beds. He ran into the room, bent, and pulled her out by the wrist. She sobbed hysterically, slapping at him and attempting to escape.

Gold had no choice; he used his power to calm her. She went limp in his arms.

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He lifted her, and carried her downstairs into the basement. When he was in the basement he stopped and passed her to one of the guards.

Everybody in the basement went quiet when they saw Gold. They stood among the stacked tea chests, eyes wide with fear, and waited.

'It seems that our Master has lost,' Gold said. 'The new Master is on his way.'

'The Master lost?' one of the demon guards said.

Gold nodded.

The guard pulled out his sword, held it in front of him, turned it in his hands, and fell on it. He dissipated into feathery black streamers.

A couple of the girls flopped to sit on tea chests and wept.

'I'm going upstairs,' Gold said. 'I'll talk to them. Stay here.'

'Gold,' one of the girls said.

Gold turned back.

'We trust you,' she said.

Gold shook his head and headed up the stairs.

\*\*\*

Gold was sitting quietly in his office when the demon appeared. Gold rose, walked around the desk, and bowed. 'Good day, sir.'

The demon was in human form, appearing as a Chinese in his mid-thirties, slim and good-looking. 'You are Gold?'

'I am, your honour,' Gold said.

The demon grinned. 'Number Twelve's pet Shen.'

'No more, I believe, my Lord,' Gold said.

'You're free now, stone,' the demon said. 'What are you doing here?'

'Waiting to see the new proprietor of this establishment,' Gold said. 'I have enjoyed working with the women, and if you are as understanding as the previous owner, I may choose to stay. What is your honoured name, sir?'

'I'm the One Hundred and Twenty-Second son of the King,' the demon said. 'You can call me Mr Wong. I provided my father with a great deal of assistance in the recent altercation, and I have been granted all of Twelve's property as reward.'

'I will show you the deeds, sir,' Gold said.

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The demon gestured dismissively. 'Let's see.'

Gold opened a cabinet behind the desk and pulled out the books. 'These are all of the establishments possessed by the late Number Twelve. There are thirteen brothels similar to this one. There are three export traders in Hong Kong, and six in Guangdong.' Gold flipped through the papers. 'A few other minor holdings, real estate, restaurants, businesses.' He pulled out a set of books tied with a red ribbon. 'This is details of the underworld activity; the names of the gangsters, their ranks, and the amount of protection money they are collecting from the businesses.'

'How much is it all worth?' the demon said.

'Seventy-five million Hong Kong dollars,' Gold said.

The demon whistled through his teeth. 'Yes.'

'The girls are hiding in the basement, sir,' Gold said. 'They are delightful ladies, all working here of their own free will, not even held by debt. Would you like me to call them up, you can inspect them, try some of them out? They'd probably like to meet you.'

'Go right ahead,' the demon said, moving to the desk to inspect the books. He spoke without turning away from the deeds. 'Seventy-five million. Excellent.' He glanced up at Gold. 'How many women?'

'Fifteen here, my Lord,' Gold said.

The demon's gaze became intense. 'All human?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Oh, yes,' the demon said with relish. 'Humans. Any spare?'

'My Lord?'

The demon focussed on Gold. 'Are any of the women excess to our needs? Not satisfactory in performance? Do any of them need to be ...' He licked his lips. 'Punished?'

'Every single woman here is a good worker and well behaved, my Lord,' Gold said. 'None of them are excess.'

The demon shuffled through the books. 'I think I shall go and inspect my other properties. My other women.' He glanced up at Gold. 'Have the women here ready for me when I return. I will inspect them last.'

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'My Lord,' Gold said.

Gold watched the demon depart, and waited until it was a good distance away. He turned and quickly scabbled through the cabinet behind him. For a horrible moment he couldn't find what he was looking for; then pulled it with triumph from the back. He unrolled the document; the deed to the tea plantation in Fujian, the one that the previous demon owner had used in their bet. Gold rolled the parchment up and shoved it into his human body. He slipped down the stairs to the basement.

'Girls, listen,' he said. 'This one is a bad one. He will hurt you. Come with me, I can help you.' Gold felt a rush of remorse, he couldn't do anything for the girls in the other houses. He straightened. He would do what he could for these ones. 'Come with me, I'll take you to Guangdong train station, and you can go home.'

The girls silently followed him up the stairs. They grabbed what they could and ran.

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## 1851

The tea pickers sang a love song as they plucked the tea shoots on the terraced hillside. The mist had burned from the hills and the morning sun shone over the gardens. Gold sat on his terrace, sipped his tea, and sighed with bliss.

A demon servant raced up the hill towards him. 'My Lord Gold.'

Gold didn't rise. 'Yes, Fifteen?'

'We have visitors.'

Gold shot to his feet.

'Do not be concerned, my Lord,' the demon servant said. 'It is a human. A European. He is accompanied by a female dragon, who has given me a message to pass to you.' The demon held out a note.

Gold sat back down, took the paper, and scanned it.

This European knows nothing of Shen, but he has a noble heart and his cause is worthy. Please help us to free our nation from the slavery of the opium trade.

Jade.

Gold snorted with amusement. After all this time, she was looking for him. He glanced up at the demon servant. 'Show them up to the house, and tell the maids to prepare guest rooms. How big is their entourage?'

'The Dragon Princess, the European, and three servants,' the demon said.

'The Princess is acting as interpreter?'

 Gold said, surprised.

'This European does not require an interpreter,' the demon said. 'He speaks High Beijing dialect like a native.'

'Interesting.'

A flash of light erupted from the hillside below them; the sun reflecting off steel. Gold scanned down the paths leading to his manor, and saw them. Two sedan chairs, and three walking servants.

'I wonder what she really wants,' Gold said. He smiled slightly. 'Maybe her memory of me is one of the best she has.'

'I believe it is something to do with the tea,' the servant said. He bowed slightly. 'By your leave.'

'Go.'

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Gold entertained Jade and Mr Fortune on the terrace in the sunshine. The European was tall and gangly, in his late thirties, with light brown hair and intense blue eyes.

'So that is all we want,' Jade said. 'Tea seeds.'

Robert Fortune leaned forward over the table to speak earnestly to Gold. 'Tea is the root of all the problems in China. The opium to tea trade is killing your people. If we can take the tea trade out, then the British won't be bringing the opium into China.'

'If I let you have the tea seeds, I am giving you the seeds to my own downfall,' Gold said. 'You won't need to buy my tea any more.'

'We've been planting the tea in India,' Fortune said, 'and the results are unsatisfactory. The plantations in Ceylon are performing slightly better, but we will never have the same quality as you, the climate just isn't suitable.'

'So?' Gold said.

'So, your tea will always be superior,' Fortune said. 'You can provide the finest China tea to the gourmet market, at a higher price. Our tea will be the low grade drink for the poor of England.'

'The China tea trade will continue,' Gold said. 'They will still bring the opium in.'

'Not if they are dealing in smaller quantities,' Fortune said. 'They will be able to find enough silver to pay for the tea if they deal in premium quantities.'

Gold sipped his tea and considered the proposition. Fortune was offering him a great deal of money for the tea seeds. He already had seeds from a number of different plantations; he was offering Gold even more money for Drum Mountain's famed silver-tipped tea, only produced in this part of northern Fujian province. Gold glanced up at Fortune's earnest face. The European really did have the best interests of China at heart; a refreshing change after so much of what had happened during the Wars. The Europeans had bludgeoned the Dowager Empress into granting more and more concessions; half of Shanghai was now European concessions. The entire island of Hong Kong had been ceded to Britain; and Macau to Portugal.

The Empress was weak and the foreigners were strong. If they wished, they

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could take over China as easily as they had gained control of India. But if they could grow their own tea, then it would not be worth the effort. China had nothing else the Westerners wanted.

'I'll do it,' Gold said. 'I'll provide you with all the seeds and seedlings you need, just tell me how many.'

'I also need trained staff to tend the plants,' Fortune said. 'You know that what I am doing is highly illegal, and any workers found leaving the country to assist me would be sentenced to death if discovered.'

Please provide him with some demons, Gold, Jade said.

'Very well,' Gold said. 'For the Lady.' He smiled at Jade, but her expression was remote. 'I will provide you with three of my staff to help tend the plants.'

Fortune threw himself to his feet with enthusiasm and grabbed Gold's hand, shaking it until Gold felt he would shake it off. 'Thank you. You have saved your country. You will be a national hero.'

I'm a hero, Gold said to Jade.

She gazed directly into his eyes, her pale serene face expressionless. Don't even think about it.

Fortune turned to Jade and took both her hands in his, then kissed her on the cheek. 'Thank you so much, Lady Jade.'

Jade was obviously desperately embarrassed and blushed furiously.

'Oh, sorry,' Fortune said. He released Jade and returned to his chair. 'I forgot.'

'That's quite all right, Robert,' Jade said, still blushing. 'I know that Europeans do things differently.'

'I cannot thank you enough,' Fortune said to Jade.

Oh, I see, Gold said, making no attempt to hide his amusement.

Nothing happening, Jade said, her lie obvious to Gold. Europeans are just more ... demonstrative.

Fortune raised his tea cup. 'Here's to a prosperous future for the people of China.'

Jade and Gold raised their tea as well. 'And freedom from the tyranny of opium.'

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### 1903

The dining room doors flew open and a demon servant raced in, then fell to his knees, quivering.

'What?' Gold said.

Xuan Wu stormed in behind the servant and stopped when he saw Gold. He was in his human form, mid-forties, wearing black silk robes.

'Everybody out,' Xuan Wu said.

All of the demon servants and two of Gold's wives scurried out of the room.

Gold quickly stood, then fell to his knees. 'Wen Sui, Wen Sui, Wen Wen Sui.'

'Rise,' Xuan Wu said. He gestured towards Gold's chair. 'Sit.'

Gold flopped into the chair.

Xuan Wu didn't sit; he clasped his hands behind his back. 'How did you come by this tea plantation?'

'When Number Twelve was ousted, I lifted the deed for this property,' Gold said. 'Nobody else knew that Twelve owned it.'

'Theft,' Xuan Wu said.

Gold raised his hands, palm up. 'The new owner didn't even know that the plantation existed. I prefer to think that I inherited it.'

'Tell me about Robert Fortune,' Xuan Wu said. He sat in one of the chairs and conjured a pot of tea for himself.

'He did a great thing,' Gold said with pride. 'He worked to free our nation from the tyranny of the tea and opium trade.'

'You were aware that the Celestial has forbidden interference in human affairs?'

'If the human asks for assistance, is it interference?'

Xuan Wu poured himself some tea. 'You are very sheltered here in the hills of Fujian. Let me tell you what has been happening elsewhere.'

'Please,' Gold said. 'I would love to hear.'

'After the tea was grown successfully in India, the English no longer required our tea. The trade trickled down to nothing.'

'I know,' Gold moaned. 'I am reduced to selling on the local market. It's very hard, I had to dismiss half my workers. I may lose part of the plantation.' He brightened.

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'But that means less opium.'

'True,' Xuan Wu said. 'So the streets of the southern provinces were full of addicts with no supply. The tea merchants were forced to dismiss many of their staff. Suddenly the streets of Guangdong were full of addicts in withdrawal, and workers with no livelihood.'

Gold was silent. He hadn't seen it that way.

'When there is poverty there is unrest. The obvious ones to blame were the foreigners. Many of the homeless men joined secret societies of martial arts practitioners. They worshiped me.'

Gold began to feel that things were once again not going his way.

'They believed that I protected them against the Westerner's weapons,' Xuan Wu said. 'They attacked the foreigners in their enclaves.' He leaned back and glared at Gold. 'The Dowager Empress supported them. They killed every foreigner they met. Women and children as well.'

'They were freeing our nation,' Gold said. 'I have heard that the foreigners were carving up our country.'

'The Empress fled.' Xuan Wu thumped his fist on the table. 'The foreigners put down the rebellion and the Empress ran.' He leaned back and sighed with exasperation. 'The Westerners have taken over. Heavenly Mandate has been removed. The Empress will last no more than a couple of years. Very soon she will poison her own son to stop him from taking control when she dies, because she fears that he will bring China the reforms that it so desperately needs. She will set up a three-year-old as Emperor, to keep this country stunted and backwards.'

Gold was silent.

'The Empire has already fallen, Gold,' Xuan Wu said. 'You are a very small Shen. You do not know the extent of the suffering that our country is about to encounter. Millions of people will starve to death.'

'I have no vision of the future, my Lord,' Gold said. 'I am too small.'

'Be glad of that. If the tea trade had not stopped, it is possible that we may have maintained enough control of our economy to lessen this disaster. It is impossible to tell how much the theft of the tea contributed to these catastrophes.'

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Gold moaned. 'I helped do this.'

'The Jade Emperor would like to speak with you.' Xuan rose and pulled out a vermilion scroll bound with gold ribbon — an edict from the Jade Emperor.

Gold shot to his feet, then fell to his knees. 'Wen Sui, Wen Sui, Wen Wen Sui.'

'Present yourself at the Imperial Cell Complex in the Celestial Palace,' Xuan Wu said. 'You are to be held at the mercy of the Jade Emperor.'

'This small Shen is honoured.' Gold rested his forehead on the floor. 'No.'

'I will give you a day to organize your affairs,' Xuan Wu said. 'Do you have any children?'

'No, my Lord,' Gold said without rising. 'But I have three wives.'

'Human?'

'Yes.'

'They will never see you again,' Xuan Wu said without emotion. 'Say your goodbyes. Settle your affairs. I will be acting as Celestial General when next you see me.' His voice softened. 'Rise, Gold.'

Gold pulled himself to his feet and wiped his face.

'I can understand why you have done this, but the Jade Emperor is furious,' Xuan Wu said. 'You have openly disobeyed an Imperial Edict. You have meddled in human affairs. Be ready, stone, this will very bad for you.'

'Will I be executed?'

'If you are very lucky,' Xuan Wu said, 'you will.'

'And if I am unlucky?'

Xuan Wu disappeared.

\*\*\*

Jade sat on the floor of the cell and buried her head in her knees. 'I am so sorry, Gold.'

'It wasn't your fault.' Gold moved closer to the steel bars that separated their cells. 'You didn't force me. We both thought we were doing the right thing.'

Jade looked up at him, her face streaked with tears. 'You think we'll be executed?'

'The Dark Lord said that if we're lucky we will.'

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Jade buried her face in her green silk robes and wept.

'On your feet,' the guard said.

Gold glanced up; the guard stood next to the open door of Gold's cell. The guard moved to Jade's cell door and opened it as well.

'Come on,' the guard said. 'The Celestial will see you now.'

'Both of us?' Gold said.

'Apparently you are to be sentenced together,' the guard said.

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The guard escorted them to the small audience chamber. Obviously they weren't important enough for anything grander.

The Jade Emperor sat on the throne at the end of the chamber. A set of gold embroidered screens with imperial five-toed dragons adorned the wall behind the throne.

Xuan Wu stood at the Emperor's right hand in full Celestial General form, his dark ugly face fierce and menacing. The Seven Stars sword rested in its scabbard on his back.

Jade and Gold fell to their knees and touched their foreheads to the floor. 'Wen Sui, Wen Sui, Wen Wen Sui.'

'Rise,' the Jade Emperor said. He had taken human form for the audience. He appeared as a slim, elegant gentleman of about sixty wearing an unadorned robe of imperial golden yellow. His long grey hair was tied in a simple topknot, held with a wooden spike. He watched the two Shen prostrate themselves with amusement.

Jade and Gold rose and carefully didn't look into the Emperor's eyes.

'Read the charges,' the Emperor said. He raised a tea cup from a small table next to the throne and sipped the tea.

The guard behind Jade and Gold moved forward to stand next to them. He opened a scroll. 'Princess Jade of the Dragons.'

'This small Shen is present and honoured, Celestial Majesty,' Jade said.

'Golden Boy, child of the Jade Building Block.'

'This small Shen is present and honoured, Celestial Majesty,' Gold said.

'These Shen are charged with interfering in Earthly matters. They aided a Westerner in the theft of one of the Middle Kingdom's greatest treasures. This

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interference was in direct contravention of an order issued to all Shen by your own Celestial Majesty that Shen were not to interfere in Earthly affairs during this time of unrest.'

'How do you plead?' the Emperor said, returning the tea cup to the table.

'Guilty as charged, Celestial Majesty,' Jade whispered.

'Golden Boy?' The Jade Emperor's amused expression didn't shift.

'Guilty as charged, Majesty.'

'No argument, stone?'

'It was a foolish thing to do, Majesty.'

'What shall I do with them, Ah Wu?' the Emperor said without looking at Xuan Wu.

'I'll take them, Majesty,' Xuan Wu said. 'I may have need of their abilities.'

'Oh, come on, Ah Wu,' the Emperor said. He raised his tea cup and swept his long sleeve out of the way. 'You have an army on the Mountain at Wudang, you have the entire Northern Celestial Heavens, and you claim need of these two? I think not.'

'Celestial Majesty,' Xuan Wu said.

'You always were too soft, Ah Wu.'

'My nature is Yin, Majesty.'

'That it is. Summon the Azure Dragon of the East,' the Emperor said.

Jade stiffened and Gold squeaked.

Qing Long appeared next to Jade and Gold. He fell to his knees and touched his head to the floor. 'Wen sui, wen sui, wen wen sui.'

'Rise,' the Emperor said.

Qing Long rose so that he stood beside Jade and Gold. He glanced at them, his long serene face emotionless. He was in his Celestial Form; ten feet tall, slim and elegant, with flowing long turquoise hair and a robe of shimmering silver embossed with a turquoise scale design.

'These two have offended Heaven,' the Jade Emperor said. 'You want them?'

Qing Long folded his hands into his long sleeves and studied the dragon and stone next to him. 'Are they good for anything?'

'Jade Dragon, list your accomplishments,' the guard said.

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'Embroidery, ink painting, pipa, erhu ...' Jade began.

'No!' Qing Long snapped. 'Useful stuff. Any Earthly qualifications?'

'I can read and write, add and subtract, I know all of the Laws and the Precepts,' Jade said stiffly.

'Stone of Gold,' the guard said.

'I am a stone. We are renowned for our mathematical abilities. I also know all of the Laws and Precepts,' Gold said.

Qing Long turned back to the Jade Emperor. 'I'll take them, Majesty.'

'Write out an edict, Ah Wu, and give this worthless pair to Lord Qing Long,' the Jade Emperor said.

'As you wish, Celestial Majesty,' Xuan Wu said.

The Emperor put his teacup carefully on the side table. 'The Jade Girl and the Golden Boy are to serve the Azure Dragon of the East until I decree otherwise. They are both to retain human form,' he glanced at them, 'constantly, day and night, while they are serving him, unless he permits otherwise.'

Jade and Gold didn't look at each other but they both broadcast complete mortification. Human form, twenty-four hours a day? Eating, sleeping, washing, all of the human inconveniences ... This was worse than being bound in True Form.

The Jade Emperor watched their reactions carefully. 'Concluded. Dismissed.'

Qing Long bowed deeply, his hands still in his sleeves. 'Celestial Majesty.' He beckoned towards the two Shen quivering next to him. 'Come with me. I have a lot of work for you to do.'

Jade and Gold both touched their foreheads to the floor. 'Thank you for your merciful correction of our erroneous ways.'

'Next time I will not be so lenient,' the Jade Emperor said. 'Take this as your final warning, both of you. Next time it will be a very long visit to Hell.'

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**1969**

Gold came into the room they shared and flopped onto his small bunk. He desperately wanted to take True Form but he was stuck as a human. Even worse he was hungry, and badly in need of a bath.

'You all right?' Jade said from her own bunk where she had curled up under the covers, unseen.

'I'll live,' Gold said. 'I haven't slept in days.'

'If we're lucky he'll work us to death,' Jade said, her voice muffled by the harsh blankets.

'Hell would be ten times better than this,' Gold moaned into his pillow.

'You ever considered suicide?' Jade said.

Gold was silent.

'Me too.'

'We'd just spend a few years in Hell and then end up back here with our sentences extended,' Gold said. 'Complete waste of time.'

'Hell would be a holiday compared to this.'

'I had to go through every single contract in his records room. Every single one. Looking for loopholes. Some of them are more than five hundred years old.' Gold stretched and his joints cracked. 'It took me three weeks. I had to sleep on the floor in there. I ache all over. I hate being human.'

Jade threw the covers off and staggered to Gold's bunk. Before he could protest she flopped to sit next to him on the bed, lifted his plain white cotton shirt, and rubbed his back.

Gold relaxed. 'Thanks, Jade.'

'Nothing more,' she said. 'Friends.'

'Friends. Frankly, I'm too exhausted to be interested, anyway.'

'Me too. It's been ages.'

'How long have we been here?'

'Must be close on seventy years,' Jade said with a sigh. 'We've served him well. We perform our duties diligently and without complaint. When will we be freed?'

'When the Celestial Majesty wills it, and not before,' Gold said. 'I'm really past

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caring anyway. My human form is aging. I didn't know that I could die of old age in this form. It will be an interesting experience.'

'How long do humans live here on the Celestial Plane? That never occurred to me. I thought the wrinkles were from overwork. I'm getting old.'

'I think humans live about twice as long on the Celestial Plane,' Gold said. 'Some of them have a name for it. "Shangri-La". I don't know about stones or dragons, but we both seem to be growing old.'

Jade stopped rubbing Gold's back and moved back to sit on her own bunk. Gold hoisted himself with effort, fell sit next to her, and massaged her shoulders. She stretched her neck beneath his hands. 'Thanks.'

'I've seen some of the other poor workers here, the tame demons particularly, and compared to them our working conditions are luxurious. At least Qing Long allows us to sleep.'

'I know,' Jade said. 'I suppose we'll stay here serving Lord Qing Long until we die as humans.'

'Frankly, I'm past caring,' Gold returned to flop on his bed again. 'It's all the same to me.'

Jade fell back onto her pillow. 'Me too.'

'At least I have your friendship,' Gold said into his pillow. 'I don't know what I'd do without you to talk to, Jade. I really appreciate it.'

'I feel the same way, my friend,' Jade said, but Gold was already asleep.

\*\*\*

'Why do you drag those two little Shen around with you everywhere you go?' the Red Phoenix of the South said. She banged her tile on the table, and the colours in the scarlet fabric of her robe rippled. 'Pung.'

'Shit,' the White Tiger said. 'Yeah, Ah Qing, there's no shortage of servants here. There's nothing for them to do while you're visiting. Why the hell don't you just leave them in the East?'

Qing Long glanced at Jade and Gold who knelt to one side watching the game without interest. 'Aren't they decorative, though? So pretty. And I love the way people react when they discover who they are.'

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Xuan Wu lifted a tile from the wall and checked it. He slammed it into the discard at the centre of the table, making the other tiles rattle.

'They look awful,' the Phoenix said. 'What have you been doing to them?'

'They're just soft,' Qing Long said. 'A proper day's work is a new experience for both of them.'

'You'd better be sure her father isn't too upset,' the White Tiger said.

Qing Long raised a tile from the wall and waved it airily. 'Frankly I don't think the Dragon King is even aware of her existence. She's number eighty something, a long way down the list.' He slammed the tile onto the table. 'Damn.'

Jade sagged slightly over her knees.

'Pung,' the Phoenix said, and snatched the tile Qing Long had just discarded.

The Tiger groaned.

The Phoenix shuffled her tiles, her face alight with grim satisfaction. She pulled one tile out of the group and put it into the discard.

'Sik,' Xuan Wu said, and flipped his tiles so that the others could see them.

All three of the other Shen groaned and tipped their tiles over.

'Another round,' Xuan Wu said.

'I'd rather hear about the West,' the Phoenix said. She opened the drawer in the table and counted her cash, then handed Xuan Wu a gold coin. 'You've reported to the Celestial. Tell us about it.'

'Yeah, I'd like to know what happened as well,' the Tiger said. He handed Xuan Wu three gold coins. 'You've been gone an awful long time, Ah Wu, was it really worth it?'

'It was worth it,' Xuan Wu said. 'Let's sit beside the pool, I'll tell you about it in True Form while I have a swim. I wasn't able to take True Form nearly as much as I would have liked in England, and I'm using every opportunity.'

'My Lord,' the Phoenix said.

They rose and sat at a table near the pool bar. The demon from the bar quickly brought drinks for them.

Xuan Wu took True Form; he changed to the reptilian combination of black serpent and turtle. The two reptiles separated and the turtle slid into the pool.

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'You'd live in that pool if you had the chance,' the Tiger growled. He took tiger form and flopped to lie sideways. He stretched, sheathing and unsheathing his claws.

The Phoenix and Dragon both remained in human form and sat at the table.

The Serpent stretched out on the warm pavers. 'I'd been watching England for a while. I went there to learn two things: one, how long I could stay so far from my Centre without suffering unduly. None of us had tried this, and it was an interesting experiment.'

'But you're the only one really big enough to do it for two years straight,' the Tiger said. 'You spent five years there, and only came back twice.'

'I proved that it can be done. The second thing I wanted to learn was the impact of the changes in society that have been happening the last few years. It was most enlightening.'

'Tell us,' the Phoenix said. 'What did you learn? Did you have much difficulty living as one of them?'

'I had planned to live as a European, so that I could merge into the culture,' Xuan Wu said. 'I couldn't do it. I couldn't hold the shape for long stretches. Eventually I had to take my usual human form.' The Serpent raised its head slightly. 'I experienced racism for the first time in my history. It was most unpleasant. That was the worst part about being there.'

The Tiger chuckled. 'Well, you're home now, you collected your doctor or degree or whatever that thing was, gathered plenty of information, and the Jade Emperor is mightily glad to see you back.'

'All of us are,' the Phoenix said. 'It was extremely worrying to have you so far away. The demons could have attacked us, and it would have taken you days to return.'

'Hell has been quiet, I've been watching,' Xuan Wu said. 'The Jade Emperor wouldn't have sent me if we thought there was any danger. With modern transport the travelling time is only hours, now, in human form. The world is shrinking. We may even begin to see powerful demons and Shen from other Centres come and visit us in China. The Jade Emperor and I wanted to see what was happening in Europe. I may visit America next. And it was a PhD, a Doctorate in Philosophy, and you can call me Doctor John Chen, now.'

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'Doctor Serpent,' Qing Long said under his breath. The Serpent fixed its small black eyes onto him and he looked away.

'An English name as well, Ah Wu?' the Tiger said with disbelief. 'Turncoat. Did you meet any Western Shen? What did they have to say when they saw you?'

'Now there's a strange thing.' The Serpent coiled its body and raised its head. 'I did not encounter a single Western Shen the entire time I was there. Demons, yes. Western demons are extremely interesting. In many ways similar to ours; in many ways different. But Shen; no.'

'Did you see any of those new people in London? The ones we've heard about?' the Phoenix said.

'Hippies,' Xuan Wu said. 'I joined a commune for a while during semester break. They are searching for the Tao. They are following the Hindu and Buddhist Scriptures, they have Gurus. They are regarded as highly fanatical and dangerous. Because they search for the Tao.'

The Tiger chuckled.

'One of the Gurus tried to show me the error of my ways, and put me onto the correct path towards Enlightenment,' Xuan Wu said with amusement. The Serpent lowered its head onto the paving. 'Apparently knowing some Chinese Taoism is a great help in my search for the True Way.'

The Tiger laughed, his feline vocal chords making his voice a throaty growl. 'I'm sure you were suitably humble and attempted to learn from the Sage.'

'Of course.'

'And the verdict?'

'He said with exasperation that I would never get there.'

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**1992**

Gold hefted the scrolls and continued towards the Records room. The corridor appeared to be an open air breezeway, about twenty feet wide, constructed entirely of milky translucent white crystal. The walls of water held at bay on either side of the walkway were the only indicator that the Dragon's Palace was on the sea floor.

Gold heard voices down the corridor in front of him and stopped. He recognized Qing Long's voice and sagged. There was a loud rattle of scales, partially absorbed by the thick water on either side of the corridor; the Dragon was in True Form.

Gold fell to his knees and placed the box of scrolls onto the tiles in front of him.

The Dragon had taken his smallest True Form; only four metres long. His silver and turquoise scales glittered as he glided down the hall towards Gold without touching the floor. Xuan Wu in human form walked beside the Dragon.

'But why me?' the Dragon said. 'The workings of the female human mind are as mysterious to me as they are to you. Ask the Tiger.'

Xuan Wu made a soft sound of disdain. 'If I were to use the Tiger's advice she would leave me immediately.'

'The Phoenix has had human wives.'

'She hasn't taken male human form in more than four hundred years, and you know it. And don't suggest the Jade Emperor, his family is about the most dysfunctional on the entire Celestial Plane.'

'Only you could say that and get away with it, Ah Wu,' the Dragon said. He stopped and settled to the floor when he saw Gold kneeling on the tiles. 'What are you doing here?'

'I finished these contracts and I was returning them to the records room,' Gold said without looking up.

The Dragon glanced at Xuan Wu, his turquoise eyes flashing in the reflected ripples of the water. 'This is the one you should be asking, Ah Wu. It holds the record for seducing the greatest number of Shen on the Celestial. There are very few small Shen anywhere that have not seen the underside of its sheets.'

Xuan Wu studied Gold expressionlessly, his dark eyes piercing. He thought for a while, then appeared to come to a conclusion. 'Lend it to me for a week or so. Let me

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talk to it.'

The Dragon turned back to Gold. 'Return those scrolls to the Records room, then present yourself at the Hall of Undersea Delights. If you mention to anybody the purpose of this trip, I will eat you myself.'

Gold bobbed over his knees. 'I understand, My Lord.'

'Go.'

Gold rose, picked up the box, stole a quick glance at Xuan Wu's fierce face, and hurried away.

\*\*\*

The Celestial Mountain of Wudangshan was green and cool in the morning light. Clinging mist hid the lower steps of the seven peaks. Gold and Xuan Wu sat in a small pavilion overlooking a misty gorge and shared tea. The mist carried the scent of pine and spruce through the open moon gate.

A bird sang nearby, then a shout echoed from one of the further peaks; a group of Xuan Wu's Dark Disciples had begun their morning martial arts training.

Gold passed the tea cup to Xuan Wu.

'I met her in Florida. She was singing. I had never heard anything like it.'

'You'd never heard Western opera before?' Gold said.

'Of course I had. But this was different.' Xuan Wu studied his tea cup, his face rigid with control. He glanced up and looked into Gold's eyes. 'Her voice went straight through me, like an arrow. Pleasure and pain.'

'That can happen, my Lord.'

'And then I met her at the back stage party, and it was ...' He was obviously lost for words, then gathered himself. 'She is French-Canadian. She has courage, and spirit, a spark you don't often see in humans. She lives for her Art, and she sings like the Heavens. She has a temper that even I find intimidating.' He sighed. 'She is wonderful.'

Gold poured the tea. 'I think I understand. When you encountered this with other human women, what did you do? What mistakes did you make? Human women are different to Shen, particularly animal Shen like dragons. They must be approached more cautiously.'

'I have never loved a human woman.'

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Gold stopped with the tea pot halfway to his tea cup. He glanced up at Xuan Wu. The Dark Lord's face was rigid with misery.

'You are one of the oldest of us all, my Lord. You have been around since the Dawn of Creation; you are North Wind. I have heard that you were already old when humans began to walk the Earth.'

'And I have never loved a human woman.'

Gold poured the tea. 'This one must be exceptional.'

Xuan Wu sighed. 'She is.'

'Well then, let's win her for you.'

'No deception. No use of the fact that I am a Shen. I want to win her as a human man. I want you to help win her as me, not doing what you would do, but help me to avoid mistakes I could make because she is human and therefore different.' Xuan Wu sagged slightly. 'I do not want to lose her.'

'When she finds out what you really are, it may lose her forever, my Lord. Your True Form is ...' Gold hesitated.

'I am well aware of the fact that my True Form is one of the ugliest in Creation,' Xuan Wu said evenly. 'Even without the Serpent, I am truly horrifying.'

'Without the Serpent?'

'I have no idea where it has gone, Gold. I have searched the planet, from Pole to Pole, and it does not answer the Turtle's calls. Right now I am only yin Turtle. The yang Serpent is out there somewhere, hiding.'

'I had not heard about this happening, my Lord.'

Xuan Wu looked directly into Gold's eyes. 'And you will not share it. The residents of Hell must not know about this.'

'I understand. You have my word, I will tell no one. When did this happen?'

'About fifteen years ago. Nineteen seventy three.'

'Has this happened before, my Lord?'

Xuan Wu turned his tea cup in his long fingers. 'No.'

'That may explain some of the strange weather patterns in the last ten years. The Serpent affects the weather.'

'I am well aware of my own abilities.'

---

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'Apologies, my Lord, you are the only Shen who is two creatures. It must be very difficult for you, being in two pieces with one half gone.'

'You have no idea.'

Gold straightened and changed the subject. 'So. This woman. Tell me what you have done so far, and I will help you to take this further. Is she still in Florida? I don't know if I can travel that far from the Centre, I am very small.'

'She is in Hong Kong doing a concert series. This is the perfect time.'

'Yes it is.' Gold raised his tea cup and smiled up at Xuan Wu. 'Let's win you this exceptional woman.'

Xuan Wu leaned back. 'Good.'

\*\*\*

Gold sat in the plush lobby lounge of the Hong Kong Regent while Xuan Wu checked in. The enormous three-storey windows gave a spectacular view of the Harbour and the high rises clustered on Hong Kong Island across the water.

Xuan Wu sat next to him in one of the large, comfortable sofas. He handed Gold a key folder. 'Meet me back here at seven. Until then, you're on your own.'

'Sir,' Gold said.

Xuan Wu passed Gold a small leather portfolio. 'Identity documents, enough cash and a couple of credit cards to cover expenses. Go overboard with the spending and I'll remove an equivalent amount in gold from your own stone self.'

'I understand, my Lord, but there is no need,' Gold said. 'Lord Qing Long sent me down here to study Law about ten years ago. I'm a registered barrister both here and on the Mainland, and I already have a small bank account here and full identity papers.'

'Really? Useful,' Xuan Wu said. 'Why not accounting? That would be more in line with your talents as a stone.'

'Jade is the accountant. My skills as a stone allow me to connect with devices that are also made of stone. Silicone. Computers.'

'You can hack into networks?'

'No computer system is closed to me. I have been through every major system in the world.'

'It is not honourable to be prying like that.'

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'Lord Qing Long doesn't seem to be very bothered about those types of detail, my Lord.'

'Stop calling me that in public. Here I am Mr John Chen. Just "sir" is enough.'

'Sir.'

'As I said, back here, seven. You can come with me to the Cultural Centre, and we'll begin.'

'Sir,' Gold said.

The bag was already in Gold's room when he went in. He went straight into the bathroom and had the longest, hottest bath he'd had in years.

\*\*\*

Xuan Wu and Gold materialized together in Qing Long's audience hall. Gold fell to his knees.

Qing Long was in thirty metre long True Form, stretched out on the grey tiles in front of his blue and silver throne. He shifted and turned his ice-cold turquoise eyes onto them. He rose and bowed as a Dragon to Xuan Wu.

'I am finished with it, Ah Qing. It has been extremely useful.'

'Good. Return to the Hall of Records, Gold.'

'My Lord.' Gold rose and turned to go out. When he reached the massive silver double doors, the Dragon called to him.

'Stone.'

Gold turned back. 'My Lord?'

'Do not think for one second that you will receive any special treatment because of this. And do not mention this episode to anybody, or it will go very badly for you.'

Gold bowed. 'I understand, my Lord.' He went through the doors and turned to close them. He rested his forehead on them for a second, then sighed gently with resignation, turned, and headed back to the contracts.

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**1995**

Gold stopped and took a deep breath at the doors to the hall, then pushed the doors open and went in.

The Dragon waited for him in human form. He sat on the throne and watched as Gold approached.

Gold's footsteps hissed through the hall as he made his way between the milky crystal pillars to the gleaming blue and silver throne, his reflection moving through the pillars as he passed. The arched ceiling disappeared into invisibility above him.

He stopped in front of the raised dais that held the throne and fell to his knees. 'Wen sui, wen sui, wen wen sui.'

'Rise,' the Dragon said, and Gold clambered to his feet. The Dragon gracefully rose from the throne. 'Come with me, and record everything you see. If what I've heard is correct, this should be very, very good.'

They materialized in front of the Great Hall of Celestial Audience, right at the top of the Imperial Palace. The buildings of the Palace stretched below them and disappeared into the clouds at the base of the mountain.

The Dragon walked up the steps to the main entry doors. The Door Gods appeared and glared at the Dragon and Gold as they approached.

'What business have you here?' General Wei said, his red face fierce.

'I wish to attend Court,' the Dragon said. 'It is within my rights as a Celestial and the East Wind.'

'Enter, my Lord,' General Wei said. He lowered his halberd, his red robes flowing with the movement. The five storey high doors swung open to permit the Dragon and Gold entry.

General Wei lowered his voice as they passed. 'Everybody's here to see the show. There's standing room only.'

General Wei was right. The Audience Hall was at least thirty metres long and a similar distance deep, and it was packed with Celestials of all types craning to catch a glimpse of the Jade Emperor seated on the Celestial Throne at the end of the Hall. The Emperor wore splendid Tang style robes of Imperial golden yellow and a square hat with beads hanging like a curtain in front of his eyes.

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The Dragon unceremoniously pushed his way to the front of the crowd, elbowing aside lesser Shen. He stood below the two metre tall dais that carried the Emperor's throne and waited where the entrance carpet met the base of the stairs to the dais.

The gathered Shen carefully left the gold carpet clear for the one who was about to enter and face the throne.

The enormous doors flew open and Xuan Wu in full majestic Celestial Form, complete with black lacquer armour and Seven Stars sword on his back, strode down the carpet. He stopped at the base of the dais and fell to one knee, saluting the Emperor as senior retainer. He was so tall that on one knee he still towered over many of the smaller Shen.

'Rise,' the Emperor said, his thin voice carrying easily over the hushed and waiting Shen.

Xuan Wu rose and studied the Emperor, his dark face fierce. 'Celestial Majesty.'

'Emperor Zhenwu of the Dark Northern Heavens,' the Jade Emperor said, using Xuan Wu's formal post Ming-Dynasty title.

'This humble servant petitions your Celestial Majesty with a request,' Xuan Wu said, his deep voice echoing through the hall.

'Name it,' the Emperor said.

'This humble servant has married a human woman and requests permission to join her and live on the Earthly plane as a human.'

'What of your duties as First Heavenly General?'

'I would that they were delegated to Er Lang, Second Heavenly General.'

'Your dominion, the Dark Northern Heavens?'

'My Generals will manage the Heavens in my absence.'

'Your Mountain?'

Xuan Wu hesitated.

A soft rustle echoed through the hall, the hissing sound of moving silk. None of the gathered Celestials said a word, but everybody present knew how much the Celestial Mountain of Wudangshan meant to the Dark Lord.

Xuan Wu waited until the noise died to silence. Then he raised his head and

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looked the Jade Emperor in the eye. 'I have lieutenants capable of running the Mountain in my absence. I request permission to remain on the Earthly.'

The Jade Emperor watched Xuan Wu without saying a word. They remained expressionless and gazed into each others' eyes.

'Permission denied,' the Emperor said. 'You are needed on the Celestial Plane, Dark Lord of the Arts of War. We cannot spare you. Bring her to the Celestial, she will be welcomed and given full honours as your Empress.'

The rustle of moving robes hissed through the hall, then once again there was silence.

'She refuses to leave the Earthly,' Xuan Wu said. 'If it needs be, I will forsake my dominion for her.'

'Permission is still denied, you are not given Celestial consent to do this thing.' The Jade Emperor spoke with an edge of exasperation. 'This has been discussed and negotiated. The position of the Celestial is clear.' His voice became vehement. 'You are needed here.'

Xuan Wu raised his head with defiance. 'I will do it anyway, Celestial Majesty. With your permission or without it, I will be with my wife.'

The rustle of robes was accompanied by a gentle hush of voices which trickled to silence.

The Jade Emperor spoke loudly and clearly. 'You will not do this thing.'

'Arrange someone else to fulfil my duties for the next hundred or so years, Majesty, I will be living on the Earthly.'

The Jade Emperor banged the arm of the throne. 'You will not do this, Ah Wu, I forbid it!'

Xuan Wu took two steps towards the dais. 'I will do it anyway.'

The Jade Emperor rose, stepped forward, and glared with menace. 'You are walking a very fine line, Ah Wu, do not disobey me!'

'Go to hell,' Xuan Wu said, turned on his heel, and stalked out of the hall surrounded by a dull roar of astonishment.

Oh my, that was better than I expected, the Dragon said silently to Gold. Did you get it all?

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Yes, my Lord, Gold said. He hesitated, then, If I had known it would lead to this much trouble I would not have aided him.

He may be thrown from Heaven, the Dragon said, still amused. There are many who question his place here, and this is exactly the excuse they have been looking for.

The Celestials filed out of the hall, quietly discussing the events once they were through the door. Gold and the Dragon followed the crowd. It would take some time for them to reach the door.

When they were close enough to see the fierce bearded faces of the Door Gods the Jade Emperor bellowed so loudly that the clerestory windows on the square raised roof forty metres above them rattled. 'Golden Boy!'

Gold and the Dragon stopped and slowly turned.

The Jade Emperor stood on the dais in front of the throne and glared at them.

'Golden Boy, child of the Jade Building Block,' the Emperor growled. He raised one hand. 'There you are. Approach.'

Gold slumped and wiped his hand over his face. Not again. He and the Dragon walked back to the throne.

'Azure Dragon, you are dismissed,' the Jade Emperor said. 'I wish to see the Golden Boy alone.'

You're on your own, the Dragon said, and disappeared.

Gold sighed and walked the rest of the way to the dais. The empty hall echoed with his footsteps. He fell to his knees in front of the dais and spoke the obeisance with resignation. 'Wen sui, wen sui, wen wen sui.'

'Rise,' the Emperor said.

Gold rose and waited.

'Find the Jade Girl. Bring her here to my private apartments in one hour. I wish to speak to both of you.'

Gold took a deep breath, hesitated, and then threw his life away. 'Celestial Majesty.'

The Jade Emperor had turned to sit on the throne. He paused for a moment, then sat and leaned his elbow on his knee. 'Speak.'

'Celestial Majesty.' Gold fell to his knees again. 'If it pleases your majesty, the

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Jade Girl was not involved in this. It had nothing to do with her; it was all my doing. I take full responsibility. Please do not punish her for something she did not do. It was me and me only that assisted the Dark Lord in this matter.'

'Did you hear my order, stone?'

'I did, Celestial Majesty, and still I beg for my friend's life. She was not involved.'

'Your friend, eh?' The Jade Emperor didn't move. 'I repeat my order, stone. Return with Jade Girl to my private apartments in one hour. Do not even begin to think of running. You will obey me.'

'I will obey you, Lord, you know I have no choice.' Gold dropped his forehead to the floor. 'This humble Shen is honoured.' He shook his head, still with his forehead on the floor, and whispered, 'No.'

'Go.'

Gold pulled himself to his feet and went.

\*\*\*

Jade was in the Hall of Numbers, busily running over the budgeting spreadsheets. She looked up and smiled wanly when she saw him.

Gold sat in the office chair next to her at the desk. 'You remember when the Dark Lord asked for my help to win the human? How we laughed about that?'

Jade smiled down at the printouts then back up at him. 'That was delightful, the most I'd laughed in twenty years.'

Gold's voice was hoarse. 'He married her, and now he's forsaken his duties and wants to live on the Earthly with her as a human.'

Jade gasped and her hand flew to her mouth.

'He just had a major altercation with the Jade Emperor. Let me show you.' Gold concentrated and presented the recording so that Jade could view it.

When the recording had finished Jade shook her head, confident. 'Without the Dark Lord to defend it, Heaven is at the mercy of the demons. They won't throw him from Heaven, it's simply not possible. Besides, he's the North Wind.'

'With him full-time on the Earthly, Heaven is at the mercy of the demons anyway,' Gold said. 'This is just the excuse his enemies have been looking for.'

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'He has no enemies.'

'He is Yin itself, he refuses to play the political games and is straightforward in all his dealings. Of course he has enemies.'

Jade sighed. 'I hope it doesn't happen, I have a great deal of respect for him. And he tried to help us when we were in trouble, by taking us into his service.'

'Jade.' Gold fingered the printouts. He sighed. 'This is very hard.'

Jade touched Gold's hand. 'Go on, I trust you, my friend.'

Gold didn't look up from the paper. 'The Jade Emperor wishes to see me in his private apartments in forty minutes. Apparently my interference, once again, has returned to bite me on the ass.'

Jade grasped his hand. 'No.'

Gold dropped his head and mumbled. 'He wants to see you too.'

Jade shot to her feet. 'No!'

Gold put his head in his hands. 'I am so sorry.'

Jade grabbed Gold's forearm and hauled him to his feet. He watched with confusion but didn't attempt to defend himself.

She threw her arms around him and held him close, pulling his face into her shoulder. 'Don't worry, whatever happens, it will work out.'

'I hate to think what our sentence will be, Jade, and it's all my fault.' He nuzzled her shoulder. 'And you had nothing to do with it at all.' He gripped her tighter. 'This shouldn't happen to you!'

Jade stroked the back of his head. 'Well, wherever we're going, we're going together.' She pulled back to see his tear-filled eyes and ran her hand over his cheek. 'Don't worry, Gold, we'll still have our friendship. Wherever we are.'

He buried his face in her shoulder again. 'I just keep making people suffer.'

'We'll do this together, I know we can.'

\*\*\*

The private apartments were large and roomy with a polished hardwood floor and exquisite rosewood furniture. A Ming-style bookshelf held a priceless collection of teapots from all dynasties and provinces.

Jade and Gold stopped dead as they entered. The Jade Emperor sat on the couch;

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and next to him in an armchair sat the Dark Lord Xuan Wu in human form, his face rigid with restraint.

Jade fell to her knees and Gold remembered and knelt as well. 'Wen sui, wen sui, wen wen sui.'

'Rise,' the Jade Emperor said without moving from his chair.

Jade and Gold stood and waited.

'You sure they won't be more trouble than they're worth?' the Jade Emperor said.

'I think they'll be useful,' Xuan Wu said.

Gold felt a leap of hope.

'The Dragon released them?' Xuan Wu said.

'He had trouble finding them more work. He said they were just redoing tasks because he'd run out of things for them to do.'

'Well, I'll have plenty for them to do.'

Jade inhaled sharply but didn't look up.

'Jade Girl. Golden Boy,' the Jade Emperor said sternly.

'Celestial Majesty.'

'The Xuan Wu is so obviously insanely in love with this human woman that the Celestial has seen fit to give him permission to remain on the Earthly with her for a human lifetime.'

Jade sneaked a quick glance at Xuan Wu then looked down again.

'The Xuan Wu will obviously require assistance whilst living on the Earthly, and he has suggested that you worthless pair may be of some use.'

Gold opened his mouth to say something and then changed his mind and closed it.

'You have something to say?'

Gold shook his head. 'No, Celestial Majesty.'

'Very well. Where should they present themselves, Ah Wu?'

Xuan Wu shifted slightly. 'Hong Kong, Peak. One Black Road. Top floor.'

'You heard him,' the Jade Emperor said. 'You have three hours to collect your belongings and present yourselves there. You are still to remain in human form while in

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the Dark Lord's service, you have not atoned completely for assisting the foreigners to steal China's greatest treasure.'

'Don't bring too much, Hong Kong is very small, there won't be room,' Xuan Wu said. 'One bag apiece. If you need more you can purchase it later.'

'Celestial Highness,' Jade said.

The Jade Emperor waved them away. 'Go.'

\*\*\*

Jade stopped packing and looked up. 'Do you know anyone who's worked for him?'

Gold shook his head as he shoved his poor threadbare clothes into the plain cloth sack. He'd been so long in human form that he was too weak to even conjure his own clothing. 'No. He's so senior that even his retainers are too big for me to know. I've heard that he is a hard master.'

'Harder than the Dragon?' Jade whispered.

Gold looked up and smiled. 'I don't think anybody is harder than the Dragon.'

Jade giggled then stifled it. 'Yes, you're right.'

'Hong Kong is an interesting place now.' Gold returned to packing his bag. 'It will be fascinating to see the changes there.'

Jade sighed. 'I can't wait to meet the woman.'

'She is as remarkable as he says.'

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