



Emerald - A Birthstones story
By Kimberly Burke and J. Falcon

Ryu let his eyes flick from the laptop screen to the hard copy to the clock and back again. Ten more minutes and the call would be over, by then Thomas should have cleared airport security and be on the plane with him. He suspected the delay was Murphy. Murphy was a wonderful guide dog but made things complicated when traveling with all the paperwork and vet certificates and crap, but Thomas wouldn't travel without him and rightly so. He was Thomas' eyes and one of his dearest friends.

"Mr. Takagawa, do you agree to the terms on page ninety of the contract?"

Ryu glanced down at the paper and his notes in the margin. "Yes, if the codicil is added like we discussed last time. The company requires the extra quarter percent paid out over the next year."

"Of course, of course."

Ryu allowed himself the luxury of rolling his eyes since he was alone in the cabin. "Send the draft to me and I'll review it next week. When that is complete we'll arrange a face to face meeting in London to get everything signed by the May deadline."

"I was hoping that this one would be a stop gap measure and you'd be willing to sign it...." The lawyer on the other end was wheedling now.

"No." He let that hang in the air.

"The revision will be ready shortly and delivered to your office in Tokyo by Tuesday afternoon."

"I'm out of pocket until the twenty-second. No rush on the next draft." Let them chew on that one. "Gentleman, I need to go. As always, a pleasure doing business with you and, on behalf of my father, have an excellent weekend."

Various goodbyes were said and he hung up, grateful it was over. He quickly tucked away the laptop and all the papers into his messenger bag and locked that in the narrow safe. The plane would be returning to Tokyo after it carried him and Thomas to Bali, his work would be protected until he needed it again.

The intercom buzzed. "Sir? Your guest is on the tarmac."

"Excellent. Open the door and let him in."

The plane's hatch door opened with a hiss and the stairs extended out. A quick check through the portal gave Ryu visual confirmation that Thomas was most of the way across the tarmac, Murphy ambling along ahead of him. Thomas was looking good, if a little thin. It was hard to tell with the winter coat still on, but his features were sharper. This time of year was always hell on him and the break would be welcome; time to put some color into those pasty New England cheeks.

The attendant waited for Murphy and Thomas to ascend the stairs before guiding them to the main cabin.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Ryu, but you know how it is getting Murphy through customs. This time the claim was perhaps I was not blind at all."

Ryu chuckled before giving Thomas a kiss on the cheek. "You telling me we need papers from the vet for you, too?"

His lover smiled at him in a most mischievous way before giving him a gentle kiss and murmuring low enough only Ryu could hear him. "Even you are not as kinky as to send me off to a vet, are you?"

"Only if I get to hold the leash," he murmured back. "Let's get you and Murph settled so we can take off."

The flight attendant backed away as Ryu took hold of Thomas' elbow and guided him over to one of the leather chairs. Murphy looked at it and circled before squeezing in between the chair and the cabin wall.

Thomas settled in and whistled low. "Very nice. We're more of an economy traveling duo, usually."

"Don't think this is typical of me either," he said as he settled in the seat opposite and nodded to the attendant. "My father was feeling very generous on New Year's."

The attendant went back to the refreshment station and pulled the curtain across to give them privacy, bowing deeply to Ryu on his way out.

Thomas was fingering the soft leather, smiling. Clearly he was very tickled by the luxury. "I would send him a thank you note if it were at all appropriate."

Ryu nodded. "He would be touched if you did such a thing."

"Then I will do it as soon as I get home." There was a contented sigh and Thomas settled back in the chair, folding his hands over his stomach.

The speakers in the cabin crackled to life. "Mister Takagawa-san, we're ready for departure, please ensure you and your guest are prepared."

Ryu touched the intercom button on the wall next to him. "We're ready. Estimated time to Los Angeles?"

"Four hours and thirty minutes, Takagawa-san. On the ground for a half hour for refuel and Murphy-chan's biological break, then the next leg."

"Thank you, Ito." Ryu released the intercom button and settled back in his seat.

"I'm sure Murphy will need it by then as well, I left the toilet lid up by mistake this morning and he had a help himself water dish."

"There is an oversized litter box thing further back in the cabin if you want to try that for him." Ryu sipped from his glass. "We'll get drinks and lunch once we're up in the air, if you're hungry."

"Famished."

The light jet rolled away from the hangar and out onto the small, private runway. There was little disturbance from the g-force as it sped up and swooped into the air, taking a sharp turn and climbing almost effortlessly into the sky. Once above the clouds, the windows dimmed to keep the glare out of the cabin.

"You should eat and then stretch out and take a nap," Ryu said as he watched New England fall away below them. "You look tired. Up late grading?"

"Yes, I was. I burned some midnight oil to get it done. Oddly, I don't seem to have as much as I used to." His lover's eyes creased as he smiled. There were dark circles there as well, not that Thomas would admit to being tired. "How was London?"

"Damp." Ryu shrugged. "More meetings than ever fit in a week, as usual. Finished up the last one while you went through the gauntlet."

"Without our work, whatever will we do to fill a whole week?" His lover teased.

"I have a few things planned, but mostly it's going to be baking some heat into your bones until you make me take you home."

Thomas nodded as he reached over to give Ryu a squeeze. "I am looking forward to it."

The attendant slid the curtains back and came out carrying two covered trays, which, from the aroma wafting out from underneath, concealed pasta carbonnara. Nice. He set them down on the table then wheeled it over, locking it into place before going back to the service area to return with a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc.

"Much nicer than the tuna sandwich and can of coke on a commercial flight, no?"

His lover inhaled deeply and made a contented rumble. "You don't even get the sandwich anymore. Costs ten dollars."

"Ah. I usually end up going business class at the last minute. They still pretend to care there."

"I tried to convince the university I need to travel in business class, due to Murphy, but they didn't buy it."

Ryu sipped at his wine. "Well, if you want me to add you to my frequent flyer account so you can get the upgrades, let me know."

"I will, but I don't have to fly nearly as often as you do." Thomas slipped the cover off his plate and set it gently on the table, not letting go until it was carefully placed. "At the rate you're going, you'll spoil me."

"You deserve it," Ryu murmured. "For as long as I have the means."

Thomas' cheeks turned pink and he took a sip of his wine. "It's a wonder you keep this old face hanging around."

Ryu finished chewing and drank some wine before answering. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

The rest of the flight to California was quiet; Thomas and Murphy taking naps while Ryu did a couple of crossword puzzles and then watched a movie. The change of air pressure from the descent into LA woke Thomas up. The aircraft lighted on the runway and Thomas scrubbed at his face, yawning broadly. Murphy also woke, sticking his nose against an air vent and whimpering.

"I think I dozed off there."

"Yes," Ryu murmured, glancing up from his puzzle. "A couple of hours. We're coming into LAX now."

Thomas stretched again and gave another wide yawn. "Well, I will be more company now, I feel a million times better."

"Cool. There are clothes for you in the back if you want to change into something more comfortable for the next leg."

Thomas nodded and when the plane came to a full stop and the pilot announced that it was safe to unbuckle and walk around the cabin, he got up, taking off his coat and gathering up Murphy's leash and harness. "I will, but first, I think someone needs to relieve himself."

"Sure. Can I come with you?" Ryu looked up as he popped his seatbelt loose.

"Well, of course." His lover chuckled and held out his hand for Ryu to take. "Start spending some time together now, instead of me being half asleep."

"I'm sure I'll sleep during the next part." He stood and intertwined his fingers with Thomas'. "Thank you for coming on vacation with me."

"Thank you for making me take the time off and come." Thomas squeezed his fingers as they walked down the stairs and onto the warm tarmac.

LA was sunny and bright, much warmer than it had been in New England. Ryu put on his sunglasses and stretched in the light. "Now this is more like it."

Thomas let go of Murphy's lead long enough to loosen his shirt collar; the dog wasted no time in making his escape to a convenient patch of grass.

"Aw man, he was about to pop." Ryu snickered at the look of relief in Murphy's big brown eyes.

"He must have been." Thomas chuckled and waited for the canine's return. "Poor thing, I would imagine the big litter pan would be lost on him."

"Wasn't he paper trained?"

"If he was, it was so long ago that I don't know if he remembers. Lillian wouldn't allow paper on the floor for him seeing as she didn't want to be picking up poop inside or having me step in it."

"Right. Well, after this it's one more refueling stop before Bali so we're going to need to do something for him."

"If he starts to whimper and pant, we can try him out in it. Desperation might just be his impetus." Thomas shook his head and laughed. "Well, here's a romantic conversation... dog pee."

Ryu shrugged. "It's normal and I don't mind, but if you prefer I can talk about what I have planned for you in our tropical paradise."

"I'd like that, seeing as questions were forbidden."

"You're going to Bali, how much did you need in the way of details past that?"

"May I ask where we're staying?"

"A place on the beach." Ryu nodded to the attendant who'd come up behind them and took the offered bottle of water. "Private and secluded. Has servants."

"Sounds lovely." Thomas shifted from one foot to the other, stretching out his legs. The attendant almost had to place the water in his hand before he noticed the offer. "Oh, thank you."

"I thought about a hotel...."

"But figured some of our more recreational activities might scare the others?" Thomas quirked his eyebrow and grinned at Ryu.

"Mmmhmm." Ryu glanced around before leaning in close enough to whisper, "You still want to be fisted?"

There was a jolt to his lover's body, as if he'd hit Thomas with a gentle electric shock and Ryu could see his adam's apple bob, swallowing against a dry throat. Thomas unscrewed the cap of the water bottle and took a sip, nodding as he did.

"And you would be more comfortable in private?" Ryu stepped closer, crowding into Thomas' personal space.

"Yes." Thomas didn't back away, but there was a fine trembling now, fear, anticipation; Ryu could read some of it on Thomas' face. There was a definite heat radiating from his lover now as well.

"Tomorrow night," he promised then kissed Thomas: a sharp bite to his lover's lower lip, taking possession of Thomas' mouth.

His lover was compliant, allowing Ryu to taste him, kissing him back. Thomas rocked his hips toward Ryu. It had been too long.

"I want you," Ryu whispered roughly. "Want you under me and taking it."

"Oh God." Thomas whimpered. Small beads of sweat were appearing on his forehead. "I want that, too."

Ryu delicately traced the line of Thomas' jaw with his fingertip. "Make you scream."

Thomas' chuckle was forced, trying to sound relaxed, but his whole body was now tight as a bowstring.

"I'm going to back to my seat," Ryu murmured. "Because if I stay here with you I would do something very foolish."

"I will be in momentarily... to settle again." Thomas voice was thick, low. "I just have to collect Murphy."

"When the attendant goes forward to sit with the pilot -- you are going to service me."

"Yes, sir." Thomas bowed slightly in Ryu's direction; outwardly a show of politesse, but between them personally so much more.

One more stroke of Thomas' cheek and he turned away, headed back to the stairs and his seat. Knowing that relief was coming made it easier to leave Thomas standing there alone; far better than pushing the man to his knees and taking him now.

The cabin was cool in comparison to the LA sun. Ryu settled into his chair and waited, taking another sip of the water. The attendant milled about politely, quietly, pretending to pay no attention to anything going on. It didn't take long before Thomas appeared back through the doorway, Murphy leading the way. His lover's movements were stiff and he was bent in the middle slightly.

Ryu chuckled heartlessly but didn't say anything as the door was secured and they taxied to the runway. Soon they were back up in the air, the corporate jet cutting effortlessly through the atmosphere. The attendant came over and bowed to Ryu. "Is Takagawa-san ready for his brandy now?"

"Yes. Nothing for Dr. Nolan except water."

"Hai." The attendant bowed low, not shifting his eyes toward Thomas at all.

"Then you are relieved until we land in Hong Kong. Please make sure the bed is turned down."

"Hai." Another bow and the attendant walked away to complete Ryu's requests.

Thomas' face was flushed red almost to the point where his ears looked hot to the touch.

Ryu just watched, sipping his brandy after it was handed to him. When the door had clicked shut between their compartment and the front of the plane he unbuckled his seatbelt and stretched. "Thomas."

"Yes, sir?" Thomas' also undid his seatbelt, letting it fall to either side of him, sliding out of the chair to kneel on the floor. There was something appealing about that when he was still in his pleated trousers and shirtsleeves.

"Come here. I want to kiss you."

His lover felt with his fingers until they touched the base of Ryu's chair, bending his head back and waiting.

Ryu just looked at Thomas, sipping his brandy. The tight expression on Thomas' face was easing as he dropped into headspace. "You should relax. Everyone here is trustworthy."

Thomas' body visibly relaxed, as did his face. His color was slowly returning to normal as the humiliation bled away.

Ryu put his hand on top of Thomas', letting his thumb rest against the pulse point in his lover's wrist. He gently rubbed the soft skin there, feeling the heart rate continue to slow as he kept drinking his brandy. "This trip is for both of us, away from everyone and their expectations."

Thomas nodded, his heart rate continuing to slow until it was almost normal, heightened slightly belying his arousal. "Thank you, sir. You think of everything."

"Not everything, but enough." Ryu set aside the empty glass and leaned forward, barely touching his lips to Thomas'. "Thank you for accepting me into your life."

"Thank you for being everything I need." Ryu could feel Thomas' pulse in his lips, in his throat. The heat coming from him was a welcome warmth. Sleeping alone was always so cold.

Ryu cupped his hands around Thomas' skull, holding his lover there as they kissed. He did love this man so very much. His lover's tongue responded to the tickling and coaxing, it played with Ryu's mouth; teasing him. Thomas moved closer still, pressing up against Ryu. Ryu spread his legs, letting Thomas slide between them. His lover gently touched his thighs. Fingers softly stroked over the fabric of his pants, then more firmly massaged into the muscles in deep strokes. He groaned and tightened his grip on Thomas' head, biting at Thomas' lips.

Thomas gasped and his hands stroked inward, touching Ryu's erection through his pants, not opening them, waiting for an order or permission. "Please."

"Yes." He barely recognized his own voice, so guttural and needy.

The air felt cold as it rushed in through the newly opened button and fly. Thomas' hands were warm and a little damp, but this made them slide smoothly up and down his cock. The skin of Thomas' hands was so soft, almost as soft as his mouth or his ass. It was so good. Only sex with someone else ever felt this good and Ryu's own hand was a poor second. He thrust his tongue deeper into Thomas' mouth, mimicking the hands that were stroking him. There was a muffled moan from Thomas, and one of the hands stopped stroking him to gently cup his balls, pulling them out of the opening in his pants to roll and fondle them.

Ryu's breath hitched deep in his chest. Thomas always knew exactly what made it feel best, always had. It was part of the reason they were still together, despite the travel, despite the age difference, despite the cultural divide. He wanted this man, he always did.

The massaging pressure was becoming intense as his lover squeezed his cock as Thomas' hand traveled up it, thumb sweeping over the top to smear the precome over the head and back down the shaft. This eased the slight burn from the increasingly rough stroking.

He pulled away from the kiss. "Close," he whispered as he leaned back against the seat.

The maddening hands disappeared for a moment and there was a crinkle of a plastic wrapper. Trust Thomas to have put a condom in his pocket. The cool, slippery latex was expertly rolled down over Ryu's cock, causing him to flinch only momentarily.

His lover lowered his head to capture the tip of Ryu's erection in his mouth. It was like being doused in the most pleasant moist fire, the suction was almost painful.

Ryu closed his eyes and let the fire consume him.

When he opened his eyes again, his lover was gently nuzzling his lap, looking contented. "Think I lost you there for a moment."

"It's been a while," he murmured.

"I'm happy it pleased you so much, sir." Thomas smiled and kissed Ryu's inner thigh.

"It did." Lassitude had replaced arousal in his system.

His lover rested his cheek against Ryu's leg and smiled, obviously pleased with himself.

Ryu petted Thomas' hair and let his eyelids drift closed again. "And you? Did you come?"

"No, sir. You didn't tell me I could."

Ryu chuckled. "Permission granted. Anything in particular you want?"

Thomas was quiet for a moment, there was just the unevenness of his breath and the way he was petting Ryu's leg that gave away that he'd not fallen asleep. "When sir recovers, I would very much like it if he would fuck me. As after tomorrow evening, it might be a day or so before it could happen again."

A sluggish roll of pleasure went through his groin at that. "Sir would be most pleased to fuck you."

Thomas continued his gentle petting, allowing for Ryu to recover in his own time, not trying to push him back into arousal too quickly. "I am very lucky that you are so indulgent."

"Tonight," he murmured. "Tomorrow I will be far more demanding."

He could feel Thomas swallow and nod. "Thank you, sir."

"And I would like it if we didn't do the whole trip this way, that I could be...your equal for part of it."

"Yes, of course, Ryu." Thomas' voice sounded now far more forceful and in control.

Ryu chuckled ruefully. "Remind me never to date an intellectual that can turn on a dime again."

Thomas kissed his thigh and smiled before nuzzling into his scrotum. "I would never presume tell you what to do. I love you just as you are."

"Except when I forget and run your life for you," he murmured regretfully. "I should go wash and then we can sleep for a few hours before we land in Hong Kong."

Thomas leaned back on his heels, letting Ryu up. "Of course. I'll just get changed." He sounded vaguely confused, like he was still processing what Ryu was saying to him, like he did when he was puzzling out some meaning behind the surface text.

Except Ryu didn't think he was being obscure this time. Sleep would certainly speed up the next time they could have sex. The conversation had been straightforward. He himself was frequently overbearing, lord knew his mother had told him that enough times.

Trust an English professor to try and overanalyze everything. The way Thomas' mind worked, he might have been chewing on something else completely different. Ryu loved him, but sometimes he was an odd man. Ryu dismissed the thought as he stripped off his clothes and did a cursory wash-up. It had been an exceedingly long day, starting with a business meeting in London and ending with sex at twenty thousand feet.

Thomas was already stretched out on the narrow bed with Murphy lumped across his feet, reading from the guidebook that Ryu had pulled out of his briefcase for

his lover. "These average daily temperatures sound heavenly. And the cultural sights. Tell me we're going to do more than sit on the beach."

"Right now all I want to do is lie down and sleep."

"Of course, of course." Thomas reached out and patted the space next to him.

"Rest. I'm just going to read."

He held back a groan. Reading meant 'reading out the most interesting bits' and trying to hold a conversation about them. "At least move Murphy so I can lie down."

"Well, isn't he already out of the way?" Thomas had the grace to blush a little when he swept his hand out to the edge of the bed. "I suppose not. I'm so used to sharing the bed with him at home that I don't think about it."

"Yeah, and I usually end up curled up on the edge of the bed then, too," he let slip.

"Well." Thomas pulled the blanket up. "Is there more bedding? You hog the sheets and pillows."

"Don't even start that. I do not hog the blankets." Ryu began quickly braiding his hair back.

Murphy was looking at them now, big brown eyes darting between Ryu and Thomas who was now tucking the pillows behind his head.

"Yes, you do. You should have seen my heating bill from the last time you visited."

"Bah." Ryu slipped a tie over the end of the braid and edged into the bed, pushing out with his feet and making Murphy oof at him. "Move, Murph."

"Ryu, he's used to sharing with me."

"Not tonight he's not. I love you, but I am not sharing a double sized bed with you and ninety pounds of retriever, no matter how much you both think so."

"Eighty pounds and be nice, he's got a delicate temperament," Thomas said primly, barely holding back a smile.

Ryu snorted and yanked a pillow away from Thomas. "Heh."

Murphy groaned and wriggled, bending himself around their feet until finally he got up and jumped off the bed. He tossed a baleful glance back over his shoulder at Ryu before purposefully heading to the closest of the executive chairs, taking his time climbing into it and turning before flopping down to rest his head on the armrest that was conveniently facing Ryu.

Ryu swore under his breath and turned off the cabin light. That would cure that. It was quiet for a few minutes and his lover had started to gently stroke his arm. Nice. Not quite a tickle. Soothing. He could hear Thomas' other hand running over the pages of the book in almost the same manner.

He was almost asleep when Thomas' voice broke the silence into a million tiny pieces. "Did you know that Indonesia is known as the 'Emeralds of the Equator?'"

"Uh." Was all Ryu could bring himself to say. He turned over and tried to ignore Thomas.

"Yes. Alternating between that and the 'Spice Islands'. We should pick up some spices while we're there."

This could go on all night.

"In the predominantly Moslem country of Indonesia the main religion of the island of Bali remains Hindu..."

"And in the tiny country of Takagawa-sama's plane it's sleep until you wake up."

"Oh course, of course. I'm sorry, Ryu. You go to sleep." The gentle petting started again, Thomas falling silent. The only sounds in the cabin were Murphy's sighing and the occasional sound of a page turning.

Ryu let himself relax again, actually drifting into a light doze, Thomas' warmth welcome in the chill of the air and not distracting.

"Huh."

It broke the calm like a pebble being tossed into a pond: the signal that Thomas was about to start talking again. Ryu rolled over and groped for the book, stealing it out of Thomas' hands and tossing it to the floor, well out of reach. "Good night, professor." He firmly rested his arm across Thomas' middle and made, 'really, I'm sleeping now' sounds.

His lover chuckled and scrunched further down on the mattress, holding Ryu and kissing his forehead. "Good night."

Mmm. This was nice; so nice all that was left was the mental irritation of Murphy's long sighs and doggie glare from across the room. He resolutely put it out of his mind and tucked himself closer to the furnace that was Thomas. Sleep, at last.

They were half way through their week in Bali. Wednesday had come up and smacked him on the back of the head that morning and reminded him that there were so many things to do that they hadn't even tried yet. Instead they'd lain out on the beach, bought some horrendously ugly shirts and wandered around the tiny villa that was theirs for the visit.

Ryu paused for a moment, looking over the fruit stand on the corner. It had all of the things that Thomas had become fond of, and that were left in a dish by their bedside each morning. One corner of Ryu's mouth curled up in a smile, it was good, but it wasn't as good as the stuff he stole off his mother's table in Hawaii. But then, he was a snob. The next breeze brought with it the sweet smell of frangipanis. The one after that brought the spicy cooking from the street vendor; fried meat best left unidentified, and vegetables. The streets of Denpasar were packed this time of day and a jostle from an old man wearing the ubiquitous sarong and smoking a clove cigarette got Ryu moving again.

He kicked over the engine on the old Yamaha that he'd rented for the day and skidded out onto the street, just beating the bus to the corner and cheerfully giving the driver the finger before zooming off again. The road, though it was generous to call it that, was packed with motorcycles, busses and trucks, everyone dodging the pedestrians who were sure Hindu was on their side and they would be safe. With a last philosophical shrug he left the city behind. Yes, he'd come looking for some sort of souvenir of their trip but the bike had called to him louder. It had been months since he'd ridden.

He bent down over the handlebars. The mountain road back to the villa opened up before him. There was still a lot of traffic going both ways on this one-lane cowpath, but he'd see what the bike could do. Steep incline, no guardrails. Perfect. Like when he was on the circuit and would take side bets for the extra money. He'd get the speed freak out of his system now before picking up Thomas and going for a more sedate ride over to the Monkey Forest or perhaps up the mountain to take in the silence.

It was going to be difficult to pry his lover away from the beach at all. Thomas had practically staked a permanent claim on the porch and its comfortable chairs. He'd not said a single word about how much school stuff there would be for him to do when he got home.

As the incline of the hill increased again, the vegetation on each side of the road became denser and greener. A heavy mist rolled up the hill from the warm ocean, settling on his skin and cooling it. It was also making things really hard to see, as it traveled in bilious packs of white ghosts across the road.

A big truck cresting over the ridge from the other way caused Ryu to swerve a moment, his back tire knocking loose several stones from the edge of the road and into the ravine next to it. He glanced and mentally estimated how far down it was - and how much it would hurt. It just added to the adrenaline as he zipped around the next curve and down the ridge into the next pocket valley. A break in the vegetation on the left was his signal to turn and head down the valley toward the beach.

From his vantage point, he could only see the white strip of sand against the aquamarine ocean. The villa was shielded from prying eyes by the dense foliage; the only thing still visible from the road was the huge sandstone Garuda that served as the pillars where at one point a gate might have hung. Right now he could care less about ancient history or local tradition. He had a motorcycle again and he was going to ride it until they made him give it back.

The path to the beach was curved, downhill and an empty private road. It was time to see just how fast this old beast could go. He looked down at the speedometer; just over sixty. That was nothing. It made him long for his racing bikes again. He crouched lower, trying to improve the aerodynamics. Sixty-five. Seventy. He was running out of room so he throttled back and coasted into the driveway, hearing Murphy, who had come charging out onto the veranda, barking up a storm. The black lab's happy barks echoed loudly as he sounded off at Ryu, his tail wagging in excited circles. He'd spent the last few days off-harness and was taking full advantage of his ability to make a racket.

"Who fed you a double dose of puppy pills this morning?" he asked as he pulled off his helmet and shook out his hair. "Thank you for announcing me better than any doorbell."

"Hallo, Mister Ryu." Superman, the driver, was coming out of the garage; wiping the oil from his hands. He actually spent more time tinkering with the car than driving it. "I hear you come down the road. I can fix that noise, if you want."

"Nah. I just borrowed it for the day."

Superman's dark brow furrowed in concern, but his eyes looked very bright and hopeful. "Then you will not need a drive somewhere today?"

"Nope. You have the day off to do whatever you'd like. You need today's cash now?" he asked cannily.

Superman gave the worst impression of shocked Ryu'd ever seen. "It is up to Mister Ryu when I get paid. I cannot ask."

"Of course, of course. Fifteen thousand rupiah?" He pulled out his wallet and began mournfully counting out small bills.

"Mister Ryu pays for my services forty thousand a day, but it would be gracious to see to thirty-five thousand."

"I was positive I had paid you thirty thousand yesterday. Are you sure?"

"Mister Ryu, Superman is very honest and would not try and cheat you." Now came the mock indignation. "Okay, maybe thirty-two thousand."

"Now you're trying to rob poor Murphy of his dog food, but I imagine I can part with thirty-two thousand." He, of course, put thirty-five into Superman's hand.

The driver smiled at him, his hand closing around the money. "Mister Thomas' dog is already fat."

"Shhh. Thomas just thinks he's fluffy."

Superman gave him a wink before turning to head back into the garage, stuffing his money in his pocket. "You have fun taking tour today on the noisy machine."

"You have fun tinkering with the car and I'll see you tomorrow morning." He slipped the helmet over the handlebars before striding through the house. Murphy met him at the edge of the large sitting room; tail still moving a mile a minute. "Thomas?"

"In here." Thomas' voice drifted in from the huge veranda.

Ryu gave Murphy a scratch behind the ears as he crossed into the living room and out onto the deck. The faux wall had been pulled back, so the living room had

become a shaded adjunct to the outdoors. Thomas was in the edgeless pool, under the shade of one of the thatched umbrellas. "Your merman impression again?"

"The pool is lovely. Almost as warm as bathwater." Thomas smiled at him from under the brim of his white-straw fedora. "Don't worry, Ibu Wegawi was out here talking to me until you got back."

Ryu peeled off his sweat-soaked tank top then crouched down to start untying his sneakers. "Can't keep you out of the water, huh?"

"Well, at least it's much warmer than any pools I've been to in North America." Thomas chuckled and swished the water around him. Murphy swam toward him and unsuccessfully tried to gain purchase on one of the sunken barstools Thomas was sitting on. "I tried keeping him out. I'll make doubly sure it's cleaned before we leave and any damage he's done can be billed to me."

"Hey, he's probably overheated from trying to defend all this new territory."

"He's been busy but a lot of people don't like dogs in the pool."

Ryu shrugged. He was paying enough that if he wanted to give the dog a bubble bath in the pool they'd let him, but he didn't say that. It would only make Thomas start into another diatribe. "It'll be fine. Anyway, he just wants to be close to you, something I can understand."

"Well, I can think of one person I'd rather be close to now. I could hear you coming over the hill. Motorbike, huh?"

Murphy finally managed to balance himself on the submerged stool and rested his head on Thomas' arm, earning himself a lazy scratch behind the ear.

"Yeah. I thought I might get you out of here for the afternoon. Come for a ride with me." He stepped close enough to the water to let it close in over the tops of his feet.

"I might be persuaded to go riding with you this afternoon..." Thomas' voice was light and teasing. He sank further back against the pool's side, the water now coming up to his collarbone.

Ryu snorted. "Somehow I don't think you mean the bike." He backed away from the water and then stepped out of his pants, tossing them and his underwear on the pile of sodden clothing.

"Of course I meant on the bike." His lover chuckled and moved to turn in the water, facing in Ryu's direction. His face was the picture of feigned innocence, right down to the insipid grin and batting eyelashes.

"Maybe I should bend you over the bike."

"Like you did in San Francisco?"

Ryu paused on the edge of the water again, thinking about it. "Well, yeah. I like it."

"If I remember, I wasn't exactly complaining." The ripples from his toes lapped gently at Thomas, and he moved a little more to the side. "The water is fairly deep and it's warm, go ahead."

"Go ahead and do what? Exactly?" He splashed a small wave toward Thomas with his foot.

His lover splashed him back, the wave cresting over his ankles. "Jump, dive. I wouldn't suggest belly flopping."

Ryu glanced down at his nascent erection. "Uh. No." Then fell sideways into the pool, letting the warm water swallow him.

Not quite the bathwater that Thomas had said, it felt good against his skin taking away some of the sweat and heat, the humidity. He could hear the pool filters working as well as the echo of Thomas' voice as he spoke. Twisting underwater, he looked up through the filtered sunlight and had the idle wish that he'd never need to go home. It lasted about as long as his air did and he surfaced, releasing it to the daydream it should be. "Were you talking to me or to dogface?"

"I was telling Murphy not to swim overtop of you in an attempt to come to your rescue." Murphy was back up on the waters edge, pacing before jumping back in and paddling around, sometimes kicking up sprays of water with his front paws to catch in his mouth.

"Ah, the drowning thing." Ryu flipped his hair back out of the way.

"Yes, even off harness. But his judgment is not quite what it used to be for water rescue." Thomas waded toward him now, his shoulders were still pink from a previous sunburn, but it was better than the glaring white they had been.

"Oh?" Ryu held out a hand to Thomas, guiding him into a loose embrace.

His lover nodded and kissed him. "He's getting old. Some things are not quite what they used to be. I should have retired him two years ago."

"You have to give him away, don't you? When you get another dog."

"Yes. You don't bond well with the new one if you have other dogs."

"And they get jealous." He sighed. "Would the family who had him as a puppy want him? Or should I hit my mom up as a soft touch?"

Thomas shrugged and pulled him closer, their bodies gently bobbing and bumping in the water. "I haven't given it much serious consideration. I've grown quite attached to him."

"You thinking about just keeping him and not having a guide dog any more?"

"I know it's silly. I just don't like the idea of parting from him. He's only probably got a couple years left anyway, then I could get a new one."

"It's not silly at all. He's been your companion for...eight years." Ryu nuzzled under Thomas' chin, licking away the water. "I miss all the dogs I've owned too."

"They don't warn you about that part when you sign up for a guide dog." His lover tilted his head down in order to kiss him again.

"Or you don't want to hear it," he murmured as their lips met.

A happy sigh was the only sound that answered Ryu as Thomas opened his mouth, tracing his tongue over Ryu's lower lip.

Ryu closed his eyes and leaned in, pressing their bodies together firmly. He could feel Thomas' erection trapped against his abdomen, the heat radiating through the cloth of Thomas' swim trunks. His lover moved against him and moaned. "Left you alone too long."

"Remembering San Francisco fondly." Thomas murmured before kissing his jaw line and nipping at his earlobe.

"Slut," he murmured, laughing.

"Now, now... you only find my number on the walls of the highest class of men's room."

Ryu snorted. "Better not find your number anywhere."

"Possessive... I like it." Thomas purred back.

"Damn straight. We're a dedicated couple now."

"We should do something to celebrate that."

Ryu grinned. "Well, I was going to get you something, but the shiny bike distracted me."

Thomas ran his fingers over Ryu's face. "Well then, we'll have to do something else. Perhaps take the bike out after?"

He nibbled on Thomas' index finger as it skimmed his lips. "Mmmm. Could be."

"We could try what we started the other night too..."

"You're ready to try again?"

"Yes. I trust you, Ryu." There was certainty in Thomas' voice, no trepidation.

Ryu began to nod and then busted out laughing. "Dude, if I fist you there is no way you're going to be up to riding that bike."

"Well, I'm willing to take the chance. If you are."

"I think you're just chickening out of a bike ride with me on these roads, but let's do it. Go to the bedroom and wait for me."

"I still say we might do both." One more lingering kiss and Thomas pulled away, heading toward the steps that led from the pool to the master bedroom. Murphy followed in Thomas' wake, clambering out of the pool and lying down on the deck in the sun.

Ryu floated in the pool, letting himself relax in the buoyant water. He could hear the shower come on as Thomas got cleaned up. It was only when the water turned off again that Ryu climbed out of the pool and waited on the threshold between the bedroom and the outdoors, watching silently as Thomas dried off and prepared for him.

When Thomas had settled on the bed Ryu stepped forward, pulling on the nitrile glove and letting the edge of it snap against his skin. This time there was barely an instinctive flinch from his lover. The first time they'd tried this, Thomas just couldn't let go of the nervousness and trust him completely. Thomas looked far more relaxed today.

He let his fingers flow across the arch of Thomas' foot, over the top and then up one leg, pausing to swirl around the bump of one knee before resting his hand against Thomas' hip. "Thank you for sharing this with me."

His lover smiled, breathing deep. His muscles were lax under Ryu's hand. "Thank you for allowing me to."

"This time I think we'll just stay here and not slide into headspace. Hopefully it will help us both communicate." He sat on the edge of the bed, pushing up Thomas' near leg to allow himself access. "Shall we start?"

His lover nodded and took in one more deep breath and let it out. Even with the deep down trepidation Thomas was likely still feeling, Ryu couldn't help but notice that Thomas' erection was coming back impressively. With his bare hand Ryu stroked down the length of the erection, enjoying the warm skin under his fingers even as he dipped into the jar of thick lubricant with his gloved hand and slipped two fingers into Thomas' body.

His lover's muscles relaxed further and the erection bobbed up to meet his hand. Thomas moaned low and gasped when Ryu twisted his fingers to massage against Thomas' prostate.

"Easy." He watched as Thomas' skin flushed, the bright pink rising up his lover's midline and across his chest as Ryu kept up the erotic massage, going back again and again for more lube. The flush climbed, coloring Thomas' neck. It was only then that Thomas' breathing steadied and he relaxed enough to let Ryu slip a third finger in, stretching him that bit further. "Well done."

"Thank you." His lover's voice didn't have any of the strain in it from the other night. They might make it this time.

Ryu let go of Thomas' cock and reached out, settling Thomas' own hands on his erection. "Come for me. I want to watch you." It would also help his lover relax and let Ryu get more of his hand inside.

Thomas' hands worked over the length; thumb swirling over the purpling head. Ryu only kept his hand still by dint of will. He wanted to touch and taste that

passion and no, it was not the time for that. Now Thomas was moving his hips in time to the stroking, thrusting into his own fist and back onto Ryu's fingers, making incoherent sounds until he finally froze and spurts of semen coated his hand and chest.

Without waiting any longer, Ryu pressed his whole hand into Thomas, folding his thumb across his palm and squeezing his fingers together. As Thomas sighed, relaxing into the aftermath of his climax, Ryu pushed in, feeling the wide part of his hand push through and Thomas' body clench around his wrist. "You did it. Bear down."

He almost could have laughed at the look of what could only be described as satiated surprise on his lover's face. Thomas followed his instructions and bore down on Ryu's hand now trapped inside Thomas' body.

Ryu slowly curled his fingers into a fist and twisted his arm. He watched the reaction ripple up through his lover's body and had to smile as Thomas' hands clenched in the sheets and Thomas moaned in pleasure. "You're mine."

"Completely yours..." His lover's voice sounded different, not quite distant, but definitely detaching. Thomas fingers eased up on the sheets, but clenched again until his knuckles turned white when Ryu pulled his fist back to the point of almost pulling out before he pushed back in.

Ryu twisted his hand slowly then stopped, holding still and letting Thomas float in the sensation. Ryu rested his other hand on Thomas' pelvis, gently anchoring him. His lover was in another place now; his breathing was deep and even. He moaned gently, but didn't even try and speak; his muscles were pliable and he was completely lax, not even clutching the sheets anymore.

Ryu pushed in and out, going slowly and watching Thomas' face as he drifted deeper and deeper into pleasure. In some ways it was like he was touching Thomas for the first time; they were now connected in a place that allowed his lover to surmount pain and even pleasure. It was an internal world, but he was not there alone, he'd brought Ryu with him. Ryu's hand was as much being held and cradled by Thomas body as it was delivering the type of intensity and intimacy they both craved. It also meant that Thomas did trust him completely to take Thomas to these places.

He was awed by that trust and held the moment as long as he could before finally relaxing his hand and withdrawing. A towel took care of the worst of the mess and then he was lying down on the bed, holding Thomas in his arms. "So beautiful."

His lover groaned in response, turning fully toward Ryu and lying on his chest. It might be a while before the usually verbose doctor could speak again in full sentences. For now, it was good that he'd wrapped his arms around Ryu and was not totally in shock.

Ryu did manage to urge him upward enough to take a long drink of water and then let him rest again. Eventually they both drifted into a light doze while the sun overhead moved into the afternoon. Ryu couldn't get over how amazing the whole experience had been for both of them. It just made the trip that much more special. Finally, he could feel Thomas shifting against him, twisting to ease some of the ache that would be setting in now that the adrenaline had seeped out. Thomas' eyes were open and his eyelashes tickled Ryu's chest.

"Hi," he said softly, letting his hand drift down Thomas' back to rest against his waist.

"Hi. I think I went away for a bit, there." His lover pressed a kiss to the skin just where his head was resting.

"You did. That's what vacations are for."

"It's been so long since I had a proper vacation, I'm sorely bereft of any memory of what they can be like."

Ryu sighed. "I know what you mean, but we should work on that."

"Perhaps we should make this annual? Force ourselves to go somewhere and relax for a week. Doesn't have to be fancy, just away." He was given another kiss, Thomas' breath warm against his skin.

"Yes. Next time you get to pick where." Ryu squeezed Thomas closer for a moment in an ad hoc hug.

He could feel his lover smile. "How about Ireland?"

"Uh. Sure. Trade one emerald island for another. Could be a theme."

"Huh... Never thought about it." Thomas chuckled.

Ryu grinned. "And next time, you can do me."

The chuckling stopped and Thomas swallowed. "I would be honored, lover. Thank you."

"Mmmm. You ready to start on the second half of your vacation? I still have the bike sitting out front if you're feeling daring."

Thomas nodded, stretching until the afternoon light shifted to shine into his eyes and his back popped. "Yes, I think I can manage some time on the bike, so long as daring is my type of daring and not yours."

"I think I can manage that."

"Good." Thomas yawned and nuzzled into Ryu's chest. He chuckled again. "But first? I need a little more sleep."

The air was filled with the sounds of wood being chopped, stone being cut and sanding. The man, Hitarto, in a sarong and dress shirt was waiting for them in front of the open building, smiling and waving. His right-hand thumbnail was so long it curled. He was someone of great importance as the headmaster of the biggest artisan school in Bali.

Ryu had promised Thomas that they would go souvenir shopping, but taking him to one of the crowded pasars just hadn't felt right. Instead he had, through a connection, arranged for them to tour the school, letting Thomas touch and feel the work of the students that had agreed to this unusual request.

Hitarto came forward, his broad grin showing off next to all his teeth, he first took Ryu's hand in both his, before capturing Thomas' hand in the same manner. "Welcome, Mister Ryu and Mister Thomas. Our humble school is happy to receive you."

"We are honored that you are allowing the visit." He bowed slightly. "Could you tell us what you teach here?"

"Our school is most excellent for apprenticing in many of our arts. Carving, painting, making batik." Hitarto opened the heaving mahogany gate door behind him and stood out of the way, allowing them to pass through.

Inside, the low building had no interior walls at all and dozens upon dozens of young people sat on grass mats, taking instruction from masters on how to properly ply their trade. Thomas took a deep breath in; the smell of patchouli and incense hung heavy in the air. They had discussed this on the way over to the

school, trying to figure out the best way to let Thomas 'see' everything and yet at the same time, not letting the day become all about that.

Ryu stepped forward, already veering toward the batik, his favorite of the arts made here. Huge vats of dye bubbled away to themselves over low fires while young artists furiously applied and scraped off wax on the fabric before putting it into its next dye bath. The air was acrid with a chemical smell and Thomas coughed gently. Hitarto called over one of the students to show off his beautifully done green and purple design. The young man was just starting to apply gold leaf.

Ryu gestured to Hitarto and Thomas. "Why don't you show Thomas something else? I can tend to myself and I promise -- no touching anything without asking first."

Hitarto bowed to him and took Thomas by the arm, chatting to him as he led him away. "Is there anything you find very interesting?"

Thomas smiled and nodded. "I think perhaps I would enjoy observing some of the mask making. They are particularly interesting, very stylized."

Ryu followed their progress across the room visually until a loud splash caught his attention and the batik drew him in again. He watched, fascinated as the gold leaf was added and grinned at the artist when she looked up at him shyly. That section finished, he was reminded that Thomas was around here somewhere, so he glanced up, scanning the room until he spotted the towering-in-comparison figure of his lover. Walking over, Ryu overheard the last of an explanation.

"And so when Rama had to descend into the underworld to rescue his beloved, Sita, he had no other allies but the Monkey King to turn to for aid."

Thomas turned his head to smile in Ryu's direction and held up one of the goat-hide shadow puppets. Using one of the sticks attached to its hands, Thomas made it wave at him. Ryu chuckled softly and waved back at the puppet before resting a hand on Thomas' arm. Thomas was running his fingers over the edges of the puppet, a puzzled expression on his face. "So, then, this is a monkey."

Hitarto laughed. "No, you are wrong again, sir. That? Is a demon. Monkeys have big ears."

Ryu guided Thomas' fingers over the cutouts that defined the features. "It's easier to tell when they're backlit."

His lover hummed thoughtfully as his fingers traced over the delicate detail. "Can you imagine? This kind of laser precision with a knife?"

"It wouldn't have the same life to it, I think. The stories are carved into them with each nick of the blade." The gold gilt caught the sunlight and the paint was still so fresh you could clearly see each blood vessel, so lovingly painted into the demon's bulging eyes.

"Come, you should see some of our stone cutters, they are very fine."

Ryu nodded. "Are you getting the puppet, Thomas?"

"I really like it. I am just trying to think of where the perfect place to put it is."

"You have that shadowbox on the bookcase."

"Very true. Hmmm. It is lovely, so delicate feeling." Thomas was making that humming sound he always did when he was pretending to mull something over. The sale had already been made.

Ryu kept his game face on. "We'll haggle a price before we leave, if you're still not sure."

"That sounds excellent to me." His lover let Ryu take the shadow puppet from him and give it back to the student to finish it.

"And now I think we're about to be treated to some sculpture."

"Oh wonderful." Thomas' smile crinkled the corners of his eyes and he sounded very pleased.

Hitarto led them into an area where several young sculptors were working on sandstone carvings, the same type seen all over, from temples to yards to just next to the road. The largest one was well over twelve feet high and three students were working on it while the master barked orders at them. "This one is very important; it will replace a temple statue."

"Is there a piece of it my friend can touch, so he can see it?" Ryu asked softly, trying not to draw too much attention to the request.

"Yes, yes, of course." Hitarto allowed them to step by him and toward the statue.

Thomas reached out and gently ran his fingers over the near-polished sandstone.
"It's warm!"

"Yes. We use hot water to keep the stone very soft, so it carves so smoothly."

Ryu also reached out, feeling the warm slickness of the stone under his fingertips. It gave the very eerie sensation of the temple guardian being alive. He almost expected to look up and see it moving above him.

Thomas was now using both hands to map out the fissures and whorls in the stone surface. "Now, I would really not know where to put anything like this!"

"And the little problem of transport," Ryu added, stepping back out of Thomas' way.

"Oh, it is no problem." Hitarto chimed in. "We ship overseas to the US."

"But this one is for the temple; we wouldn't want to deprive them."

"We have many others not on commission that perhaps Mister Thomas likes?"

"You'll have to show them to him," Ryu said levelly.

Hitarto bowed to Ryu and gently tugged Thomas over to where there were several smaller sculptures, fierce looking Garuda and Garuda Dogs along with lithe maidens and stumpy dwarves. Hitarto cleared a path with his foot, kicking tools and students out of the way, letting Thomas touch the dry stones, run his fingers over the open mouths of the figures and smile at the jagged teeth.

"Nothing like this at home," he murmured to Thomas when he caught up to them again.

"I was just thinking that this is probably how old Murphy pictures himself." His lover joked and crooked his arm so Ryu could easily loop his through.

"Fearsome beast." Ryu mentally pictured the retriever. "He's ambitious. So are there any you particularly like? They have elephants which are supposed to be good luck."

"I like the stone Garuda, actually. I don't know if the elephant in stone would be quite as interesting." Thomas sounded thoughtful. "But an elephant would be nice."

"It's for your home, Thomas. Whatever you would like."

"Maybe there is another medium? Something more... elephanty."

"Jade." Ryu pointed at another table.

The students were all bent over their work, carving the hard stone with small, delicate tools; before buffing them in soft cloth until they almost look like they glowed from within. There was everything: more of the ever-present Garudas and Ganeshes, more Rama and Sita. A few students were working diligently on proud, miniature elephants. A younger student was relegated to the middle section of the table, crowded in by his neighbors on either side and was diligently working on his elephant. Ryu guided Thomas over to him, kneeling down so they were all on the same level and with his eyes asked to hold the statue that looked to him to be complete.

The boy blushed as he gently placed the statue in Thomas' outstretched hand. Where the other elephants were rotund with large ears and perfectly formed tusks, this boy's creation was a bit on the slender side with lopsided ears and one tusk. Hitarto shook his head. "Selmas tries very hard and his parents think he has the gift, but he falls behind."

"I like it." Ryu's voice was firm.

Thomas smiled and reached over to touch Ryu. "It's quite lovely."

Selmas didn't look at either of them. He was still looking down between his knees.

"I don't know about my companion, but I would like this very much for my home. Is it for sale?"

Selmas finally dragged his eyes up from the dust, his expression surprised. "You want to *buy* it?"

"Yes. I would like your elephant to go live on my windowsill in Hawai'i."

"But, he is not a very good elephant."

"He is good enough for me." Ryu petted the little statue with one finger.

Thomas smiled and nodded. "Perfection is sometimes seen through what is imperfect."

"What is the price for this size of elephant, and we will pay it." He looked directly at Selmas.

"For one of that size?" Hitarto interrupted. "Usually it is five thousand rupiah, but this one could be three."

"Two thousand five hundred."

"Two thousand seven fifty. It is only fair."

"Two thousand six. I am still getting the puppet too, don't forget." He winked at the boy.

Selmas beamed at him and sat a little straighter, his desk companions stopping to take notice.

Hitarto cleared his throat. "You take the figure, the puppet AND the Garuda, I give you best price."

"Wait. I never agreed to the Garuda. We're talking about the elephant."

"The Garuda is very nice and Mister Ryu's friend like."

Ryu grinned. Hitarto was acknowledging that he and Thomas were together. Fine, if he was going to play that way.... "He does, but I decide what goes in the house."

"The Garuda is very nice, for indoor or garden." Hitarto's tone was very placating and reasonable.

Ryu caught Thomas' suppressed smile out of the corner of his eye, just a slight twitch to his lips. "I'm sure it is, but we're discussing the elephant. I'm sure we agreed on two thousand on that, didn't we?"

"Two thousand six hundred, Mister Ryu. Not including the price of the puppet or Garuda."

"I was certain it was two thousand..." He made a show of looking around. "Let's say fifty thousand for all three pieces, and I give you another ten thousand to mail them home for me."

Hitarto grinned at him, with all his teeth showing again. "Would Mister Thomas like to take another look at our woodwork?"

"No, he would not," Ryu chuckled. "But thank you for the offer."

"Then perhaps Mister Ryu Would like the batik he saw?"

"Another ten thousand and you ship it to my mother." He raised an eyebrow. "And we're done."

Hitarto smiled more genuinely and stuck out his hand. "Deal, Mister Ryu."

"Perfect and done." He smiled and took Hitarto's hand.

His lover smiled and placed the small, green elephant in Ryu's hand. "I think this is yours."

"The artist needs to mark it for me." He kissed the head of the small jade statue.

Selmas smiled at him and fished his etching tool out of the water pot, signing his name to the elephant. "There you are, mister, and terima kasih."

"Kembali," he said -- you're welcome.

Later, after they had escaped outside, he tucked the elephant into Thomas' pants pocket. "A token for you to remember today and this trip."

Thomas chuckled and patted his pocket. "Terima kasih, Ryu. The elephant was important to you, wasn't it?"

"Yes. Unfinished and imperfect, just like the world."

"Just like us." Thomas intoned.

"Just like us."

end

Birthstones: Emerald

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