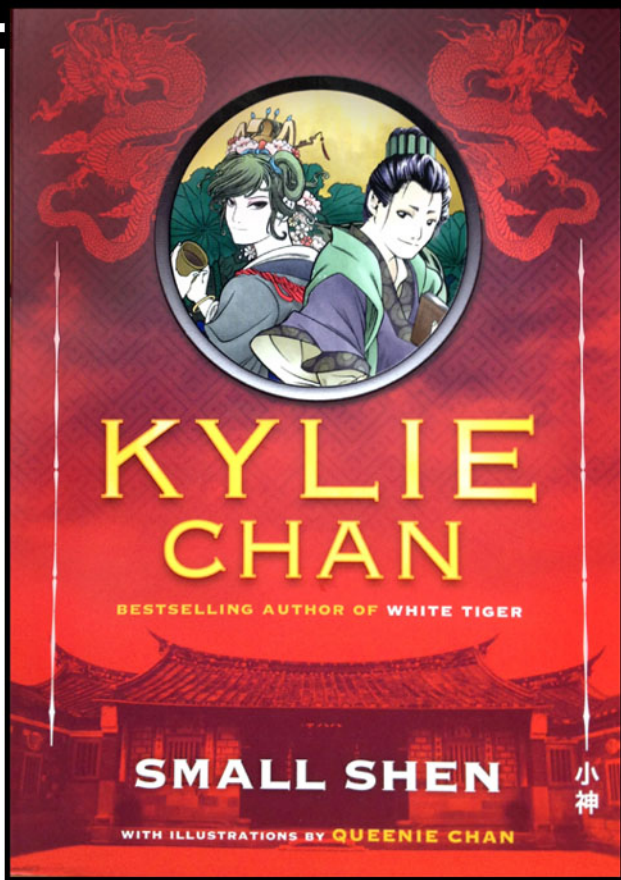


AN EXTRACT FROM



IN AUSTRALIAN BOOKSTORES

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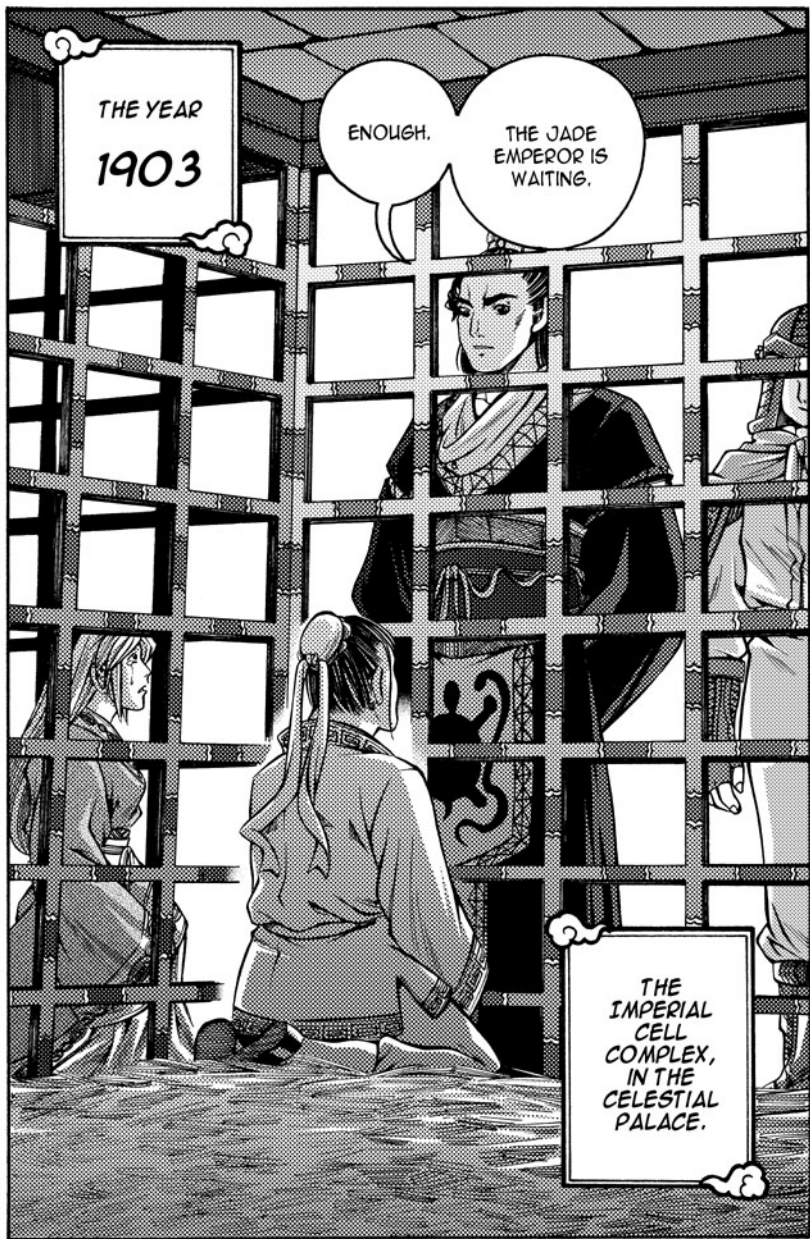
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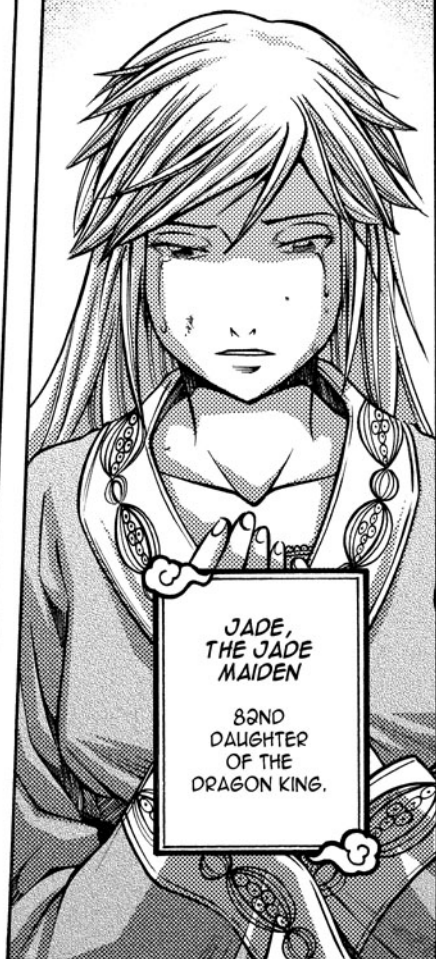
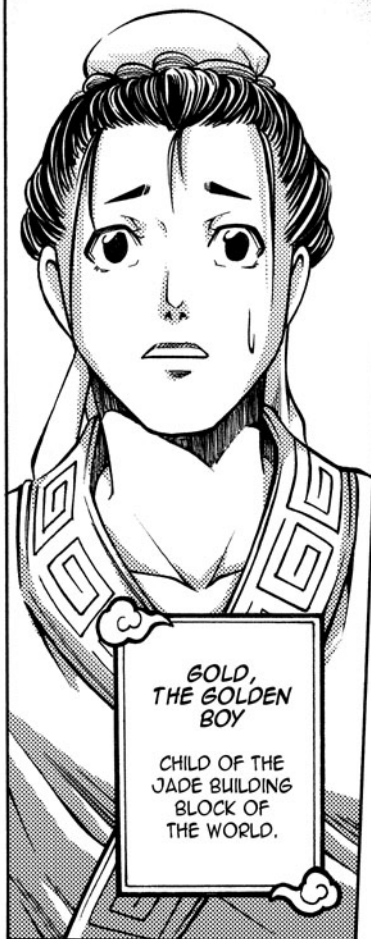
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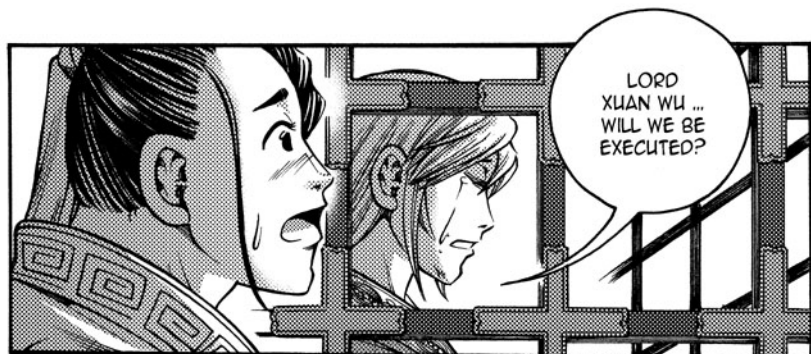
THE JADE
EMPEROR IS
WAITING.

THE
IMPERIAL
CELL
COMPLEX,
IN THE
CELESTIAL
PALACE.



YOU TWO
WILL BE
SENTENCED
TOGETHER.





IF YOU
ARE BOTH
VERY LUCKY,
YOU WILL BE.





HONG KONG

1995

THE BUILDING at One Black Road was thoroughly sealed. Jade and Gold couldn't even materialise in the eleventh floor lift lobby — they had to enter through the gates like humans. The security guards on the ground floor called the apartment on the intercom and they rode the lift up, rigid with apprehension.

The eleventh floor lift lobby had only one door; the Dark Lord Xuan Wu had the entire top floor to himself. Gold pressed the doorbell and they waited.

A human Filipina domestic helper opened the inner door and studied them suspiciously through the large metal gate. 'Yes?'

'Let them in, Monica, I'm expecting them,' Xuan Wu said from inside.

The Filipina opened the gate for them and Jade and Gold entered. They stopped at the door and removed their shoes, then entered the large comfortable living room on the left and fell to their knees in front of the Dark Lord where he sat on the cream couch.

'Please go into the kitchen for a moment, Monica,' the Dark Lord said.

The Filipina closed the front door and gate then quickly disappeared into the kitchen across the hall.

'Wen sui, wen sui, wen wen sui.'

'Rise. Do not address me like that again in this household. Most of the staff here are human. Celestial protocols are inappropriate. A standing or kneeling salute is sufficient.' He leaned his elbows on his knees and studied them both, his noble face intent. He appeared to be in his mid-forties, wearing a pair of black cotton trousers with a small hole in one knee and a plain black T-shirt. His long hair had come out of its tie and fallen around his shoulders.

They remained standing, waiting.

'I requested that the Celestial assign you to help me in my current ... *predicament*.'

A young European woman in her late twenties wandered into the living room from the hallway. 'Predicament, Lo Wu?' she said with the soft burr of a slightly French accent. She moved behind the couch and put her hands on Xuan Wu's shoulders, then bent and kissed the top of his head. He took one of her hands and pressed it to his lips. 'I think I am the one in the predicament.'

'I think we both are, love,' he said. 'This is my wife, Michelle. Michelle, this is Jade and Gold. They are small Shen in big trouble. The Jade Emperor has sent them to help us out.'

Michelle straightened to study Jade and Gold. She was quite tall, about five ten, with a fine-boned, intelligent, and strikingly beautiful face framed by light honey brown hair that curled under by itself and rested on her shoulders. She wore a dark blue tailored silk suit with a white silk shirt beneath. She smiled at Jade and Gold, and her warm brown eyes sparkled. 'More Shen. Just what I need.'

Jade and Gold both bowed. 'My Lady.'

Her smile widened and she waved them down. 'Please, Michelle, just Michelle.' She leaned over the back of the couch to speak to Xuan Wu, her hair falling forward over his shoulder. 'I have rehearsal in half an hour.'

'We'd better go then,' Xuan Wu said.

'Leo can take me,' she said. 'We'll be fine.'

He rose without releasing her hand. 'I will take you. I want to be absolutely positive that you are safe.'

She sighed theatrically. 'If you must.'

'Besides,' he said, gazing down at her with adoration, 'I will not pass up a single opportunity to hear you sing.'

'If you must take me, please change those awful pants, Lo Wu, find something halfway tidy.'

'For you I will.' Xuan Wu turned to Jade and Gold. 'You're stuck in human form, so you'll need somewhere to live. You can't stay here, I don't have room.' He held his hand out and a folder and some keys appeared in it.

'Lo Wu!' Michelle said, scolding. 'One day you'll do that in the middle of Connaught Road.'

‘I did that yesterday.’ He turned back to Jade and Gold. ‘Here are the door codes, addresses, and keys for two apartments that I own in Happy Valley. You can each have one. Settle yourselves in, then return here this afternoon, and we will go through your duties. Do not do anything Celestial in front of my human staff — the housekeeper Monica and the guard Leo.’

Jade and Gold moved forward to accept the documents and keys.

‘Where is Leo?’ Michelle said, turning back to the hallway. ‘He’s supposed to drive me.’

Xuan Wu concentrated.

An enormous black man in his mid-thirties charged down the hallway into the living room. He was more than six feet tall, a wall of muscle, and smartly dressed in a designer polo shirt and a pair of dark slacks. ‘Sorry, Mr Chen, my phone rang,’ he said with a strong American accent.

Michelle patted him on the arm. ‘Your phone has not stopped ringing since we arrived here in Hong Kong, Leo. I think you must be the most popular man in the Territory.’

‘Ma’am,’ Leo said, smiling down at her as well. ‘May I drive you to the studio?’

‘Leo may drive me,’ Michelle said, linking her arms in Leo’s and Xuan Wu’s. ‘And then Lo Wu may hear me sing.’

‘Go,’ Xuan Wu said to Jade and Gold. ‘I will see you two later.’

The two Shen saluted him, and headed to the Valley.

Jade and Gold had lunch together in one of the Western restaurants in Happy Valley, close to their new apartment building.

‘She calls him “Lo Wu”,’ Jade said. ‘*Old Wu!*’

‘She’s delightful,’ Gold said. ‘The human retainer, the black one, he’s very cute too.’

‘A two-bedroom apartment each. Who would have believed it?’ she said.

‘He seems different.’

‘I noticed,’ Jade said. ‘More ...’ She searched for the word.

‘Much more human,’ Gold said. ‘Kinder. Gentler.’

‘You think she’s done that to him?’

‘If she has,’ Gold said, ‘then she is truly remarkable. I think I’m going to like working for them.’

What are you doing, Gold?

Jade saw Gold jump at the mental contact. ‘What is it?’

Gold raised his hand. *Jade and I are sharing lunch at Happy Valley, my Lord. What time would you like us there?*

Whenever you finish. Before two.

Gold dropped his hand. ‘I have a stone inside me that allows him to contact me anywhere. He wants to see us as soon as we’re finished, before two.’

Jade checked her watch. ‘We’d better move.’

Gold smiled as they called for the bill. It felt very strange to be living as a modern human.



The domestic helper answered the door. ‘He’s waiting for you in his office.’ She guided them down the hallway to the third door on the right and tapped on it.

‘Bring them in, Monica.’

Monica ushered them in. She glared at the desk, then turned and went out, banging the door behind her.

Gold stopped and stared. The Dark Lord had a large rosewood desk piled high with papers. A stack on one end of the desk seemed about to topple onto the floor and join the mess there. A set of ancient scrolls sat against the wall, under a filing cabinet that had one drawer hanging open.

The Dark Lord gestured for them to sit on the two chairs across the desk from him.

Jade and Gold shared a surreptitious look as they sat.

Xuan Wu closed the spreadsheet on his computer and turned to study them, leaning his elbows on the mass of paper in front of him. ‘The situation is not as simple as it appears.’

Gold sagged slightly. It never was.

‘Michelle is terrified of my True Form. Every time she sees it she runs from me. Eventually she said that she cannot live with the thought

of me changing into something so horrifying, and she threatened to leave me unless I vowed never to take it again. So I'm stuck on the Earthly in human form, much as you are.'

'Never to take it again?' Gold said, horrified. 'Never?'

'As long as she lives, Gold, I will never take True Form. I have made the vow, and though it was on the spur of the moment, I am a Shen of my word.'

'Isn't that difficult, my Lord?' Jade said. 'For a ...' She hesitated, searching for the right word.

'Creature as large as me? Yes,' Xuan Wu said evenly. 'It is a tremendous drain. My energy levels are always low. Always. When my chi reaches a dangerously low level I make a quick trip to Celestial Wudangshan, and build the energy again.'

'If you allow your energy to fall too far, my Lord, you could lose your humanity and be stuck in True Form for quite some time,' Gold said.

Xuan Wu leaned back and studied Gold. 'I am well aware of that. The situation is very difficult.'

'I'm sure you are able to manage this, my Lord,' Jade said. 'You are a master of energy. You can control the level.'

'It's difficult because she hates going to the Celestial with me. She needs to sing. There is no audience there for her, so I go for as little time as possible.'

'Why don't you leave her here with guards?' Gold said.

'Because the demons have found out about her. Very large demons are constantly trying to kidnap her. We have had four attempts in the last two months.'

'The demons want her,' Gold said grimly. 'If they hold her they have you.'

'That is correct. So. You can help guard her. What level demon can you take in human form, Gold?'

'About level fifty, my Lord. If I was to face a low-level Snake Mother it would be a close thing.'

'Jade?'

Jade hesitated. 'I use teeth and claws, my Lord. I've never faced a demon in human form. I always change.'

‘Well then, time for a test. Do either of you prefer a particular weapon?’

‘I can’t use a weapon in human form,’ Gold said. ‘There’s too much of a time lag between the stone making the order and the human form carrying it out. Up to a tenth of a second. So I just use energy, chi, directly from the stone.’

‘Jade?’

Jade hesitated again. ‘My claws, my Lord. Always.’

‘Looks like you will need some training, Jade.’

Jade lit up. ‘You will teach me?’

‘Of course. Let’s go to the training room and see. I am already teaching Leo, two more won’t make much of a difference.’

He led them down the hallway to the door at the end. It opened into a training room with soft white mats on the floor. The long wall across from the door was covered with mirrors. A fearsome array of martial arts weapons hung from hooks on the short wall. Xuan Wu led Jade and Gold into the centre of the room and turned. He lowered his head and concentrated.

The black bodyguard, Leo, appeared in the doorway, frowning. ‘Sir?’

Xuan Wu gestured. ‘Come in and close the door, Leo. You can help me.’

Leo glanced suspiciously at Jade and Gold, then entered the room and closed the door behind him.

‘Jade,’ Xuan Wu said.

‘My Lord.’

‘Which arts have you studied?’

Jade hesitated.

‘Have you had any training in the arts at all?’

Jade dropped her head and mumbled, ‘No, my Lord, none at all.’

‘Very well, you are dismissed. Return to your apartment at Happy Valley. I will not need you until two in the afternoon tomorrow, from now until then the time is your own.’

Jade stood still and stared, obviously speechless.

Gold helped. ‘You are giving her a whole day free from work, my Lord?’

Xuan Wu's stern expression didn't shift. 'Your working hours will be nine to six, six days a week. Sundays are your own.'

Jade and Gold shared a look, then turned back to Xuan Wu.

'We work less than sixty hours a week?' Gold said with disbelief.

'Your time outside these hours is your own. You may do as you please.' Xuan Wu smiled slightly. 'Just don't forget that you're on the Earthly plane, and you still do not have permission to take True Form. Oh.' He raised his hand. 'Obviously you've been in human form for a great deal of time, both of you look worn. You need to rebuild the energy of your human forms. You have my permission to take True Form for the next twenty-four hours, Jade, just make sure that nobody sees you.'

Jade's eyes went wide. 'May I fly and swim, my Lord?' she said, breathless.

'Of course.'

Jade grinned broadly, bowed, and saluted Xuan Wu. 'My Lord.' She glanced up at him, still grinning. 'Thank you.'

Xuan Wu waved her away. 'Go.'

She hurried out the door.

Xuan Wu turned to Gold. 'Now, let's see how good you are.'

'May I do that too when I am dismissed?' Gold said.

'Yes. Take True Form until you return here tomorrow.'

Gold couldn't control the huge grin. It had been a long time.

'Are these Shen, Mr Chen?' Leo said, watching Gold suspiciously.

'Yes. That one was a dragon, this one is a stone.'

Leo stiffened with surprise, then studied Gold carefully again. 'How about that.'

'I'm really perfectly harmless, I assure you,' Gold said, smiling his most charming smile and hoping his dimples were obvious. He raised his hands out to the side. 'Perfectly harmless.' He spoke to Xuan Wu silently. *Do we really have permission to do what we please outside these working hours?*

Yes, Xuan Wu said.

Even to the pursuit of ... liaisons?

Yes.

Gold's smile broadened. *Permission to take female human form, my Lord? And return later to visit.*

Xuan Wu's voice was full of amusement in Gold's stone lattice. *Go right ahead, Gold, I expected that from you. I have no problem with you forming a relationship with anyone. If you wish to visit Leo, and he is interested, then I have no objection.*

Gold changed to female form; slightly shorter, with long gold hair. He was still slim and elegant, and the female form had the same charming dimples. He smiled at Leo. 'Could you show me around Hong Kong? I haven't been here in over a hundred years. Let me buy you dinner to thank you.'

'Sure,' Leo said, his voice low and gruff. 'Would the other one like to come as well? I can show both of you around.'

'No, just me,' Gold said, smiling into Leo's eyes.

'There will be time for this later,' Xuan Wu said, breaking in. 'Right now, Leo, attack her. Don't be concerned about the fact that it has taken female form, these creatures are completely flexible as to gender. Treat it as if it were still male.'

'I object to being called an "it",' Gold said cheerfully, but he didn't have a chance to say more. Leo's fist shot towards his head and he sidestepped and blocked it, twisting it down and away. He used Leo's arm as a lever, stepped around him, and tipped him over so he landed heavily on his side on the mats. He bent and bound Leo's energy, effectively paralysing him, then rose and raised his hands. 'What level can this guard take? He's not very good.'

Leo struggled against the binding.

'He has only been learning from me since Michelle and I set up house together,' Xuan Wu said. 'About three months. He has a great deal of potential, but you are obviously better. Unbind him.'

Gold reached down and tapped the back of Leo's neck, releasing him. He held out his hand to help Leo up. 'No hard feelings, my friend? If you like, I'll show you that move later.'

Leo hesitated, then took Gold's hand and rose. 'That would be great, thanks. You're really good, I'm glad you're here to help guard.'

Gold didn't release Leo's hand. 'So am I.'

Leo looked down at Gold who was holding his hand, then grinned broadly. 'I look forward to seeing you later.'

'Me too.'

‘Leo, go and fetch the Demon Jar from the storeroom,’ Xuan Wu said.

Leo dropped Gold’s hand. ‘Sir.’ He quickly went out.

‘I have heard of this, my Lord,’ Gold said, full of curiosity. ‘It’s true?’

‘What have you heard?’ Xuan Wu said.

‘That you are able to turn demons into inactive fragments, and retrieve them at will.’

Leo returned carrying a massive jar at least a metre high and half that around, with a complicated metal seal on the lid. ‘That’s a pretty good way of describing it,’ he said. ‘You can’t do it?’

‘As far as I know the Dark Lord is the only one who can do it,’ Gold said with awe. ‘A gift of a jar full of demons from the Dark Lord is a high honour indeed.’

Leo grinned. ‘How about that.’ He placed the jar in the corner of the room. It was full of large black beads, shining like dark olives. ‘I thought all of you could do it.’

‘No, only him.’

‘Leo, I will be pulling large demons out. You are no longer needed, but you may stay and watch if you like.’

‘Please stay,’ Gold said, putting on his best girlish charm. ‘I’d love to show you what I can do. It’s quite remarkable, I assure you.’

Leo grinned. ‘Sure. I’d love to see some really big ones go down.’

Xuan Wu opened the jar and there was a hiss of escaping air. He reached in and pulled out one of the beads. ‘Level twenty. Is that too high to start?’

‘No, my Lord,’ Gold said, readying himself. ‘And I can gauge their levels myself once you’ve released them, no need to tell me.’

Xuan Wu tossed the bead onto the floor at the base of the mirrors. It formed into an ordinary-looking Chinese man in his mid-forties. He leapt straight for Gold.

Gold generated a ball of chi about fifty centimetres across and threw it at the demon, who exploded and dissipated into black feathery streamers.

‘Generate the largest ball of chi you can,’ Xuan Wu said.

‘Please move back, Leo,’ Gold said. ‘I don’t want to hurt you.’

Leo shifted so that he stood against the wall.

Gold generated a ball of chi more than a metre across.

'Is that the best you can do?' Xuan Wu said.

Gold concentrated and added another ten centimetres to the diameter of the glowing golden ball.

'Whoa,' Leo said softly.

'Can you change the colour?' Xuan Wu said.

'What colour would you like, my Lord?' Gold said.

'White.'

Gold nodded and concentrated. The gold chi turned into a shining ball of silver.

'Good. Turn it back, then re-centre it. Well done.'

Gold inhaled deeply, turned the chi back to its usual golden colour, then reabsorbed it.

'Move back, Leo, I'm going to pull out a really big one.' Xuan Wu shuffled through the contents of the jar, then held his hand above it and concentrated. A bead flew out of the jar into his outstretched hand. He tossed the bead onto the floor. It formed into a short, wizened elderly woman in a blood-red cheongsam.

Gold let his breath out in a long hiss. 'How did you catch this, my Lord?'

'It's the only one I have, Gold. Leo, watch carefully. If we're very lucky it will take True Form and you'll see what one of these looks like.'

The woman glanced from Gold to Xuan Wu. When she saw the Dark Lord her face filled with loathing. She grew. Her cheongsam turned black and tightened until it fitted her form, then disappeared completely.

Her skin disappeared as well. Her legs merged together and formed serpentine coils with black scales. She grew and twisted and lengthened until she was nearly two metres long.

Her front end appeared as a man with the skin taken off. Her back end was a black snake that writhed over the floor, spreading a deadly trail of toxic slime.

'Snake Mother,' Leo said softly.

The Mother raced towards Gold.

He held out his hands and bound it. Its tail writhed on the floor as its front end struggled to reach him.

Gold's voice was strained as he laboured to hold the demon. 'I can't kill this one with chi, my Lord, it would blow me up.'

'Leo, grab a sword and take its head off,' Xuan Wu said.

'Quickly!' Gold said.

Leo raced to the weapons rack, grabbed a dark sword, pulled it from its scabbard, and sliced the demon's head off. The head fell to the floor and dissipated quickly. The body and serpentine back end writhed on the floor for some time before they dissipated too.

Gold dropped his hands and panted. 'That was too big for me, my Lord. What level was that one?'

'Fifty-five,' Xuan Wu said. 'I thought you said you could gauge them?'

Gold was embarrassed. 'Not if they're that big.'

'If that was the best you can do then you require some work. I will spend time with you to build your skills. A stone like you should be able to produce much more than that, particularly one made of a noble metal as you are.'

Gold sagged. 'You are quite correct, my Lord. I need to be better if I am to defend your lady.'

'Good.' Xuan Wu waved to Leo and the guard returned the sword to the rack. 'Gold, Leo, dismissed. Gold, I will not need you until two tomorrow, same as Jade. The time is your own. If you wish to spend it with Leo, you have my permission, both of you. Leo, same for you. Take the afternoon off.'

Gold grinned broadly, then pointed the grin at Leo. *Wanna take off now?*

'Just let me grab a couple of things from my room and we can go,' Leo said. He bowed slightly to Xuan Wu. 'Mr Chen? My Lord?'

'Go,' Xuan Wu said, his eyes full of amusement.

Leo left the training room and Gold followed. 'Where's your room?'

'In here,' Leo said. He turned left and went to the second door along. 'There's a couple of spare bedrooms here, but Mr and Mrs Chen are planning to have a family, so —'

Gold stopped dead. 'They plan to have *children*?'

Leo stopped as well, his hand on the door. 'Yeah, I suppose so. Is this a big thing for you guys?'

Gold shook his head. 'The minute they have any sort of child the demons will be after it. All of them. He is Heaven's greatest defender, and the demons would give anything to have control of him.'

Leo opened the door and went in. 'Terrific.' He stopped again, just inside the room, and Gold nearly walked into him. 'What do you mean "any sort" of child?'

Gold smiled gently. 'You know what he really is, don't you?'

'Oh my God.'

'Yep. He's never had a human wife before, but he has quite a few lovely little reptilian children. His Number One Son for many years was a turtle Shen.'

Leo shook his head. 'This is so weird.'

'I'd better not show you me then.'

Leo turned to Gold. 'Show me you? That doesn't make sense.'

'I won't show you my stone.'

'Your stone?'

'Well, me, actually. I'm a stone. This human form,' he raised the female form's arms, 'is just a shell.'

'A *shell*?'

'Yep.' Gold dropped his arms and brushed one hand along Leo's bare arm. 'The real me, the stone, is inside this form. You can see it if you like.'

Leo hesitated, watching Gold, then shook his head. 'Enough weirdness for one day, I think. Maybe later. You still want me to show you around?'

'Sure.'

Gold leaned on the railing next to Leo and watched the tug boats pull barges through the steady stream of water-borne traffic on the harbour below them. The sky to the left faded to lilac as the sun set. The packed high-rise apartment blocks on both sides of the harbour began to light up. Across the harbour an enormous neon sign for a Japanese electronics company flared to brilliant life.

Gold sighed. 'This is wonderful.'

Leo leaned his forearms on the railing. 'I'm glad it's a clear evening so you could see.'

Gold shifted sideways to press the female form into Leo and smiled up into his eyes. 'So many wonderful things to see.'

Leo smiled back. 'You can stop coming on to me, my friend. I'm afraid you're out of luck.'

Gold turned back to the harbour and thumped the rail. 'You should have told me you're spoken for.'

'Oh, I'm not spoken for,' Leo said. He stood straighter, held the rail, and spoke softly. 'I'm HIV positive. Mr Chen somehow clears the virus from me, but I don't want to put anyone at risk.'

Gold smiled up again, cheeky. 'You won't put me at risk. I'm a stone; I can't catch any sort of virus.' He shifted closer to Leo and put the female form's arm around his waist. 'You don't need to protect me.'

Leo wrapped his arm around Gold's shoulder and squeezed him gently. 'Then it's a terrible shame, because I like you and I've enjoyed your company. But you were really much cuter as a guy.'

'This just gets better and better,' Gold said. 'Is there a place where we can go? I can't change out in the middle of the viewing platform here.'

'We can go back up to the Peak apartment if you like. I'd love to see you change again. I'd like to see the stone, too.'

Gold stiffened. 'The Dark Lord will allow it?'

Leo chuckled and his arm moved over Gold's back. 'Sure. He doesn't mind at all, he told me himself.' His voice saddened. 'Not that I can bring anyone home anyway.'

'Well, you can now,' Gold said. He laughed quietly. 'Look at us, arms around each other, perfectly normal boy and girl. Let's go up to the Peak and be a perfectly normal boy and boy.'

'None of you Shen are normal,' Leo said, his voice a low rumble. He dropped his arm from Gold's shoulder and took Gold's hand. 'Let's go.'

Gold smiled at the view before he turned to follow Leo. It had been a long time.



‘You’re too big and this bed’s too small,’ Gold said, muffled by the covers. ‘How tall are you anyway?’

‘Six five.’

‘*Wah*, that’s huge. Can’t you get a bigger goddamn bed?’

Leo turned over and threw his arm across Gold’s chest. ‘No. Deal with it.’ He pulled himself up to sit. ‘Hey. Can I see the stone?’

Gold sat up as well and leaned his back on Leo, relishing the soft dark skin. Leo was rock-hard muscle beneath Gold’s back. ‘Sure. You really want to see?’

‘It’s not gross or anything, is it?’

‘Nope.’ Gold reached into his human form’s chest and pulled the stone out. He unwound the chain holding the black turtle and handed the stone to Leo.

Leo turned it over in his hands. ‘And this is you.’

‘Yep. Like I said, what’s sitting next to you is just a shell.’

‘What was that around it?’ Leo said, holding the stone as if it was very fragile.

‘Oh, this?’ Gold raised the turtle pendant. ‘The Dark Lord gave this to me about a hundred and fifty years ago so that we could communicate.’

Leo’s body tensed behind Gold.

Gold laughed. ‘No, no, nothing like that. I was working as an agent for him. Here in Hong Kong, actually. It was a long time ago.’

‘Oh, all right.’ Leo ran his hand over the surface of the stone. ‘It’s smooth and soft. I really like touching it.’

Gold shivered. ‘Don’t stop.’

Leo traced his finger over one of the veins of gold in the stone and Gold threw his head back into Leo’s shoulder.

‘Oh, now *this* is interesting,’ Leo said. He rubbed his palm over the stone and Gold went completely rigid. When Leo stopped rubbing, Gold collapsed with a sigh.

‘*Very* interesting.’ Leo traced his fingers across the stone, turning it over in his hands. He rubbed it between both palms and Gold squeaked.

‘Bad?’ Leo said.

Gold panted. ‘No. No. Good.’ He took a deep breath. ‘Very, very good.’

Leo flopped back against the bedhead and held the stone. 'You promised dinner.' He rubbed the stone and Gold moaned. 'You gonna buy us dinner?'

'After,' Gold said, and pulled himself on top.

'Leo.'

'Hn?'

'Thanks for dinner, I had a great time. But I have to go, and there's something I need to tell you.'

'Wha?'

'When you see me tomorrow afternoon, I'll look at least twenty years younger.'

That woke him. Leo rolled over and screwed up his face. 'What?'

'You remember Lord Xuan said I could take True Form for a while? It's because I look so old. My normal human form is about twenty, twenty-one years old in appearance. I don't normally look this old.'

'Why not?'

Gold sighed. 'It's a long story. But when you see me tomorrow, I'll look at least fifteen years younger than you.' He dropped his voice. 'I hope that isn't a problem for you.'

Leo wrapped his arms around Gold. 'Will you still be a guy?'

Gold smiled slightly. 'For you I will.'

Leo's hands drifted lower. 'Then it's not a problem at all.' He pulled Gold closer. 'It's late, must be past midnight. Stay the night.'

'No, I have to go back to my apartment and sort stuff out. And since I can take True Form for a while, it'll be much easier as a stone.'

'Your choice.' Leo brightened. 'Wanna come out on the town with me Saturday night? Meet some of my friends?'

Gold moved back slightly to grin with delight. 'You want to show me off?'

'Hell, yeah,' Leo said.

Gold moved his face closer to Leo's so that their mouths nearly touched. 'Do you always fall into bed with guys you've just met like this?'

‘When they’re as cute as you I do,’ Leo breathed, and closed the gap.

Two days later Gold reported for work at the apartment at 8 a.m. sharp. Leo was waiting for him. They sat at the small four-seat kitchen table together as Monica busily washed the breakfast dishes.

‘The Dark Lord is practising martial arts in the training room right now,’ Leo said. ‘He gets up real early. Michelle, on the other hand, usually sleeps until at least 10 a.m., later if she’s performing. She’s a real night owl.’

‘So what do you do in the mornings?’ Gold said.

‘After the Dark Lord’s done warming up, he’ll give me a lesson for an hour or so; he’ll probably want to teach you as well ...’

Yes. Present yourself for training with Leo in forty-five minutes, the Dark Lord said into their heads.

Leo jumped. ‘I’m still trying to get used to that.’

Gold grinned wryly. ‘I had a human wife once who never got used to it. In the end she just asked me to stop.’

Leo stared at him.

Gold shrugged. ‘I’m not human. I’m not even really *organic*. I’m a stone, my friend. Gender doesn’t really apply to us.’

‘You gonna fool around with chicks while you’re with me?’ Leo growled. ‘Cause if you are, we can stop now. I’m not letting you put anybody in danger.’

‘I’m not going to fool around with anybody.’

Leo studied Gold for a moment, then relaxed.

‘You trust me?’ Gold said with delight.

‘The Dark Lord trusts you. That’s good enough for me,’ Leo said. ‘It’s not the whole “be faithful to me” trash. It’s the virus. I don’t want to put *anybody* at risk.’

‘You won’t be.’

Leo nodded, confident. ‘Good.’ Monica gave him a mug of black coffee, and he nodded to her in thanks. ‘After we train, we’ll take Michelle to the gym. Then back here, or out to meet someone for lunch, and then after lunch down to the academy.’

‘Wudang?’

‘Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts! She spends a lot of time there, they’ve only been running degree-level programs in music for a few years, she’s been helping them to develop the programmes. She’ll practise for an hour or so, then —’

‘Practise what?’ Gold interrupted.

‘Singing, dumbass. It’s what she *does*. After she’s done practising, she’ll spend some time there, maybe doing a master class, or mentoring some students, course development, something like that. She usually doesn’t finish down there until at least five.’

‘She’s a busy lady.’

‘When she’s performing the schedule will be a lot more packed, she’ll spend a *lot* of time rehearsing. She’s extremely hands-on.’

‘You mean she drives everybody nuts.’

Leo sighed. ‘Before, she travelled the world. She toured the US. She was sought after by different opera companies. Now she’s married, she’s become very old-fashioned and refuses to leave her husband.’

‘That is safer for her.’

‘It may be, but she misses the contact with the other players.’

‘So she *is* driving everybody nuts.’



About two weeks later, Gold and Leo waited for Michelle in the academy’s tearoom, part of their daily routine.

‘Gin,’ Gold said.

‘Dammit!’ Leo said. ‘You sure you’ve never played this before?’

‘It works very much like mah jongg,’ Gold said. ‘Only simpler.’

Michelle entered the tearoom. ‘Good, you are both here. I have a break for about an hour. Will you accompany me to the open space across the road? It would be good to be out of this stifling atmosphere.’

Gold and Leo rose.

‘Our pleasure, ma’am,’ Leo said. ‘If Gold and I play any more gin, he’s gonna clean me out.’

Michelle patted Gold’s shoulder as they went out. ‘Do not take all of Leo’s money, little Shen, he needs it to buy drinks for all his friends in those bars.’

‘It’s okay, Michelle,’ Leo said gruffly. ‘Most of the drinks are for Gold anyway.’

‘I’m learning a variety of alcoholic drinks that I never knew existed,’ Gold said. ‘Bourbon is *awesome!*’

‘Champagne is better, especially after a successful show,’ Michelle said. They crossed the busy Wan Chai street, hurrying between the slow-moving vehicles, to the park. The park was an open concreted area with benches beneath tired-looking trees in brick planter boxes. Michelle sighed and looked around. ‘This is *not* a park.’

‘The gentlemen over there playing chess would disagree with you,’ Gold said.

Three elderly Chinese men sat on stools around a Chinese chessboard on a concrete table, loudly discussing their moves. The board was a piece of card marked out in a grid, some of the squares had crosses through them. The pieces were simple wooden discs with printed characters indicating the piece.

Curious, Michelle approached them. ‘I have never seen a game like that before.’

As they neared the demons, Gold grabbed her arm. ‘They’re demons waiting for us,’ he said. ‘Turn around and walk away now, ma’am.’

Michelle stopped. ‘Are you sure? They look so harmless.’

‘Yeah, you sure?’ Leo said.

Before Gold could answer, the old men all rose, studying Michelle carefully. They moved slowly towards her, crouched as if ready to spring.

‘Three of them, two of us,’ Gold said. ‘Time to put the training to good use.’

‘Move behind us, Michelle,’ Leo said.

‘These old men are no threat, ignore them,’ Michelle said.

‘These old men are after you,’ Gold said.

‘What level are they?’ Leo said.

‘Only about level twenty, slightly bigger than the ones you were practising on last week,’ Gold said. ‘Ready?’ He moved into a long defensive stance.

‘Hell, yeah,’ Leo said, moving into a defensive stance as well. ‘It’ll be good to practise on something worthwhile.’

The three demons rushed them. Gold generated chi and blew one up, then paused before sending his fist through the head of another, making it disintegrate into black feathery streamers. He grimaced at the delay between giving the order and his human body responding. The third demon stayed out of his reach and tried to grab Michelle. Leo took it by the arm, swung it onto the ground, and ran his palm into its nose, breaking its face and destroying it.

‘Ugh, what is that stuff they turn into?’ Michelle said. ‘It is disgusting!’

‘Demon essence,’ Gold said. He checked Leo, who had some essence on his hands, black and oozing. ‘You’ll need to wash that off, Leo. It’ll burn after a while and poison you if it’s left on for too long.’

‘Yeah, Mr Chen told me,’ Leo said. He looked around. ‘No faucets here; how do they water the plants?’

‘They have the water taps inside locked boxes, to stop people from stealing the water or leaving it running,’ Gold said. ‘Come over here to this one and wash your hands.’

‘People *do* that?’ Michelle said. ‘Sometimes I dislike this place very much.’

Gold put his hand over the lock on the box and opened it, then guided Leo’s hands under the running water.

‘People who are accustomed to poverty will take anything that’s not nailed down,’ Leo said. ‘Including water.’ He shook his hands. ‘All gone.’

Gold turned the water off and resealed the box. He turned to Michelle, who was leaning heavily on the box, her face ashen. ‘Are you all right, ma’am?’

‘Are you well enough to take me home?’ Michelle said.

Leo took Michelle’s arm. ‘We’ll take you home right away, ma’am.’

Michelle leaned on Leo as he guided her back across the road. He bent to carry her but she waved him away. ‘No. Don’t. I can walk.’

‘Is this the first time you’ve been attacked?’ Gold said.

Michelle shook her head.

‘No, but it’s the first time without Mr Chen along to make them explode quickly,’ Leo said.

Michelle began to sob silently.

‘It’s all right now, Michelle, you’re safe,’ Leo said.

Gold moved to the other side to help guide Michelle. Her face was pale and streaked with tears as she leaned heavily on them.

‘Don’t pass out on us now, my Lady, we’re nearly there,’ Gold said gently.

Michelle glared at him. ‘I am not going to faint! I am stronger than that.’

Leo caught her as she collapsed, unconscious, and carried her to the car.

Gold alerted the Dark Lord and he was waiting for them when they arrived back at the Peak apartment. Michelle had regained consciousness, but she was weak and needed assistance up to the eleventh floor. As soon as they arrived at the apartment’s front door, Xuan Wu scooped her into his arms and took her into the bedroom.

‘Will she be all right?’ Gold asked Leo as they went into the kitchen to wait.

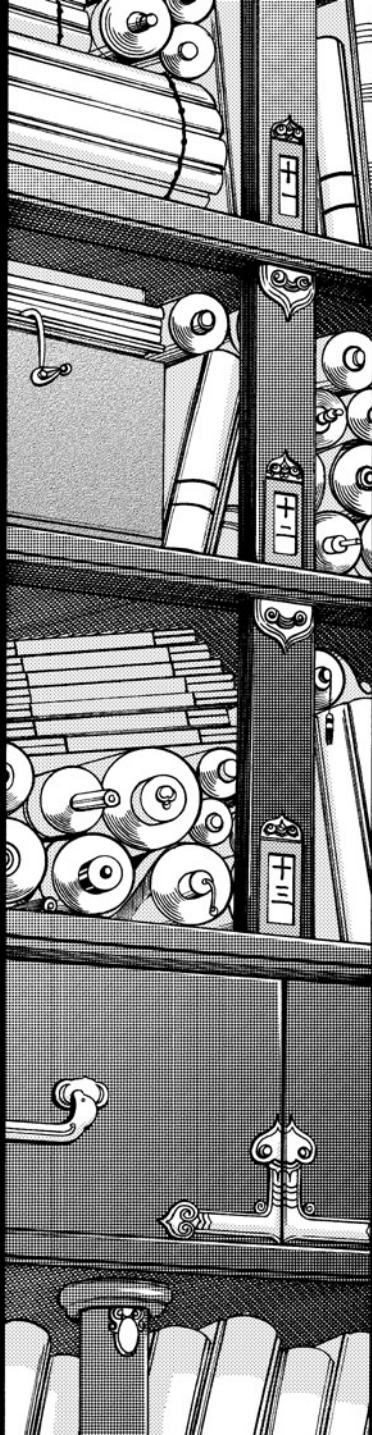
‘Yeah, she’s done this before,’ Leo said. ‘Very ... *sensitive*. She’s passed out after a very big performance, too. The doctor says that she suffers from slightly low blood pressure, but really it’s just ‘cause things get to her.’

Gold shook his head. ‘Humans. I’ll never understand.’

‘Women. Ditto,’ Leo said.

BEGINNINGS

1720



HOW DID ALL
THIS BEGIN?

HOW DID THIS STORY
COME TO BE?

HOW, IN THE
LONG-LIVED
LIVES OF THE
IMMORTAL *SHEN*,

DOES FATE
INTERVENE
AND BRING US
UNIONS

BOTH
STRANGE
AND
UNEXPECTED?



JUST AS
EVERY STORY
HAS ITS
BEGINNING,
EVERY
TALE HAS
AN END.

THIS TALE
BEGAN 275
YEARS AGO,
WITH THE
MEETING OF
TWO SMALL
SHEN --

AN UNLIKELY
PAIR IN THIS
FEARSOME
WORLD
OF GODS
AND DEMONS.



... GOLD, THE CHILD OF A
BUILDING BLOCK OF THE WORLD.



... AND JADE, A
DRAGON PRINCESS.

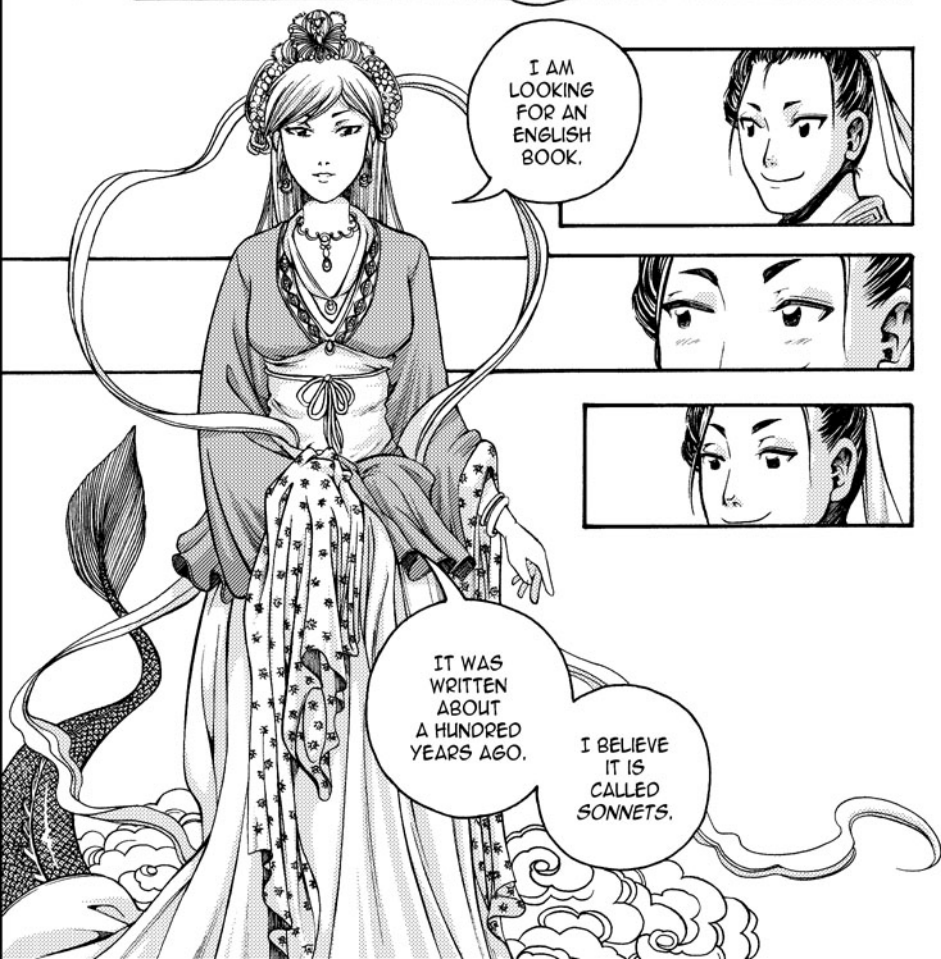


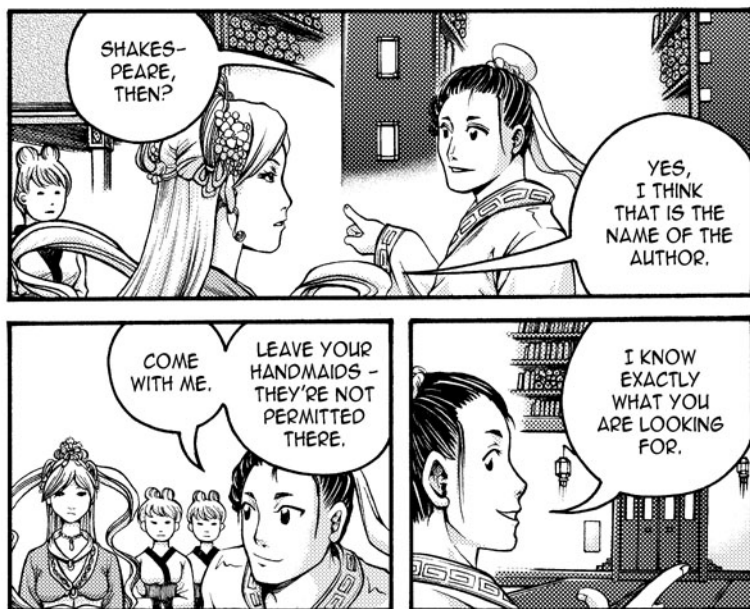
THE YEAR

1720

THE HALL OF
RECORDS.

THE LIBRARY
OF THE GODS.
EVERY BOOK
IN EXISTENCE
HAS A PLACE
HERE.





'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.'

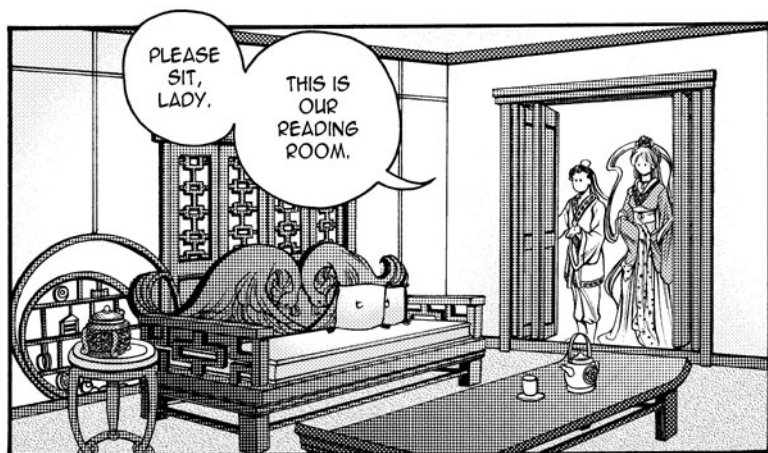
'There was a jade Building Block?'

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.



She must have slipped past me when she came in, she wasn't expected until later, the Archivist said.

LEPATHY TELEPATHY TELEPATHY TELEPATHY TELEPATHY

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



Thank you, Archivist, Gold 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.





‘You didn’t hear what he said, Princess’

Gold sat 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.'



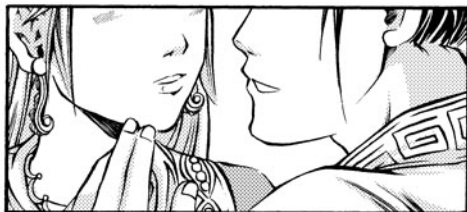
'That was part of the bet. The longer he could make you hold out before submitting, the more his brothers will be forced to pay.'

Gold moved closer to Jade and guided the teacup out of her hand onto the table. He took her hand in his.



'You deserve much better than that furry bastard, my Lady. You have waited too long for someone to treat you with the care and respect that you deserve.'

'Much too long,'
he whispered.





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.



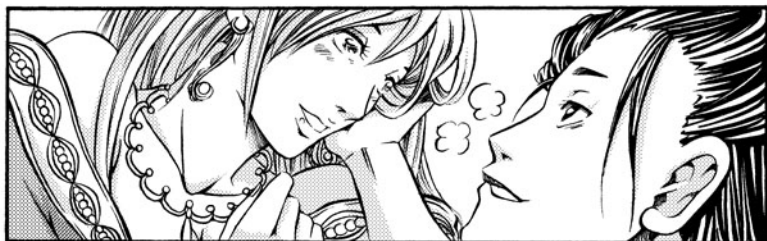


Gold turned to look at Jade. 'Let's run away together,' he said. 'I have a fortune on the Earthly Plane, Princess. Nothing is holding me here. Run away with me.'

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.



'Wait for me there 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 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 to the Western Palace. 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. And no funny business.

TELEPATHY TELEPATHY TELEPATHY TELEPATHY

At that, Gold smiled,
and disappeared.





'FUNNY
BUSINESS'?

HEAVEN
FORBID,
ARCHIVIST.



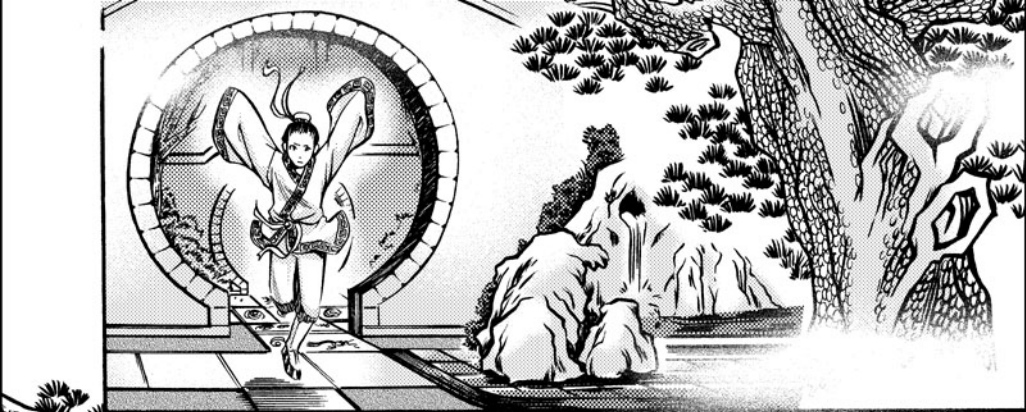
WESTERN
PALACE

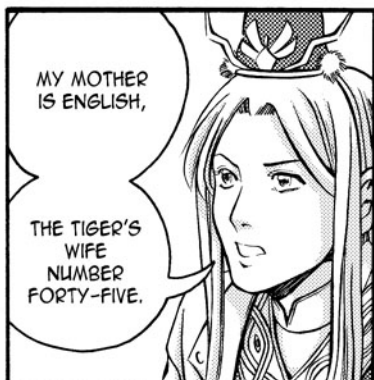
HOME OF
BAI HU, THE
WHITE TIGER.

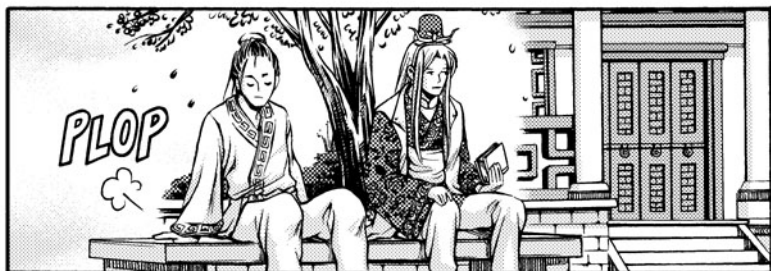


NOW TO
FIND THE
BOOK—

AH!







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. 'May I?'



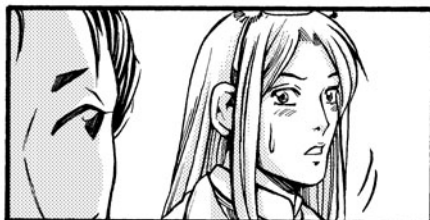
'The love described in these poems is love that is true and would last the test of centuries. All that dragon would give you is suffering.'

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



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





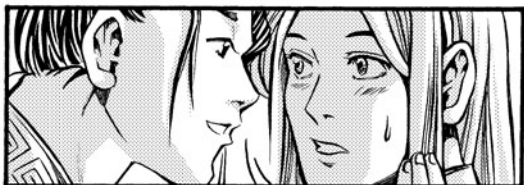
‘A woman’s gentle heart, but not acquainted
With shifting change, as is false women’s fashion;’



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

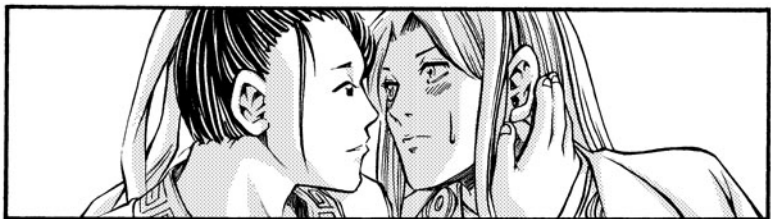


‘A man in hue, all “hues” in his controlling,
Which steals men’s eyes and women’s souls amazeth.
And for a woman wert thou first created;
Till Nature, as she wrought thee, fell a-doting,’



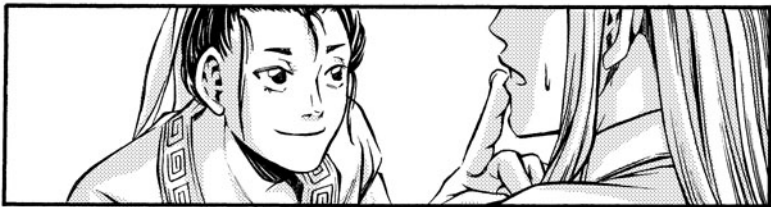
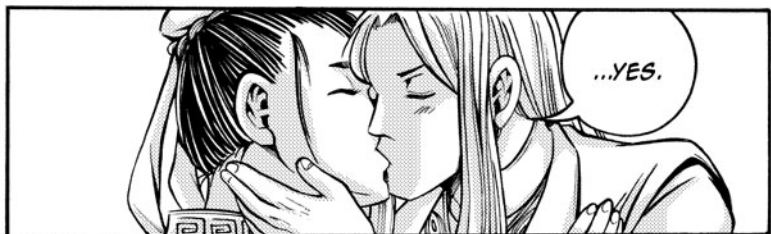
‘And by addition me
of thee defeated,’

Gold reached around to turn William's head towards him. He studied William's face for a long time, eyes unreadable.



This particular tiger's son was not the usual large, brawny Horseman. His skin was pale and delicate, almost transparent, and his hair was shining platinum blonde. He was slender and young, graceful and languid. Gold smiled.

He then pulled William in and kissed him.



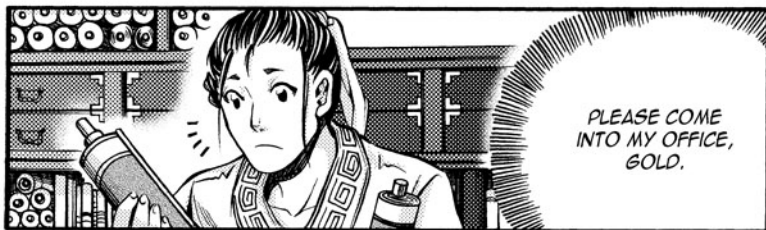
'Have you ever done this before?'

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.'

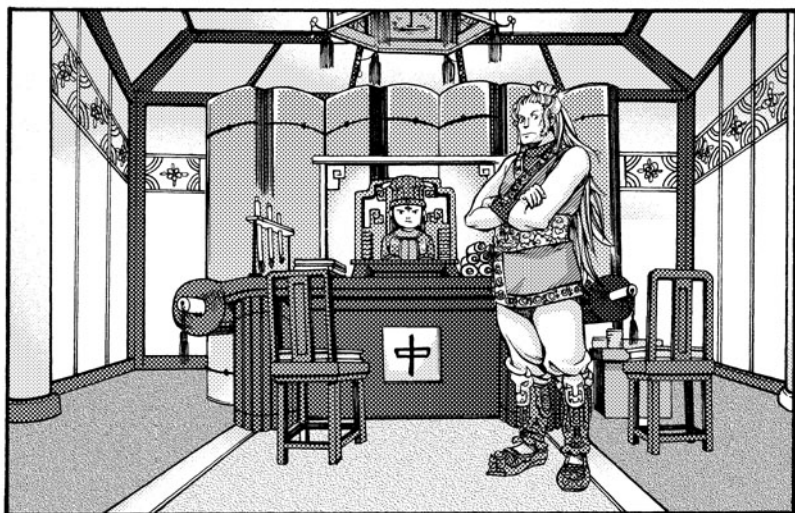
Gold felt remarkably proud of himself as he returned to cross-indexing the scrolls. He had rescued the two fools from each other, shown young William where his true preferences lay, and had had a very enjoyable experience doing it. He quietly wondered if Jade was still searching for the non-existent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

He chuckled quietly as he picked up the next scroll.

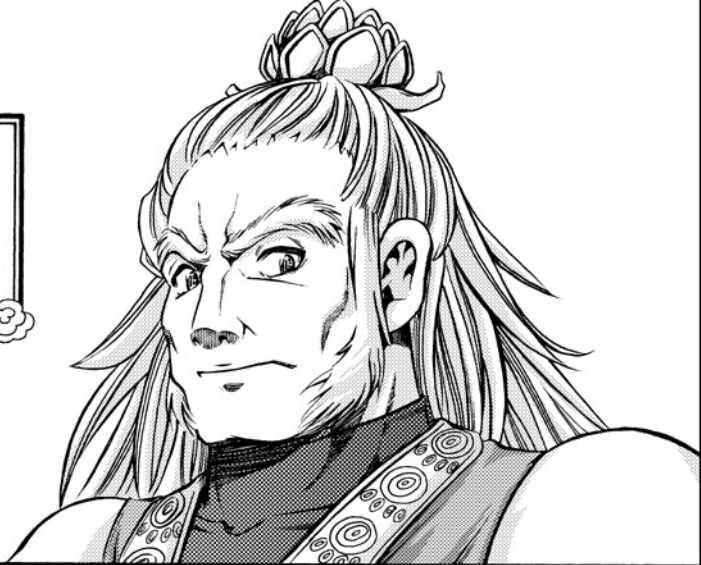


TELEPATHY GET THEE TO MY OFFICE TELEPATHY





THE
WHITE TIGER
OF THE
WEST,
BAI HU.



LORD
BAI HU.



GRR...

RISE.



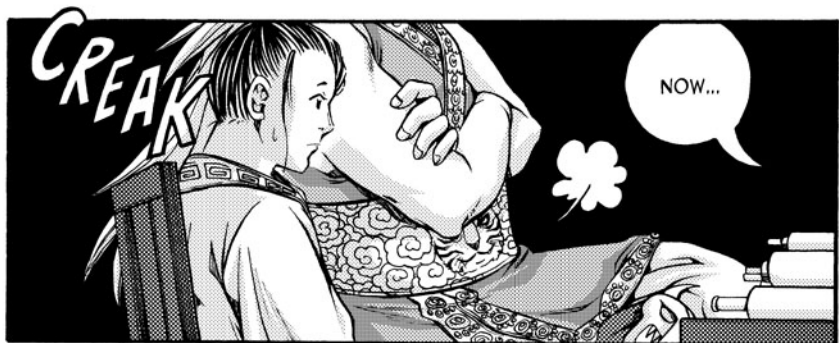
ARCHIVIST
...

SIT,
GOLD.



CREAK

NOW...





‘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.

‘What will we do with it?’ the Tiger said.

‘Gold is working here as punishment for a similar transgression,’ the Archivist said. ‘Obviously 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.’ Then, with emphasis, he added ‘Because she wants to kill you first.’



‘I did both of them a favour!’ Gold argued.

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

The Tiger spoke up. '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 Dragon King 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?'



'I have a solution.' The Archivist said finally. '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.'



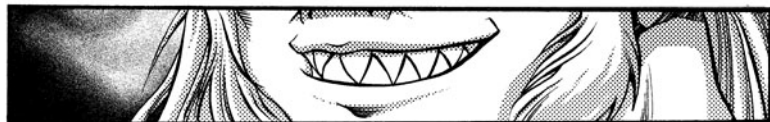


'Works for me,' the Tiger said. 'How long will it take him to finish the scrolls?'

'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.'



'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
ONE HUNDRED
YEARS.

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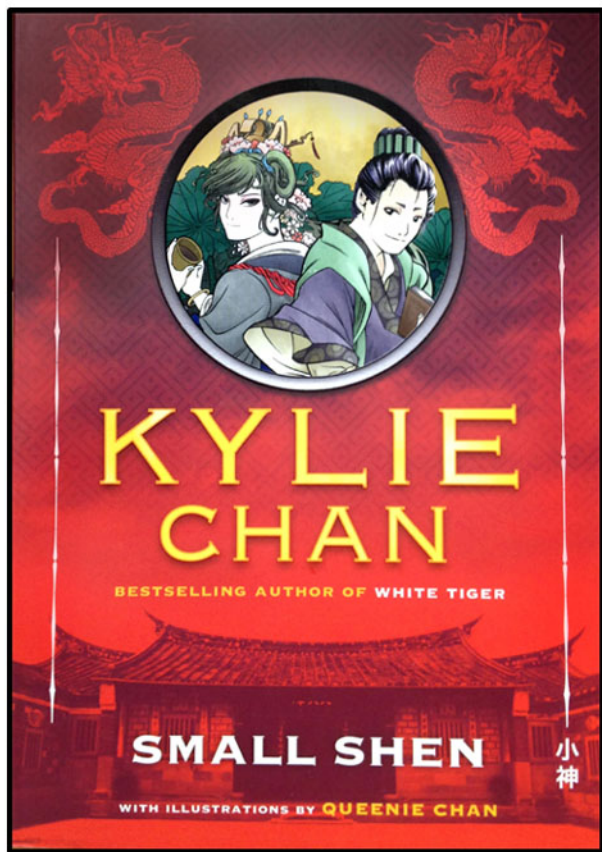
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